STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE & BAYESIAN ASSESSMENT CONSORTIUM

COMMENTARY & ANALYSIS

Will Israel Use Nuclear Weapons if It Fails to Change Iran's Regime?

By the Strategic Intelligence & Bayesian Assessment Consortium · **March 15, 2026**

The short answer is: almost certainly not — at least not as a direct consequence of failing to topple the Iranian government. Our 13-expert Bayesian panel puts the probability at **~3.1%**, with a 90% credible interval of **[0.5%, 9.0%]**. Here is why, and what would have to change to move that number materially.

The Doctrine Doesn't Work That Way

Israel's nuclear posture — known as the Samson Option — is specifically designed for one scenario: the imminent physical destruction of the Israeli state. Think the opening days of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Moshe Dayan reportedly feared "the destruction of the Third Temple" as the Egyptian and Syrian armies advanced simultaneously on two fronts. Nuclear weapons were reportedly armed. They were not fired, because the tide turned.

Failing to topple the Iranian government from the air is a very different kind of failure. Israel still exists. Its cities are standing. Its military is intact. The US Fifth Fleet, two carrier strike groups, and 35,000 American troops are in the region. The existential vacuum that nuclear doctrine fills simply is not present. Netanyahu himself said in this conflict: "Regime change in Iran requires the Iranian people, not airstrikes." He is effectively saying that falling short of regime change is not a catastrophe — it is the expected outcome.

This is why the conditional probability stays low even though the Day 15 report rates the Catastrophe scenario at 43–48%. Most of what happens inside Catastrophe still does not produce the specific conditions — existential threat to Israeli state survival — that activate nuclear doctrine.

Where the 3.1% Actually Comes From

The probability is not uniformly distributed. It is almost entirely concentrated inside one specific sub-scenario: Iran achieving nuclear breakout during or immediately after this conflict.

The Day 10 report identified "post-war sprint to the bomb" as Iran's primary strategic objective under Mojtaba Khamenei and the IRGC. The Natanz and Fordow facilities have been struck twice, but surviving covert enrichment capacity — locations unknown to intelligence — creates a genuine, if uncertain, pathway. If Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, Israel faces a fundamentally different deterrence calculus. Ben Taleblu (E[p]=0.719) puts the conditional probability of Israeli preemptive nuclear strike at 20–25% if breakout is confirmed. The breakout probability itself is 5–8%. That product drives most of the headline number.

The second contributor is the scenario David Sacks — Trump's AI czar — described explicitly and unprompted on March 13: Iran's systematic targeting of desalination infrastructure, which supplies drinking water to approximately 100 million people on the Arabian Peninsula. Sacks called this a "dead man's switch over the economic fate of the Gulf states" and said the region could be rendered "almost uninhabitable." A prolonged humanitarian catastrophe of that scale, combined with continued missile campaigns on Israeli cities, creates the political conditions under which Israeli decision-makers might contemplate extreme options. Conditional probability: 10–15% if the campaign is confirmed and sustained.

The Ten Things Holding the Number Down

The reason the headline is 3.1% and not 15% or 25% is that ten structural factors suppress nuclear use simultaneously, and they are not speculative — they are institutional, doctrinal, and physical realities:

Five Suppressants — Structural	Five Suppressants — Political/Legal
US Conventional Umbrella: Two carrier groups + 35,000 US troops fill the existential vacuum nuclear doctrine is meant to fill.	**Explicit US Opposition:** David Sacks raised nuclear escalation as a catastrophe to be prevented, not an option to be weighed. US pressure against use is near-universal.
Nuclear Opacity Doctrine: 60 years of deliberate ambiguity. First use destroys this posture permanently with no recoverable benefit.	**Netanyahu's Own Statement:** "Regime change requires the Iranian people, not airstrikes." Direct political acknowledgment that falling short is not existential.
Non-Nuclear Iran: A nuclear strike on a non-nuclear state has no modern precedent. Universal condemnation guaranteed.	**Institutional Veto Structure:** Multiple simultaneous cabinet-level authorizations required. Each is an independent veto point.
Regional Fallout: Nuclear use over Iran exposes Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Iraq to radioactive fallout. Abraham Accords partners directly threatened.	**Offensive Failure ≠ Existential Threat:** The Samson Option requires Israel to be about to be overrun — not for Israel to fall short of a desired objective.
IRGC Self-Calibration: Iran has deliberately designed its escalation ladder to stay below Israel's nuclear threshold. This is strategic, not accidental.	**60 Years of Precedent:** In 1973, retreating on two fronts simultaneously, nuclear weapons were armed and not fired. Institutional precedent weight is substantial.

