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[Iran Ups the Ante](#)

In the midst of political turmoil sweeping the Middle East, Iran has sent two warships through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. It is the first time since the Iranian revolution that Tehran has done this; under former President Hosni Mubarak, the government of Egypt, which controls access to the canal, [would not permit it](#).

The deployment of the two ships, a small frigate and a supply ship, does not affect the military balance much (unless they are delivering some special cargo, and the Egyptian government has given assurances they are not carrying anything illegal). Nevertheless, the deployment has raised concerns about Iranian intentions, with the Israeli foreign minister [calling it](#) a "provocation."

Let us assume he is correct. Should Israel allow itself to be provoked?

Certainly, the Israelis have reason to be concerned. The government of Iran has been perfectly clear that it regards the State of Israel as illegitimate and doomed. "The Zionist regime (Israel), with a 60-year record of genocide, plunder, invasion and betrayal is about to die and will soon be erased from the geographical scene," President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [proclaimed](#) in 2008.

Statements like this would alarm any government, and Jerusalem's apprehensions are reinforced by Iran's nuclear program. Having developed their own nuclear capability to deter attack, Israelis are now wondering whether deterrence will suffice. They have already launched preemptive strikes against nuclear facilities in Iraq and Syria. Although an attack against Iran would be much more difficult, the option is openly discussed.

Yet it is not just the technical military issues -- the greater range, the larger number of targets -- that

must be considered. In the past, there was no widespread reaction. The Arab street was, for all intents and purposes, indifferent.

The question is whether, in light of the current popular uprisings, that situation has changed.

To be sure, anti-Israeli sentiment has not been a major factor in the protests, but it does exist and is beginning to emerge. Calling the Camp David peace treaty negotiated by President Jimmy Carter between Israel and Egypt "humiliating," Ayman Nour, a former Egyptian presidential candidate imprisoned by Mubarak, has called for a referendum. While saying he would not prejudge the results of such a referendum, he [added](#) that "in practice, the Camp David accords have come to an end."

That is not just the opinion of Nour, a man singled out as a democratic hero by President George W. Bush in his "freedom agenda" [speech](#) in Prague in 2007. Just before President Mubarak left office, a senior official of the Muslim Brotherhood, Rashad al-Bayoumi, [told](#) the Japanese television station NHK that a new government should "dissolve" the treaty.

In addition, Arab, and especially Egyptian, opinion toward the Iranian nuclear program seems to be changing. A [poll](#) presented at the Brookings Institution last year indicated a large majority of Egyptians now believes Iran is entitled to its nuclear program even if it is designed to produce a weapon.

These new developments must enter into any consideration of a military confrontation with Iran. The Arab street is no longer silent, and any military conflict between Iran and Israel could divert its attention. If that were to happen, the consequences for Israel could be catastrophic.

Israel was able to win its conventional wars against armies, but could it win a war against the peoples? Although Israel's armed forces are well armed and trained, its population is dwarfed by that of its neighbors. And wars in revolutionary situations tend to be wars of the people themselves.

With the holocaust still within living memory, Israel's leaders are mindful of their responsibility to protect the safety of their people. It is a trauma that cannot be dismissed, which is why the Iranian campaign of holocaust denial is so incendiary.

But it is also suspicious. If you are pursuing the ultimate weapon, why would you incite your enemy before you had it?

One possible answer is that Iran is trying to provoke. Tehran could be making the calculation that a conflict now -- when emotions on the Arab street are so inflamed -- could lead to a wider war, a war that Israel could not manage.

The choices facing Israel are not enviable. Its fears of an Iran with nuclear weapons are understandable. At the same time, the political environment is not what it was before. A fresh approach may be in order, before time runs out altogether.

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