

Iran's Nuclear Programme and the Stability of the Middle East

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ALEX WARD, MAR 2 2012

What is the Likely Impact of Iran's Nuclear Programme on the Regional Stability of the Middle East?

Quoted in the Washington Post (2011: npn), the current US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, highlighted how "Iran is technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium for a weapon in the next few years". Undoubtedly, a nuclear-armed Iran will inevitably "throw existing security structures into flux" (Kaye & Wehrey, 2007: 120), recalibrating the Middle Eastern strategic order. That said, the contours of this increasingly nuclearized political landscape are shaped by a myriad of interlocking and complex factors. Naturally, Iran's nuclear programme is sure to elicit responses from Washington, Israel and a host of Arab states, most notably those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), particularly Saudi Arabia.

With regards to the Western powers, "it is clear that Iran is now a centrepiece of American Policy" (Sick et al, 2008: 1), largely due to its counter-hegemonic, recalcitrant foreign policy. Whilst direct military confrontation is unlikely, the US and the EU has already engaged a multitude of covert operations targeting Iran's nuclear facilities and imposed significant diplomatic and economic sanctions upon the Islamic Republic. With regards to the GCC, compelling arguments have been made for the reactionary pursuit of nuclear weapons, as is the case with many other Arab states, which has severe implications for regional nuclear proliferation.

However, the most profound effect on regional stability is likely to come from the possibility of an Israeli pre-emptive strike to stall Iran's nascent nuclear programme, driven by the need to ensure regional pre-eminence and counterbalance against Iranian hegemony in the Gulf (Schake & Yaphe, 2004). Indeed, fears of an emboldened Iranian foreign policy have "sharply increased regional tensions" (Gasirowsky, 2007: 125).

Nonetheless, the implications for regional stability ultimately hinge upon whether the Islamic Republic is a revisionist or status-quo power. Suspicions, particularly from Israel and the GCC about Iranian support for Shia proxies in both the Levant and Gulf and threats of a Shia-led Iranian pursuit of regional hegemony are not ill-founded. However, it is necessary to draw upon a constructivist and pluralist review of the origins and nature of Iranian foreign policy, as well as the theory of defensive realism, which suggest that Iran's nuclear programme is reactionary in nature, nullifying the argument for Iran as an intrinsically revisionist state.

Crucially, in assessing the implications of Iranian nuclearization, it is important to acknowledge the fact that "nuclear worlds call for and encourage a different kind of reasoning" (Waltz, 1981: npn). As such, Waltz's theory of nuclear deterrence frames Iran's nuclear programme in such a way that informs notions of a more stable regional order, mainly due to the deterrent capabilities of nuclear weapons (Betts, 2000).

To be sure, suspicions of Iran's clandestine nuclear programme have galvanized western cooperation under the mutual necessity to prevent a nuclearized, emboldened Tehran (Rakel, 2007). From a pluralist stance, the US Presidency has come under increasing domestic support for the use of force as a preventive measure, with a recent CBS/NYT poll revealing that 82% of US citizens consider Iran as an 'enemy' of the US (Gilboa, 2010: 1). Similarly, influential Zionist lobbies such as AIPAC have exerted mounting pressure on Washington, particularly in Congress

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wherein "Israel is virtually immune from criticism" (Maersheimer & Walt, 2006:42). Currently, in the run up to the 2012 elections, Obama is under "tremendous pressure from the Israel lobby" (Madsen, 2011: npn) to support an Israeli strike on Iran. In the Gulf, according to Mattair (2007), the GCC states are likely to consent to US attacks based in GCC territory in support for counterbalancing the hegemonic ambitions of an emboldened Iran.

These factors considered, a covert campaign coordinated by the CIA and Mossad has been launched to stall the nuclear programme. In particular, cyber warfare (Fiore, 2011) and assassinations of numerous Iranian nuclear scientists (RT, 2011a) (Guardian, 2011) has demonstrated staunch US-Israeli opposition to the programme and has set a precedent for escalation, which is being further perpetuated by increased US naval presence in the Gulf in response to Tehran's recent naval drills in the region (RT, 2012)

Nonetheless, a direct military conflict between the NATO, the US and/or the EU with a nuclear Iran remains unlikely for several reasons (Sick et al, 2008). Firstly, Iran's promises of massive retaliation (RT, 2011b) serve to echo the notion of Iran as an undeterable state (Towle, 2000), which would significantly reduce the chances of a US strike (Powell, 2003), especially if Iran possessed nuclear capabilities. Moreover, the economic instability and sheer civilian casualties of a direct military confrontation "would increase anti-Americanism to a level that would severely undermine US power and influence throughout the region" (Mattair, 2007:137), hindering the fostering of democracy in the Middle East – a hallmark of contemporary US strategic regional policy.