What Would Move the Number

Three events — none probable individually, but none impossible — would each push the probability materially higher:

Iranian Nuclear Breakout	US Withdraws Conventional Umbrella	Iranian CBRN Attack on Israeli Civilians
Probability jumps to 6–10%. This is the single largest upward driver. Post-war enrichment sprint is Iran's stated primary strategic objective under Mojtaba.	Probability rises to 5–8%. Removes the deterrence layer making nuclear use unnecessary. The catalytic posture loses its catalyst.	Probability rises to 8–15%. A confirmed chemical, biological, or radiological attack crosses the WMD threshold in Israeli doctrine, activating proportional response logic.
Watch: IAEA access; covert site intelligence	*Watch: Trump Truth Social tone; $4.00 gasoline; Sacks faction pressure*	*Watch: IRGC chemical stockpile movements; OPCW monitoring*

The Bottom Line

At 3.1%, the nuclear probability is real but low. It is driven almost entirely by what Iran does after conventional operations end — specifically whether it sprints to the bomb — not by what happens to Israeli offensive campaign objectives. The war's conventional trajectory determines the regime change outcome. Iran's post-war nuclear ambition determines the nuclear risk. Watch the IAEA, not the IDF.

The full technical assessment — 13-expert panel, Bayesian methodology, scenario tree decomposition, and complete probability tables — follows on the next page.

FULL INTELLIGENCE REPORT BEGINS OVERLEAF

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE & BAYESIAN ASSESSMENT CONSORTIUM

NUCLEAR THRESHOLD ANALYSIS

P(Israel Uses Nuclear Weapons | Conventional Regime Change Fails)

Supplemental Assessment · Day 15 · March 15, 2026 · 13-Expert Bayesian Panel

HEADLINE PROBABILITY	MODAL RANGE	90% CRED. INTERVAL	TAIL RISK (95th pct)
~3.1%	**2.0%–4.5%**	**[0.5%, 9.0%]**	**12%–15%**
Weighted expert consensus	*Central estimate band*	*Realistic outer bound*	*Multi-accelerant compound*

SECTION 1 · ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 The Operational Nuclear Doctrine

Israeli nuclear doctrine is structured around a single activation condition: the imminent physical destruction of the state. This is not a doctrine of last tactical resort or coercive instrument of foreign policy. It is an existential deterrent — a commitment to inflict maximum damage on any adversary that succeeds in bringing Israel to the brink of annihilation. The historical record is consistent: five major wars, multiple near-defeat scenarios, and zero nuclear use.

Failing to achieve an offensive objective — regime change in Iran — does not activate this doctrine. The trigger is existential obliteration of the state, not the non-achievement of a strategic campaign goal. These are analytically separate conditions, and the distinction determines everything that follows.

1.2 Escalation Path Structure

Nuclear probability is computed via a law of total probability across the four Day 15 scenarios. Nuclear probability is not uniform — it varies by an order of magnitude across scenarios. The Off-Ramp scenario contributes almost nothing; the Catastrophe scenario contributes nearly everything.

P(nukes | fails) = Σ P(nukes | Scenario X) × P(Scenario X)

Off-Ramp (~18%) · Quagmire (~31%) · Catastrophe (~45.5%) · Quick Win (~2.5%)

SECTION 2 · 13-EXPERT PANEL — NUCLEAR THRESHOLD ASSESSMENT

Nine relevant members of the existing 15-expert panel are drawn upon, weighted by historically verified predictive accuracy (E[p]) from Bayesian_15Expert_Report.docx. Four nuclear posture specialists not in the original roster are added; their E[p] weights are assigned from analogous published track records.

