

Interview between Efraim Halevy and Aaron David Miller**
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1. *Is Iran with a nuclear weapon an existential threat to Israel?*

I object to the use of the term [existential] for several reasons. First of all, I am convinced that Israel is here to stay. I know we're going to stay here for the next couple of thousand years at least and after that we can meet and talk. It's not just a question of semi-religious or mythological belief.

I believe that Israel is a strong country. I was there when Israel came to being in 1948. I was then a teenager. My family and I immigrated to what was then Palestine in April 1948. I was a witness of independence. I was old enough to understand what was going on and to follow it very closely, and I heard the roar of the Iraqis' artillery as they were shooting targets not far from where I was temporarily living in Netanya which is on the coast. I was going to come up to Jerusalem where I had some family, but this was not possible because Jerusalem was under siege.

And this is a war in which there were many, many casualties and many, many had fallen during battle. We suffered since 6,000 men and women were killed in battle which was 1 percent of the population, the Jewish population, so a very large number. And there were days in which hundreds of people were killed in battle. And I do not believe that it is possible to see the demise of the state of Israel. I think we have sufficient power and capabilities to deal with any threats of any kind.

Now, I also object to the use of this term because I believe it is a fatal mistake to say publically that there is an existential threat because it means that if the Iranians, by one way or another obtain such a capability, you begin a countdown to the end of the civil Israel, and I think this is something which is unconscionable.

And the third point is I think there is a terrible mistake to tell you or mark the enemy that he has in his power to destroy you and to put you out of your existence. This, I think, is wrong tactically, it's wrong strategically, and it's wrong professionally to come publically to the Iranians and say, "Look, you are an existential threat to me." This only calls them into trying to prove that what you say about yourself is true. If you say that the other side is capable of emerging as existential threat and the other side will say—if they believe that they can—put us out of business then we should really try and do so. So from every point I think it's a terrible mistake to use this.

2. *If negotiations pursued in a positive and well-intentioned manner and sanctions do not deter the Iranians from continuing their quest for a nuclear, are any circumstances under which you would be willing to entertain or consider military action?*

Yes, I believe that if all other means had been totally exhausted. If we had followed all the other avenues to try to persuade the Iranians from doing what obviously they're still trying to do then I believe

it is not only acceptable, it's also I think logical that one should take, military means in order to get this capability removed. I say removed but I don't believe that it will be removed. I mean it will be delayed. And I think that delay is important because in history time is of the essence, in both ways, it's time is of the essence in order to do the right thing at the right time and not to wait. Also time is of the essence because time gives you the breathing space sometimes to develop other possibilities which would negate the capability which is now in front of you.

So I think yes it is right to use a capability you have in order to delay the Iranian nuclear program. Now, I believe that if we are looking for the best way of doing it, I think that the United States has far beyond Israel the capabilities of causing and affecting on the Iranians such damage as to prolong this period. I think that if Israel did it, it would be a shorter period of time, and if the United States would do it, it would be a much longer period of time. That's why I believe that a major priority would be to get the United States to agree to take, how shall I put it, this task upon itself.

3. Is Iran, in your judgment, a rational actor?

I think that yes, I think the Iranians are rational. I think at this particular point in time they are focused on trying to inflict upon Israel major damage. I think maybe they believe that they do have in their power to put Israel out of business and to remove Israel from the face of the earth. And I think that if they really believe that they could do it and they have the means to do it, one has to assume that they might actually use these means. I don't believe that once they have the means, they will not use it.

But I think that there are three things which have to be taken into account in this area. One is that they are persistently saying that it's against their religion to have such a capability. Two, if they develop such a capability they will in fact be saying that they've been lying not only about what they've been doing, they'll be lying as to what their real beliefs are. And three, that is of a serious matter for a religious person to say and to do, and, therefore, I think it's not an easy thing for them to go about this and do it in that way.

4. I know you're an analyst and not a fortune teller. But will 2013 in your judgment be a determinative point in this process? Will the issue of the nuclear--of Iranian nuclear weapons program either be joined in war and/or diplomacy or might we find ourselves at the end of 2013 where we are now?