With this in mind, an avenue for Western powers could be to take advantage of the dynamic nature of Iran's domestic politics. According to Chubin & Litwak (2003: 102), the sceptical Iranian public is "increasingly given to criticism [...] and scrutiny of [the] regime" rendering the nuclear issue a potentially contested turf. Moreover, as the situation has evolved, the increasing isolation brought about by Iranian hardliners, reflected recently by both the closure of the British embassy and mounting economic sanctions, could galvanize domestic opposition to the incumbent regime (Oren, 2011). The promotion of regime change in Iran, however, has considerable impediments. According to Russel (2004: 112), the promotion of domestic instability would develop a "cause for aggressive behaviour", serving to embolden the Iranian hardliners. Similarly, the estrangement of Iran from the international community could, according to Powell (2003), compel the regime to propagate a form of reactionary Iranian nationalism that could be mobilized in support for an increasingly provocative and aggressive regional strategy.

One final option lies in the potential for US-Iranian talks. Nonetheless, the likelihood of this is minimal, largely owing to the significant leverage of AIPAC and other Zionist lobbies in actively discouraging any form of dialogue between the two states (Madsen, 2011). For Iran, the issue of independence is crucial. Talks would undercut the ideological purchase it has with regards to its role as a counter-hegemonic Islamic regional leader (Rakel, 2007).

Of course, the effect of Iran's nuclear programme upon regional stability is underpinned by whether Iran is a revisionist or benign power. To many, Iran has aspirations of attaining hegemony over the Gulf (Ottolenghi, 2009), aspirations that could be realized with the deterrence, compellance and coercive capabilities of nuclear weapons in the interstate bargaining process (Panofsky, 2007). Indeed, according to Mindell (2008: 70), a nuclear weapon would "increase their ability to take more aggressive steps in asserting their pre-eminence in the region", largely through being able to use the spectre of a nuclear strike to renegotiate regional security arrangements. Furthermore, the deposition of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein has eliminated considerable impediments to a potential Iranian regional hegemony (Gasiorowski, 2007). Naturally, a more emboldened, nuclear Iran is bound to raise fears in the Gulf, particularly amongst the GCC. In particular, the perennial dispute between Iran and the UAE over the territorial rights to disputed islands in the Strait of Hormuz could be a first point of call for an emboldened revisionist Iran. In face of this, Abu Dhabi has reportedly sought to counterbalance against the Iranian threat through arms deals with Washington, including one recently of 500 hellfire missiles (RT, 2011c).

In light of Iran's history of subversive policy towards the GCC states, its rising influence amongst Shia contingents in the region has exacerbated regional concerns (Mattair, 2007), particularly considering the "loss of Iraq as a Sunni Arab bulwark" (Kaye & Wehrey, 2007: 118) and the subsequent political empowerment of Shia groups therein (Gause, 2007). Hence, the ruling elites in GCC states fear an emboldened Iran utilizing the threat of domestic destabilization through promoting Shia ascendancy to deter GCC states from balancing against Tehran's hegemonic

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ambitions. Dangerously, Iranian support for Shia groups could be counterbalanced by GCC states employing a similar policy of endorsing Sunni militants in post-war Iraq (Mattair, 2007). Such a move would be highly destabilizing, evoking profound concerns of “deeper sectarian violence in Iraq” (Gasirowsky, 2007: 125) that could propagate a Sunni/Shia divide throughout the region (Barzegar, 2005). GCC fears of a ‘Shia Crescent’ stretching from the Gulf to the Levant (Gause, 2007) have framed uncertainties about growing Iranian influence in Iraq (Mattair, 2007), even despite the Shia Crescent’s lack of “political and religious cohesiveness” (Terhalle, 2007: 70). In particular, GCC and Israeli fears of a ‘Shia Crescent’ have been amplified by the notion that a nuclear Iran will step up its support for Shia proxies not only with Shia paramilitary groups in Iraq, but with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Deep concerns for regional stability lie in the possibility of nuclear warheads being transferred to Hezbollah but this is a far-fetched contention (Fitzpatrick, 2006), mainly due to their “growing autonomy” from the Islamic Republic (Sadr, 2005: 66). This notwithstanding, even if Iran did not actively support Shia paramilitary groups, Iran’s strengthening could “provide a cover for proxies [to] engage in more reckless pursuits” (Kaye & Wehrey, 2007: 117) due to the cover of a nuclear umbrella.