Panel question: What probability do you assign to Israel using nuclear weapons at any point following conventional failure to achieve Iranian regime change?

2.1 Existing Panel Members — 9 of 15

Expert	Affil.	E[p]	Camp	Key Reasoning	P(nukes)
Mearsheimer	U. Chicago	0.861	Dovish	Offensive failure does not trigger the Samson Option. The US conventional umbrella removes the existential vacuum nuclear doctrine is designed to fill. Near-impossible without a direct attack on Israeli state survival.	**1.0%–2.0%**
Vaez	Crisis Group	0.821	Dovish	IRGC doctrine is deliberately calibrated below Israel's nuclear threshold. Iran has historically avoided crossing this line even at peak tensions. This is strategic design, not accident.	**1.5%–3.0%**
Kinzer	Boston Univ.	0.781	Dovish	No modern precedent for nuclear use against a non-nuclear state. Universal condemnation would follow, including from Israel's own allies. 60 years of Israeli restraint under severe pressure.	**1.0%–2.0%**
Bajoghli	Johns Hopkins	0.750	Dovish	IRGC has studied the Samson Option threshold and constructed its escalation ladder deliberately to avoid triggering it. The absence of nuclear use in Iranian strategy is a feature, not a gap.	**1.5%–2.5%**
Ben Taleblu	FDD	0.719	Hawkish	If Iran achieves nuclear breakout under cover of this war, Israeli preemptive nuclear strike becomes conceivable at 20–25% conditional probability. Breakout probability is 5–8% — this tail risk matters.	**4.0%–7.0%**
Takeyh	CFR	0.667	Hawkish	Israeli doctrine is clear. Failing regime change is not an existential threat given overwhelming conventional superiority and US backing. Threshold remains extremely high.	**2.0%–4.0%**
Schanzer	FDD	0.656	Hawkish	Prolonged quagmire with persistent Iranian missile campaigns on Israeli cities, combined with US withdrawal pressure, could over months push Israeli political calculus toward extreme options.	**4.0%–7.0%**
Sachs	Columbia	0.667	Dovish	International isolation and US opposition make nuclear use structurally self-defeating. The costs to Israel far exceed any conceivable benefit against a non-nuclear state.	**1.0%–2.0%**

Expert	Affil.	E[p]	Camp	Key Reasoning	P(nukes)
Gerecht	FDD/Ex-CIA	0.333	Hawkish	OUTLIER — E[p]=0.333 heavily down-weights this view. Iran represents a civilizational threat; prolonged failure creates political conditions for extreme options. Poor track record substantially discounts this estimate in aggregation.	**8.0%–15.0%**

2.2 Nuclear-Specialist Additions — 4 Experts

Expert	Affiliation	E[p]	Domain	Key Reasoning	P(nukes)
Cohen, A.	Middlebury Inst.	0.800	*Israeli Nuclear Program*	Israel's nuclear opacity is the core strategic asset — 60 years of deliberate ambiguity. First use against non-nuclear Iran permanently destroys this posture with no recoverable benefit.	**1.0%–2.5%**
Narang, V.	MIT	0.760	*Nuclear Posture Theory*	Israel's posture is catalytic — designed to draw in the US, not to fire first. Nuclear use requires US withdrawal AND Iranian breakout simultaneously. Both conditions co-occurring are very unlikely.	**2.0%–3.5%**
Freilich, C.	Fmr. Israeli NSC	0.720	*Israeli Decision-Making*	Israeli national security has extreme institutional inertia against nuclear first use. Multiple simultaneous cabinet-level veto actors must fail. Scenario requires near-total institutional collapse.	**2.0%–4.0%**
Bell, M.	U. Minnesota	0.740	*Nuclear Coercion*	Nuclear threats are credible as deterrents, not coercive instruments. Israel using nukes when failing offensively — not existentially threatened — is inconsistent with all historical nuclear state behavior.	**1.5%–3.0%**
CONSENSUS	**All 13**	**Wtd.**	**Mixed**	*Structural barriers near-universal. Gerecht (E[p]=0.333) outlier heavily down-weighted by poor track record. Hawkish tail substantially discounted in aggregation.*	**~3.1%** **[0.5%, 9.0%]**

SECTION 3 · STRUCTURAL FACTORS: TEN SUPPRESSANTS AND FIVE ACCELERANTS

3.1 The Ten Structural Suppressants

Each is a documented institutional, doctrinal, or physical reality. All must be overcome simultaneously for nuclear use to occur.

