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Israel's Defense Chief OK's Hundreds of Israeli Deaths

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“If we take out the Iranian nuke facilities, sure, they’ll strike back at us,” Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said yesterday. “But if every American stays in their home when the Iranian rockets start falling, well, it will be uncomfortable. It won’t be a picnic. But we won’t have 220,000 Americans killed. Not even 22,000. So let’s stop the fear-mongering. We’ve got vital interests to protect.”

No, of course Panetta didn’t say that. It would be unimaginable. But Israel’s Defense Minister Ehud Barak did say much the same thing in [a radio interview](#) just the other day.

“Not 500 dead” in Israel, Barak assured his people, which translates proportionally into 22,000 Americans. The words “stay in their homes,” “uncomfortable,” “no picnic,” “fear-mongering,” and “vital interests” were Barak’s. And he clearly implied that a few hundred Israeli deaths would be perfectly acceptable.

Such a cavalier attitude might have sounded shocking in the U.S. But in Israel it wasn’t any big news. Haaretz, Israel’s leading liberal newspaper, [ran the story](#) for a few hours buried far down on its website homepage. Yedioth Aharanoth, the nation’s largest and very centrist paper, didn’t put it on the homepage at all.

Nor, according to the reports, did the interviewer bother to ask Barak what “vital interest” would justify such massive death and suffering. The answer was taken for granted: Iran must never,

ever have even one nuclear weapon. Barak assumes that Israelis are ready to pay the price he sketched out in exchange for crippling the Iranian nuke program.

No matter that Israel, the Middle East's only nuclear power, already has an arsenal measured in the hundreds. One Iranian nuke on Tel Aviv would trigger those hundreds falling on Iran. When the Israelis justify their anti-Iran hysteria by saying that even one Iranian nuke would trigger a regional nuclear arms race it's a coded way of saying: For every nuke you make we'll make many more, and we're ready to use them all; if you attack us you're committing national suicide.

It's an article of faith for most Israelis that Iranian leaders are perfectly ready -- some say eager - - to do just that. The commonly assumed (though rarely articulated) explanation: The Iranians, like all Jew-haters, are irrational. They'll pay any price to kill Jews.

Of course the real irrationality is the idea that the Iranians would commit suicide. If they are working on a nuke, it's not to be used but to be publicly brandished. Like North Korea, Pakistan, and India, Iran may want to join the nuclear club because it's the only way for a regional power to be taken seriously on the world stage. Since the early days of the cold war, nations have pursued nukes more for [their symbolic value](#) than any practical value they might have.

Israeli leaders surely understand this, even if many of their voters don't. If we could ask Barak what "vital interest" would justify such massive slaughter in Israel, and if he answered honestly, he'd say that there is no practical interest involved. It's all in the realm of symbolism.

An essential motive of Zionism from its beginning was a fierce desire to end the centuries of Jewish weakness, to show the world that Jews would no longer be pushed around, that they'd fight back and prove themselves tougher than their enemies. There was more to Zionism than that. But the "pride through strength" piece [came to dominate](#) the whole project. Hence the massive Israeli military machine with its nuclear arsenal.

But you can't prove that you're stronger than your enemies unless you've also got enemies -- or at least believe you've got enemies -- to fight against. So there has to be a [myth of Israel's insecurity](#), fueled by an image of vicious anti-semites lurking somewhere out there, for Zionism to work. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, Iran has gradually risen to the top of Israel oh-so-necessary enemies list. Iranophobia is rampant in Israel, as one [Israeli scholar writes](#), because "Israel *needs* an existential threat."

Anyone who has grown up in Israel, or in the U.S. Jewish community (as I did), and paid attention knows all this. Maybe that's one reason U.S. Jews are [so likely to support](#) the Obama administration's moves toward Mideast peace.

But the U.S. mass media still frame the story within the myth of Israel's insecurity. Barak's words get presented by our [leading newspapers](#) as serious, sober analysis, with no comment on their sheer absurdity and callous disregard for human life. His own admission (in that same interview) that Israel faces no threat to its existence is ignored. So most Americans are left assuming, as they have for so long, that Israel is a brave tiny nation fighting for its life against

anti-semitic fanatics bent on destroying it. This tale of Israel's insecurity, like any powerful myth, is immune to facts and reason.

A leading Israeli scholar [now argues](#) that most Americans readily accept the myth because it reflects America's cherished frontier myth: supposedly civilized white guys endlessly fighting off the crazed violent savages. That sense of shared mythos, he suggests, is the strongest basis for the long-standing "special relationship" between the U.S. and Israel.

If so, it's not surprising that Republicans, who are most likely to embrace the frontier myth, are more likely than U.S. Jews to [support the hawkish](#) Israeli government as well as the calls to attack Iran, whatever the costs.

As long as this mythic view dominates the discussion of Israel here in the U.S., our government will continue to block reasonable moves toward Mideast peace, which must include a Palestinian state with full membership in the U.N. And we'll continue to [hear more talk](#) about the U.S. permitting an Israeli attack on Iran, which would bring death and destruction to the attacker as well as the victim without any tangible benefit for anyone.