Contrarily, Sick et al (2008: 5) identify a “clear trend toward Arab accommodation of Iran” as states bandwagon with Iran as a means of socialising Tehran into a peaceful rise. This is doubly underpinned by the conjuncture of a “growth in anti-US sentiment” (Russel, 2007: 141) and the need for a regional “counter to Israel” (Kaye & Wehrey, 2007: 119). That states are bandwagoning with Iran thus presents a critical challenge to the pre-existing strategic order, which could be counterbalanced by an aggressive Israel.

In the case made for Iran as a benign power, many have attributed Iran’s nuclear programme to the need to guarantee the Islamic Republic’s national security and sovereignty (Russel, 2004). According to Rakel (2007: 187), “the prime objective of both foreign and domestic policy has been regime survival” and as such, Iran’s nuclear ambitions can be framed through the concept of defensive realism. This asserts that Iran’s nuclearization has been a defensive project in reaction to “a feeling of encirclement” (Barzegar, 2005: 49) brought about by US presence not only the Gulf, but in Iraq and Afghanistan as well, especially in relation to its close ties to several GCC states (Mattair, 2007). Undoubtedly, the argument for defensive realism has been fueled both by regional US military presence and by the discursive threats levelled against Iran by “the Bush Administration’s anti-Iran [rhetoric] under the rubric of the ‘Axis of Evil’” (Afrasiabi & Maleki, 2003: 256) that serve as a US statement of intent regarding the deposition of the Iranian regime (Sadr, 2006). Furthermore, Iran is situated in a ‘nuclearized neighbourhood’ with Israel and Pakistan both possessing nuclear weapons, which according to Schake & Yaphe (2004: 38) has been a “primary reason” for Iran’s nuclear programme.

Drawing upon constructivist and pluralist theory, the contours of Iran’s foreign policy are intimately shaped by internal factors and thus can be “best explained [...] by the country’s political culture and political system” (Guldimann, 2007: 172). Indeed, it can be said that Iran’s nuclear programme is tied to consolidating the incumbent regime through fostering a sense of national pride (Mindell, 2008). Here, the strong domestic need for an independent and self-reliant regime can be realized through the power projection and deterrent capabilities inherent to the acquisition of nuclear capabilities. In view of this, Iran’s nuclear programme can be seen not as an inflammatory or aggressive step, but as a medium through which potential domestic dissent can be appeased, especially in light of the 2009 election protests and the enduring Arab Spring.

On the other hand, the theocratic nature of the Iranian political system has invoked the labelling of Iran as a state “driven by its revolutionary values and ideological perspectives” (Nia, 2010: 148) rather than through the realpolitik logic of the nation state. Indeed, the regime’s identity as the natural leader of Islam has sparked major regional uncertainties, particularly amongst the predominantly Sunni monarchies of the GCC (Shake & Yaphe, 2004). Moreover, these fears have intensified following the continually inflammatory and anti-West rhetoric of President Ahmadinejad (Rakel, 2007: 182). However, the nature of the Iranian political system renders Ahmadinejad as “not the sole or even lead decision maker” (Fitzpatrick, 2006: 21), which, in conjuncture with the popular discontent stemming from Ahmadinejad’s aggressive diplomacy and Iran’s continuing international isolation, will serve to mitigate the revisionist tendencies of Ahmadinejad’s Presidency (Gasirowsky, 2007). Thus, due to Iran’s defensive motivations for its nuclear programme, there remain doubts about it being born out of revisionism. Thus, Iran’s

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nuclear programme can be said to not be symptomatic of the actions of a rogue state but rather, the reaction to exogenous threats to its own national security, evincing the notion of a benign nuclear Iran.

In a similar vein, Kenneth Waltz's theory of nuclear deterrence can be utilized to interrogate the notion that, in fact, Iranian acquisition of a nuclear warhead could be "a powerful deterrent to preserve the status quo and prevent the outbreak of interstate conflict" (Russel, 2004: 102).

Nuclear deterrence theory is underpinned by the idea that the threat of nuclear weapons are enough to render the potential costs an aggressor is likely to shoulder far higher than the potential benefits if they were to engage militarily (Blair, 1993). Thus, the operationalization of deterrence involves high stakes brinkmanship whereby states actively pursue risk in order to discourage exogenous aggression, hinging upon rational choice models and game theory (Schelling, 1960) as states' actions are based upon predicting their opponents responses to threat. The credibility of this threat is of paramount importance as it is the resolution of the state in question that is imperative to the effectiveness of deterrence strategies (Powell, 2003).