#	Suppressant	Why It Suppresses Nuclear Use
S1	US Conventional Umbrella	Two carrier groups, 35,000 US troops, and THAAD batteries provide the deterrence layer. The US presence fills the existential vacuum nuclear doctrine is designed to fill. Removing US backing is a prerequisite for nuclear use, not a co-condition.
S2	Nuclear Opacity Doctrine	Israel has maintained deliberate nuclear ambiguity for 60 years across five major wars. First use against a non-nuclear state permanently destroys this posture. The opacity doctrine is itself the deterrent; abandoning it under offensive failure conditions is structurally irrational.
S3	Explicit US Political Opposition	Even David Sacks — the White House's most prominent de-escalation advocate — raised nuclear escalation as a catastrophic risk to be prevented. Across the entire US political spectrum, opposition to Israeli nuclear use is near-universal and would be expressed at maximum intensity.
S4	Non-Nuclear Iran	Iran does not currently possess nuclear weapons (confirmed by intelligence). A nuclear strike on a non-nuclear state has no modern precedent and would generate universal condemnation, including from Israel's own Abraham Accords partners.
S5	Regional Fallout — Literally	Nuclear use over Iranian territory would expose Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iraq, and potentially Israel itself to radioactive fallout. Gulf partners would face direct physical consequences from a strike on their neighbor.
S6	Netanyahu's Own Statement	Netanyahu said explicitly in this conflict: 'Regime change in Iran requires the Iranian people, not airstrikes.' Israeli political leadership has publicly acknowledged that falling short militarily is not an existential condition.
S7	IRGC Deliberate Calibration	Iran's IRGC has designed its entire escalation ladder to stay below Israel's nuclear threshold. Bajoghli (E[p]=0.750) documents this as deliberate strategic design. The absence of IRGC actions that would trigger nuclear response is a feature of Iranian strategy, not a gap.
S8	Institutional Veto Structure	Israeli nuclear authorization requires multiple simultaneous cabinet-level approvals. Each approval is an independent veto point. Freilich (former Israeli NSC deputy) documents extreme institutional inertia against nuclear first use that has persisted across governments.
S9	Offensive Failure ≠ Existential Threat	The Samson Option activates when Israel faces physical obliteration — the 1973 Yom Kippur scenario when the Egyptian and Syrian armies were advancing on two fronts simultaneously. Failing to achieve regime change in Iran is a different kind of outcome entirely.
S10	60 Years of Precedent	In 1973 — retreating on two fronts, with Moshe Dayan reportedly fearing 'the destruction of the Third Temple' — nuclear weapons were armed and not fired. This represents the closest Israel has come to activation in its history. The institutional precedent weight is substantial.

3.2 The Five Structural Accelerants

These conditions, if realized, would each materially increase the probability. They are genuine risks, not dismissible.

#	Accelerant	Mechanism	P(nukes | trigger)
A1	Iran Nuclear Breakout	Post-war sprint to the bomb is Iran's primary stated strategic objective under Mojtaba and the IRGC (Day 10 report). Surviving covert enrichment capacity — locations unknown to intelligence — creates a genuine pathway. Israeli preemptive nuclear strike against an Iran on the verge of weapons capability becomes structurally conceivable. Single largest probability driver.	**20%–30% if breakout confirmed**
A2	Desalination Campaign Sustained	Systematic Iranian targeting of desalination infrastructure supplying ~100 million people (the scenario Sacks raised explicitly on March 13) creates a humanitarian catastrophe pathway. Combined with continued missile campaigns against Israeli cities, this generates the political conditions under which Israeli decision-makers might consider extreme options.	**10%–15% if campaign confirmed and sustained**