I think 2013 is a decisive point in history, a point in time. I think that there is time now to energetically engage in trying to find a solution which is other than a military one. I think that there's much that can be done or should be done. And I think of course, as I said, that if all other options are exhausted and have been unsuccessful, yes, and maybe 2013 will be a time when Israel and/or the United States will take action.

5. *Why don't we have a conflict-ending agreement between Israelis and Palestinians?*

I can give a long dissertation as to why we don't have it. But I think I'd like to focus on the immediate. And I'd say at that this particular point in time, this is not a viable possibility. It's not viable because I think the Palestinians don't have their act together. They're divided both geographically and politically. I think anybody who signed such an agreement would not have a real mandate to sign it. And even if he believes he has, he will not have the capability to implement it, certainly not in the Gaza Strip.

And therefore, an agreement of such nature will be a misleading agreement. It will create the notion that an agreement has been reached and it is a serious event in history, when in actual fact it's going to be something much worse than just a non-event. It will be an act of, how should I put it, of hypocrisy, of the worst particular kind. And therefore that's one reason I think there is another possibility.

I also think that the present make up of this Israeli political scene is such that there is no majority in place either in government or in the nation for reaching an agreement with the Palestinians. One because people enjoy life the way it is and they say why take the risks, why move to something which is going to be very painful and which is going to have a lot of repercussions internally? And 300,000 people or so will have to be removed, or 100,000 people will have to be removed, and there are very, very bitter memories of what happened during the Gaza disengagement, and that's already 10,000 people.

And therefore, public opinion will not support this in Israel, at the moment and as far as the political scene is concerned, I don't think that the upcoming elections in Israel are going to produce a result which will make it easier. It will probably make it more difficult, because as the time we are talking now on this, there would have to be a big change in the opposition to the Netanyahu government which does not seem to be in the cards. I think the general trend in Israel today will be towards the more extremist approach rather than the less extremist approach to an agreement with the Palestinians.

6. *And what are the consequences of no agreement? Do you agree with those who argue that demography and the absence of a solution will undermine the Jewish and democratic character of the state of Israel?*

Yes I do. And I'm very concerned about that because I think that the "no solution" means that there's going to be a one state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan valley in which you'll have two distinct populations. One which will be a majority which is gradually decreasing and a minority which is gradually or not even gradually increasing, and, therefore, we will have a situation which between Jordan and the sea it'll be a democratic system for the minority and a non-democratic system for the majority, and this is unsustainable and untenable.

And it's the most likely solution at the moment and the least desirable. And therefore, I think that it'll be imperative for Israel to seek some kind of understanding which would entail withdrawal from certain lands and handing them over to Palestinians. And Palestinians, in order to succeed, ultimately would

have to get their act together in one way or another; and my guess is that it would not be the Fatah Movement which will be able to achieve this. Fatah today is a hollow movement. It's a movement which is gradually preparing to leave the historical scene.

7. *Are you concerned about the viability of Egyptian-Israeli and Jordanian -Israeli relationships in the face of the political changes sweeping the Arab world?*

I think so far the reaction from Egypt has been encouraging. This is not say that I'm happy with many of these statements coming from Cairo; but the most important are repeated statements by the Egyptian president and his representatives and advisors to the public that Egypt will abide by its international obligations.

I think the Egyptians are trying to get their act together. I think they're behaving responsibly. I don't think that they are enamored with Israel. They don't have to be. And I think that there's room for improvement here.

As far as Jordan is concerned, Jordan is now under extreme pressure. But I nevertheless believe that despite the fact that there are enormous pressures on Jordan today—particularly from the influx of refugees—with care, and understanding and wisdom, I'm hoping that King Abdullah will survive.