Iran, due to both its 'undeterable' rhetoric, its identity as a 'rogue state' and the numerous exogenous threats to its domestic stability has considerable credibility in this sense. This theory therefore holds that, following Iran's nuclearization "not escalation but de-escalation becomes likely" (Waltz, 1981: npn) due to Iran's high threat credibility. A nuclear conflict between involving Iran would result in a Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) scenario, which "as the Cold War proved, can provide a stable equilibrium" (Mindell, 2008: 72) in the regional balance of power.

Corroboratively, according to Waltz (1981: npn), the likelihood of a conventional arms race decreases massively "as the logic of deterrence eliminates incentives for strategic arms racing", largely due to the fact that when dealing with a potential MAD scenario, "arguments based on relative advantage lose their point" (Fox, 1946: 181) as both states can ensure the total annihilation of the other. As such, nuclear warheads could be additionally stabilizing by rendering conventional arms races largely redundant (Jervis, 2001).

As posited by Goldstein (2000: 283) nuclear weapons could further contribute to regional stability through providing "historically unprecedented incentives for negotiators to discover a way to avoid risking national survival". The overwhelming threat inherent to nuclear weapons could consequently drive regional policy hardliners to the negotiating table (Sadr, 2005), akin to the both establishment of the Hotline between the White House and the Kremlin following the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Six Party Talks following North Korea's nuclear programme.

The mechanisms of nuclear deterrence theory presuppose both actor rationality and effective inter-state communication structures that enable agents to precisely interpret and convey intent (Brown, 2008) (Huth, 1999). However, according to Morgan (1977: 78), the circumstance of threat can undermine the psychological capacity of key decision makers to act rationally, especially in the case of Iran, wherein perennial regional instability, 'Axis of Evil' rhetoric and an increasingly restless nuclear Israel have served to magnify threats to Iran's national security. Another major critique of nuclear deterrence is Sagan's (1994) organisation theory that emphasises the salience of "misinformation, misunderstanding, or misconstruing information" (Krieger, 2000: npn), in conjuncture with leaders' "use of simplifying mechanisms" (Sagan, 1994: 71) to comprehend complex political situations. Absent an effective communication infrastructure, actors will act "on the basis of misunderstandings" (McNamara, 1962: npn) and, accordingly, will "not function predictably in accordance with bargaining and game-theory assumptions" (Russel, 2004: 106), undermining the stabilizing effect of nuclear warheads upon the regional stability.

In the Middle East, the limitations to deterrence theory are intensified as "there exists no institutionalized process for adversaries to ensure structured communications on a routine basis" (Russel, 2004: 105), rendering interstate communication distinctly problematic, especially in light the relatively large role of the media in shaping inter-state perceptions. At an internal level, as Iran is an embryonic nuclear state, the command-and-control problems therein will be inevitably more severe and thus, according to Powell (2003: 102), "the risk of accidental or inadvertent war will be higher".

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Ultimately though, it is of crucial importance to acknowledge the "critical distinction between a theory and predictions derived from it" (Powell, 2003: 1000) and to avoid extrapolating from outdated Cold War theory, as it is not applicable to the radically different Middle Eastern strategic order.

Similarly, the implications of Tehran's nuclear programme, in relation to regional nuclear proliferation could undermine the positive connotations posited by deterrence theory (Bahgat, 2006), regardless of whether Iran is a revisionist state. Drawing upon balance of threat theory, Gause (2007: 119) notes, "states act in the international arena on perceptions of threats". As such, the effects of Iran's nuclear programme have led to extensive state interest in nuclear weapons "as hedges against a nuclear armed Iran" (Elderman & Krepinevich, 2011: 69). In February 2007, GCC representatives liaised with IAEA officials to assess the potentiality of pursuing their own nuclear programmes (Sick et al, 2008). Similarly, pre-revolution Egypt, Turkey and Syria all explicitly expressed interest in nuclear programmes in the context of Iranian developments (Brown, 2008).

In particular, the reaction of Saudi Arabia is a "leading concern among all regional states" (Kaye & Wehrey, 2007: 114). As posited by Sick et al (2008:18), Saudi Arabia "do not accept [Iran's perceived] aspirations for hegemony in the region" and as such, a nuclear Riyadh could use the spectre of a nuclearized Iran to reassert its pre-eminence in the region. Such a response would have fundamentally detrimental effects to regional stability and undermine any potential for rapprochement between the two states, especially with regards to envenoming the aforementioned Sunni-Shia sectarian divide.

All in all, the potential for regional proliferation is sure to have profound impacts upon contemporary security arrangements, entailing the possibility of an "escalating spiral of a regional arms race" (Kaye & Wehrey, 2007:111), wherein, because of the security dilemma, states endeavour to defensively build up nuclear capabilities in an attempt to counterbalance against rival state's own build up.