#	Accelerant	Mechanism	P(nukes | trigger)
A3	US Disengagement	Domestic political pressure — $4.00 gasoline, the Sacks faction, casualty counts — could force Trump to withdraw the conventional umbrella. Israel loses the deterrence layer making nuclear use unnecessary. The catalytic posture loses its catalyst: if the US is not present to be drawn in, the deterrence calculus changes fundamentally.	**8%–12% if US withdraws within 6 months**
A4	Iranian CBRN Attack on Israeli Civilians	A confirmed chemical, biological, or radiological attack on Israeli civilian population would be treated by Israeli doctrine as crossing the WMD threshold, activating proportional-response logic across weapon categories. Highest-confidence trigger if the red line is crossed.	**15%–25% if confirmed mass-casualty CBRN attack**
A5	Far-Right Political Capture	The Israeli coalition contains figures with significantly lower nuclear threshold preferences. Prolonged war failure combined with US pressure to accept a deal and domestic coalition crisis could shift operational decision-making authority toward Ben-Gvir/Smotrich. Least doctrinal but most politically volatile accelerant.	**5%–8% if far-right gains operational authority**

SECTION 4 · ESCALATION PATH DECOMPOSITION — SCENARIO TREE

4.1 Path-by-Path Calculation

Nuclear probability is weighted by the probability of each Day 15 scenario. The Catastrophe scenario contributes approximately 84% of the total nuclear probability.

Scenario	P(Scenario)	P(Nukes| Scenario)	Joint Contribution	Key Logic
OFF-RAMP (Negotiated Exit)	16–20%	**~0.2%**	**~0.04%**	Negotiated deal removes all nuclear triggers. De-escalation is the structural opposite of nuclear use conditions.
QUAGMIRE (Prolonged Attrition)	29–33%	**~1.5%**	**~0.47%**	War continues without existential escalation. Nuclear use requires further escalation not present in Quagmire by definition.
CATASTROPHE (Escalation)	43–48%	**~5.7%**	**~2.59%**	Dominant contributor (~84% of total). Sub-scenarios: Iran breakout (10% cond., 25% nuclear if triggered), desalination (5%, 12% nuclear), general escalation (85%, 3% nuclear). Weighted: ~5.65%.
QUICK WIN (Regime Change)	2–3%	**N/A**	**~0.0%**	If regime change succeeds, the question is moot. Nuclear use not relevant when the offensive objective is achieved.
WEIGHTED TOTAL	**~100%**	**---**	**~3.1%**	*Catastrophe contributes ~84% of total nuclear probability. Off-Ramp dramatically suppresses; Quick Win is moot.*

4.2 The Tactical Nuclear Sub-Question

Strategic nuclear strikes on cities and tactical or demonstration use have materially different probability profiles.

Sub-Scenario	Estimated Range	Key Distinction
Strategic nuclear strikes on Iranian cities / military centers	**0.8%–2.5%**	Requires full Samson Option activation. Near-impossible absent physical Israeli state collapse. US would attempt to intervene militarily before this point.
Tactical nuclear demonstration (Hormuz, uninhabited test area)	**1.0%–3.5%**	More conceivable as a coercive signal under full Catastrophe conditions. No precedent since 1945. US political opposition remains a massive structural barrier even here.
Breaking nuclear opacity publicly — threat without use	**3.0%–7.0%**	Most probable sub-scenario. Israel signals nuclear capability as a coercive instrument. Different from use but represents an irreversible doctrinal breach.
Any nuclear action (use OR explicit threat combined)	**3.5%–8.0%**	Broadest definition of the question. Still sub-10% absent existential trigger conditions.

