

Israel's nuclear capability. No Israeli official has ever made a statement either confirming or denying the fact that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of world community's experts are certain that Israel does possess such weapons.

Assessments vary as to how much weapon-grade plutonium Israel has produced. The most credible assessment has been made by SIPRI, according to which by 2011 Israel may have accumulated 690-950 kilograms of weapon-grade plutonium. Furthermore, according to SIPRI, the country continues the production of this material, which may be seen as a tangential indication of Tel Aviv's intention to build up its nuclear capability.

Experts believe that with the stockpile of weapon-grade plutonium it had in 2011 Israel could produce 138-190 nuclear weapons. If an allowance is made for a reserve stockpile, by early 2012 Israel's arsenal may include 100-140 weapons.

The analysis by Rosatom's Institute of Strategic Stability has shown that Israel has managed to establish nuclear triad. Israeli Air Force possesses US-made F-4, F-15 and F-16 tactical fighters that can be used to carry atomic bombs and Popey-class air-to-ground cruise missiles with a range of over 1000 km. There are also mobile solid-propellant Jericho I and Jericho II ballistic missiles with a range of up to 500 km and a reentry vehicle of about 1000 kg. Israel has also been engaged in research and development on a three-stage solid-propellant Jericho missile with a range of over 4000 km and a reentry vehicle of 1000-1300 kg. The new missile is expected to enter service in 2015-2016. Israeli Navy has three diesel-electric Dolphin-class submarines armed with cruise missiles with a range of 1500 km.

Israel's nuclear posture. As Israel does not officially acknowledge the fact that it possesses nuclear weapons, it has neither made public its nuclear doctrine. Having analyzed the statements by Israeli officials, one can assume that this doctrine and the country's nuclear posture are based on the following principles: Israel's nuclear capability is primarily intended for deterring its potential adversaries; nuclear weapons are regarded by Tel Aviv as a "last resort"; in case of a nuclear strike against the country (as well as a strike with other kinds of weapons of mass destruction) or a threat of a catastrophic defeat in a conventional warfare Israel will not hesitate to use its nuclear arsenal

against the aggressor; Israel will make every effort to exclude the possibility of its potential adversaries' acquiring nuclear weapons.

Israel has maintained negative attitude towards the prospects of establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East, which is accounted for by the lack of peace in the region, the calls by a number of Islamic countries to destroy Israel, and its neighbors' potential superiority in conventional forces.

It appears Israel may only change its posture if given credible security assurances. P5 can hardly provide the legally binding assurances that would satisfy Israel, as its members are not allied with each other (except for the US, UK and France), but rather share the relationship of nuclear deterrence. Tel Aviv could be encouraged at least to seriously consider nuclear disarmament measures only in case Israel formally accedes to NATO (which would imply the application of guarantees under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty) or enter into a bilateral alliance with the United States (as Japan and South Korea have done). For political reasons, however, the United States and Western Europe would hardly deem such options acceptable in the foreseeable future.

Israel's posture on Iran and its aspects. While the leaders of the world's leading powers heeded with hope to the new Iranian President's peaceful declarations and the oil companies have demonstrated their willingness to come back to the Iranian market as soon as sanctions are lifted, the Israeli leaders have responded with sharp criticism of both President Rouhani and the country's Supreme Leader. The statement by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu at the General Assembly clearly contrasted to the choir heralding a "detente" in relations with Iran.

Israel's distrust of Iran and its determination to prevent Iran from acquiring a capability for the production of nuclear weapons are based both on the assessment of the facts pertaining to the status of its nuclear programme, and on psychological reasons: historical memory, the constant pressure of security issues (bombings and rocket attacks even at peacetime) on Israel's government's and people, the country's feeling of isolation in the region and its continuing distrust of the outside world. Israel has considered Iranian policy as a major challenge, directly affecting the country's security. This refers, first and foremost, to Iran's ties with Syria and its support of Hezbollah.

In these circumstances Israel has been reluctant to lose its monopoly for nuclear weapons and has repeatedly demonstrated the

intention to prevent any possible changes in this area (in particular, through previous strikes against nuclear facilities in Iraq and Syria).

While Tel Aviv fears to lose control over Iran's transformation into a nuclear-weapons state, Washington believes that it can stop the process any time. Hence a fundamental difference in the assessments of threats by Washington and Tel Aviv.

Nevertheless, the leading powers do make steps to resolve the issue by political means, calling into question the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme and imposing a number of sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council and unilaterally. Tel Aviv has a different stance: it is ready to wait for results of political negotiations accompanied by effective sanctions for some time, but it retains the option of a military strike depending on the situation.

Iranian nuclear programme. Apparently, Iran's nuclear energy programme has entered its final stage both technically and politically.

Technically, Iran has almost acquired capability to produce nuclear weapons. Politically, after Hassan Rouhani won presidential elections in June 2013, great hopes arose that the problem can be resolved through peaceful means. If it proves impossible to reach a mutually acceptable arrangement with him either, the war will become inevitable.

Iranian nuclear programme has set a number of unique precedents. First, unless a country has an advanced civilian nuclear energy programme, neither uranium enrichment, nor plutonium separation is cost-effective, especially given the fact that low-enriched uranium is offered in abundance at the world market. The situation of Iran is unique, as it builds up its uranium enrichment capability while denying any ambitions to produce nuclear weapons and having no large-scale civilian nuclear programme at the same time.