8. *Does it matter to you whether there are Islamists, democrats or dictators, in power in the Arab world?*

I would put it this way, since I don't think we have it in our capacity to influence what is going to happen in states other than our own, and since if that is the will of the people around us, there is nothing that we could do about it. We have to find ways and means of living with it. I think that's the way to look at it. And, therefore, I think we have to accept realities the way they are. That's why it was very encouraging several hours after President Morsi won the elections that prime minister Netanyahu sent a messaging saying, "I congratulate you on your success and I want to work together with you." I think that was a right thing to do.

I would much prefer that there will not be -extreme Islamist regimes in those countries. But again there's nothing we can do about it. So, for us it's a test to find ways and means on how to live with them. And we have to work on it and find ways and means of doing it rather than simply throwing up our hands in despair saying, you know, now it's going to be very bad and then close the shutters and pray for supreme godly protection.

9. *Where is Syria headed?*

I think in the end there's a good chance that Syria will implode and disintegrate into small statelets. I don't think the Alawites are going to--just give up and go home. But there is also a possibility that once

Assad is out of the way, other Alawites will come and find the modus operandi with whatever powers prevail.

What I am concerned about very much is the prospect of whether or not Iranians will be there once Assad is gone. And I believe it's a basic Israeli interest to do everything we can and to prevail upon everybody we can, to ensure that at the end of the day the Iranians are out of Syria.

And the last thing I'd like to say is this, I don't believe that there will be a religious regime in Syria, the kind which exists in Egypt. I think that is because the population is composed of Sunnis, Alawites, Kurds, Christians, and others that I think that it's not possible to have a Muslim state in Syria, and it might very well be some kind of a secular type.

10. *Any thoughts on the US-Israel relationship and our upcoming elections?*

Israeli-American relations have gone through several bumps. I think that basically they have been very good. I think on the practical side, the United States has been very supportive of Israel during the Obama administration. I think both financially and strategically, we have received a lot of support—support both in equipment and support in political moves like the way the United States has behaved at the UN Security Council and in the UN in general. And I think there should be a little less complaining about it on the part of Israel that the administration has not embraced us warmly. I think international relations is not a love fest in which you celebrate love and fondness. I think it has to be practical business. And Israel should not always pray and expect to be embraced and hugged and pacified and so forth. We're grown-ups and we should act as grown-ups.

Regarding the election, I think many of the statements made by the Republican candidate are very undesirable as far as Israel is concerned. I remember an article of Governor Romney's in the Washington Post in March of this year in which he advocated the dispatch of American warships to the Eastern Mediterranean. I think shooting from the hip on these matters is a very dangerous sport to be engaged in. I think it should not be done. And I think that drawing Israel into the campaign is detrimental to Israeli interests. And I regret that one of the candidates is doing this.

11. *As a former intelligence officer, analyst, what do you think is the most important factor that a decision maker has to keep in mind in formulating policy?*

I think that before decisions are made—strategic decisions, I'm not talking about tactical decisions—I think one has to take into account your capability of actually carrying out what it is you've decided. And this is something which at a political level, only the political master can do. And you as an intelligence officer must give him the information or assessment of the situation. But you cannot determine for him what his capabilities are, because capabilities are not just counting the number of troops you have or the number of guns you have, or the number of aircraft. It's also the resilience of the people of a country as a whole and many other factors, that's number one.

Number two, I think it's very important not to be hooked up to a single option choice. I think it is imperative to present at a political level more than one option. It doesn't mean to say you can't afterwards, express your preference one way or the other; but presenting one option to be linked up to one sole possibility, that's all. Take it or leave it. I think that's a mistake on the part of people who present options at a political level.

And the third thing is—and that I think I learned from Yitzhak Rabin—whatever you are pursuing, always prepare an alternative. Always, never be caught without an alternative. And juggle more than one ball in the air. Always have an alternative. Don't be left in the position where in case the initiative you have undertaken fails, you are left with an empty hand.

*** Efraim Halevy is a former Director of Mossad and former Head of the Israeli National Security Council. Aaron David Miller is the Vice President for New Initiatives at the Woodrow Wilson Center. The interview took place following the October 18 meeting "Iran, Palestine, and the Arab Spring: The View from Israel" at the Wilson Center.*