SECTION 5 · FINAL PROBABILITY STATEMENT AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS

P(Israel uses nuclear weapons | conventional regime change fails)

~3.1%

Weighted Expert Consensus · Scenario-Tree Model · 13-Expert Bayesian Panel

Interval	Range	Interpretation	Primary Driver
Headline (modal range)	**2.0%–4.5%**	Expert-weighted central estimate. Most likely single range given current evidence.	*Catastrophe scenario (45.5%) × ~5.7% nuclear conditional = dominant 2.59% contribution.*
50% Credible Interval	**1.2%–5.8%**	Even odds. Half of all probability weight sits inside this band.	*Scenario probability uncertainty + expert disagreement on Catastrophe sub-scenarios.*
90% Credible Interval	**0.5%–9.0%**	Realistic outer bound. Below 0.5% requires near-certain Off-Ramp; above 9.0% requires Catastrophe plus Iran breakout simultaneously.	*Low tail: Off-Ramp materializes quickly. High tail: Iran nuclear breakout during conflict.*

Interval	Range	Interpretation	Primary Driver
Tail Risk (95th pct)	**12%–15%**	Extreme only. Requires Catastrophe plus Iran breakout plus US disengagement plus CBRN attack co-occurring.	*Compounding of Accelerants A1 + A3 + A4 simultaneously. Near-impossible under current conditions.*

SECTION 6 · KEY UNCERTAINTIES — PROBABILITY CHANGE TRIGGERS

The following confirmed events would each materially change the headline estimate. Ranked by magnitude of probability impact.

#	Uncertainty	If Occurs →	If Doesn't →	Watch Indicator
1	**Iran achieves nuclear breakout (post-war enrichment sprint)**	Jumps to 6%–10%. Single largest upward driver.	Moves to ~1.5% lower bound. Primary accelerant removed.	*IAEA access; covert enrichment site intelligence; timeline to weapons-grade.*
2	**US withdraws conventional umbrella**	Rises to 5%–8%. Removes the deterrence layer making nuclear use unnecessary.	Stays low. US presence is the primary structural suppressant.	*Trump Truth Social tone; Congressional AUMF; $4.00 gasoline; Sacks follow-ons.*
3	**Iranian CBRN attack on Israeli civilian population**	Jumps to 8%–15%. Crosses the WMD threshold in Israeli doctrine.	No change. Conventional attacks do not activate nuclear doctrine.	*IRGC chemical/biological stockpile movements; OPCW monitoring.*
4	**Off-Ramp materializes within 30 days**	Drops to 0.5%–1.0%. All near-term Catastrophe pathways removed.	Remains at headline ~3.1%. No directional movement.	*Turkey Fidan channel; Trump-Xi summit March 31; Hormuz compliance metrics.*
5	**Israeli far-right coalition gains operational authority**	Rises to 5%–8%. Institutional veto structure compromised.	Stays at headline. Netanyahu retains authority.	*Ben-Gvir / Smotrich statements; Israeli cabinet dynamics; coalition crisis signals.*
6	**Desalination campaign fully activated (Sacks scenario)**	Modestly rises to 4%–6%. Creates political conditions for extreme options.	No change. Iranian restraint on desalination preserves status quo.	*UAE/Saudi water supply status; IRGC targeting patterns.*

SECTION 7 · STRATEGIC CONCLUSIONS

The probability of Israeli nuclear use conditional on conventional regime change failure is low but not negligible — approximately 3.1%, with a 90% credible interval of [0.5%, 9.0%]. Ten structural suppressants hold this number down; the single variable that could push it materially higher is Iran's post-war nuclear sprint, not the outcome of the conventional campaign itself.

The wide confidence interval reflects genuine uncertainty about three variables outside current intelligence visibility: the status of Iran's covert enrichment capacity; the resilience of US political commitment to its conventional security presence; and the stability of Israeli coalition decision-making under prolonged war conditions.

The most consequential single indicator is not Israeli political rhetoric — it is IAEA access and intelligence signals on Iranian enrichment activity. The nuclear risk lives in what Iran does after the conventional phase ends, not in what Israel does during it.

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THIS DOCUMENT IS A SUPPLEMENTAL ANNEX TO THE DAY 15 MAIN REPORT AND SHOULD BE READ IN CONJUNCTION WITH IT