Second, Iran's nuclear programme is also unique due to the way the country built its nuclear fuel cycle facilities. Large plants are masked (Natanz) or built deep underground in hard rock (Fordow). There is no reason to build such underground facilities and go to the huge additional expenses, if these facilities were part of exclusively peaceful nuclear energy programme, which Tehran has claimed them to be.

Third, there is no credible answer to the question why Iran has opted to produce its own uranium enriched up to 20 percent, when Russia proposed to supply it with the fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor in exchange for a corresponding amount of uranium enriched to 5 percent in 2009.

Some policy-makers and experts believe that Iran has not yet made political decision to pursue nuclear weapons and only develops technical capability for such step. However, no one may be certain as to whether Tehran has made this decision. No state possessing nuclear weapons had ever announced such a decision before they had this type of weapons.

Some contend that Iran needs nuclear capability solely to deter potential aggressors, rather than to attack Israel, not to mention the United States, which would be tantamount to national suicide. Yet it should be remembered that all the eight powers that managed to acquire nuclear weapons (save for the United States and Israel who keeps silence) subsequently justified the creation of nuclear weapons by the need to deter foreign aggression.

Unlike any other nuclear power, Iran has been gradually and cautiously progressing towards its aim for the past 10 years, while at the same time striving to appear negotiating and searching for compromise with other countries. The limited UN sanctions have failed to stop Iran from pursuing this course.

Despite the claims that sanctions do not work, it was a decisive step by the EU who imposed oil embargo against Iran in 2012, that brought about major change in public opinion in Iran, which in its turn affected the results of the election of June 2013. One can thus conclude that sanctions do work, if of serious economic, rather than symbolic nature. However, at the same time, such sanctions must be accompanied by an active search for compromise through diplomatic means, rather than by clumsy tactics of threats and ultimatums.

Possibility of a peaceful solution to the crisis. The new Iranian President who is viewed as politically moderate, cannot take radical steps to compromise immediately, even if he wanted to. Rather, he must first consolidate his power within the country. As an experienced diplomat he will try to get the United States and the P5+1 concede as much as possible in exchange for as little as possible on the part of Iran.

For example, Tehran might offer to suspend uranium enrichment to over 20 percent in exchange for the lifting of the oil embargo. As a maximum concession, Iranian leadership can offer not to increase the number of centrifuges, or even to reduce it. However, Tehran will hardly stop its uranium enrichment programme, and will continue to operate and upgrade its centrifuges while also developing the “plutonium track”.

The United States and the EU can take these concessions, but only as an interim step. In return the West can partially ease the unilateral

sanctions (e.g. financial ones, but not the ones related to oil). However, the complete lifting of sanctions and the restoration of normal economic and political relations will ensue if the underground facility in Natanz and the Fordow facility are isolated, all commercial uranium enrichment is stopped, the construction of reactor in Arak is suspended, all information required by the IAEA is disclosed and the full compliance with the Additional Protocol to the 1997 IAEA Safeguards Agreement is ensured.

Nevertheless, the most important point in this context is the right to enrich uranium which has become a matter of principle for Iran and which caused major differences over Iran's nuclear programme, including those that brought about the UN Security Council sanctions.

To resolve this issue in principle, one could suggest recognizing this right of Iran and allowing it to continue uranium enrichment, yet at a scale that would be strictly commensurate with the capacity of the fuel assemblies production plant and the demand for such assemblies to reload the nuclear power plant.

The concessions on the part of the US and the P5+1 are clear, as they have been set forth in the UN Security Council resolutions, so it is up to President Rouhani to decide whether the issue will be resolved peacefully. If he believes that Iran should aim at reaching the "nuclear threshold", the opportunity for compromise will be far from ample and will fade soon. Another failure of negotiations will make war inevitable as soon as in the near future (a year and a half at most).

If the new president is willing to give up the military component of the country's nuclear programme and obtain guarantees that would enable Iran to develop its nuclear industry, although for exclusively peaceful purposes, there will be vast opportunity for compromise.

Conditions and possibility of Israeli military operation against Iran. Israel has sufficient capability for launching an air and missile strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, however, it would not be capable of destroying it completely. This would at most cause a setback of several years.

If Israel starts a military operation against Iran, the United States — even against its wishes — may face the necessity to defend its ally. Preparation and support of the US military operation will be accompanied by continuous space-based observation of Iranian territory. It will use up to six aircraft carrier groups against Iran and carry out large Air Force and Navy deployments from the Mediterranean Sea to

the Arabian Gulf. Military strikes may push the Iranian nuclear program for dozens of years back or even to destroy it completely.

However, this scenario may result in an upsurge of Islamic extremism and terrorism across the world, the destabilization in the neighboring countries from Palestine to the Hindu Kush, and a sharp rise in tensions between the West and Russia.

Therefore, the international community should make every effort to solve the problem through peaceful means and to pass between Scylla and Charybdis, preventing war, on the one hand, and ensuring Iran's verifiable abandonment of its intention even to approach the nuclear threshold, on the other hand.