Importantly, the regional build-up of nuclear capabilities will significantly contribute to further instability through increased multipolarity in the region. According to Powell (2003: 87), critiques of nuclear deterrence theory see it as "an obsolete and possibly dangerous kind of Cold War thinking" due to its embeddedness in the notion of bipolarity. In a neorealist vein, this is inapplicable to a nuclear Middle East due to the intrinsically temperamental nature of multipolar systems; the nature of multipolarity involves a constant dynamism in the security architecture and an unstable balance of power, in which uncertainty prevails (Waltz, 1979). Furthermore, nuclear powers within a more multipolar region would, according to Elderman & Krepinevich (2011: 72) be "more prone to miscalculation and escalation than a bipolar competition", which would also serve to further accentuate the chances of "erroneous information about the other side's nuclear intentions" (Blair, 1993: 1), undermining the applicability of deterrence theory.

Another crucial challenge to nuclear stability theory in the region lies in the possibility of a pre-emptive strike (Sagan, 1994), emanating in this case from Israel. The challenges presented by systematic communication inadequacies "make pre-emptive action that much more attractive" (Russel, 2004: 115) as they inhibit the mechanisms of deterrence from operating effectively. Moreover, according to Huth (1999: 29) pre-emptive strikes are imaginable in "conditions under which the security dilemma might operate and produce fears of a first-strike advantage". The importance of national security must also not be neglected, as "even a few nuclear detonations on [Israel's] soil would be devastating" (Elderman & Krepinevich, 2011: 68) due to its geographically dense population.

Israel's bombing of the Iraqi Osirak reactor in 1981 clearly highlights Tel-Aviv's stance toward regional nuclear proliferation and its willingness to employ pre-emptive tactics (Sadr, 2006). According to Raas & Long (2007: 30), a similar attack on the Islamic Republic's facilities would "provide at least as much benefit in terms of delaying Iranian development of nuclear weapons", especially in light of the modernization of the Israeli Air Force (IAF) since the 80s. Thus, the capability of the IAF launching a pre-emptive strike with a relatively high degree of confidence, coupled with the regional impediments to the operation of nuclear deterrence, increases the likelihood of an Israeli strike.

Of course, in assessing the likelihood of a pre-emptive strike, it is wholly necessary to adopt an insight into Israel's strategic ethos. At an ideological level, Fiore (2011: 9) contends, "no Israeli decision-maker can risk allowing a bitter

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ideological enemy to acquire nuclear weapons". This is reflected in comments by key Israeli leaders such as Ariel Sharon (2004) who specifically noted how "Israel must include appropriate pre-emption options in its overall defensive strategy". Additionally, the central role of hardliners and military leaders in Israel's foreign policy will further exacerbate fears of a pre-emptive strike and undermine deterrence theory. Similar to Sharon, comments such as "we have to consider killing [Ahmadinejad]" made by Former Israeli Defense Chief Moshe Ya'alon clearly highlight the potentially radical nature of Israel's military contingent. Recently, inflammatory military projects, such as the deployment of long-range Jericho missiles around Jerusalem (RT, 2011b) and the test of a missile capable of a nuclear strike in November 2011 could allude to an Israeli willingness to counterbalance against Iran's nuclear threat through military escalation (RT, 2011a).

The situation looks bleaker still when considering the virtual nonexistence of dialogue between the two states. In lieu of this, Cohen (2010) highlights the negative impact of a belligerent Israeli press that warns of a "second holocaust" following Iran's nuclearization, which in turn generates domestic pressure for a preemptive strike.

That said, the impracticalities of the strike (owing to the underground, dispersed nature of Iran's nuclear facilities) and the potential backlash of a strike, including the possibility of a massive Iranian military and/or proxy response, might deter Israel from this option. Nevertheless, according to Sadr (2005), the threat upon domestic security of a nuclear Iran is a cost too high to bear for Israel and Tel-Aviv could well pursue some form of disarming strike in light of this.

All in all, Iran's nuclear programme has already had a profoundly destabilizing effect upon the region's security architecture, evoking an "intense concern about the restructuring of the region's power relations" (Kaye & Wehrey, 2007: 112). This has led to Western and Israeli concerns of a revisionist state pursuing an increasingly emboldened and subversive foreign policy, propagated further by Ahmadinejad's demagogic rhetoric. Indeed, fears of a revitalized Iranian pursuit of regional hegemony are shared by the GCC states, particularly over the perceived Iranian fostering of a 'Shia Crescent' (Gause, 2007). Despite Iran's intentions being most suitably framed through the lens of defensive realism (Barzegar, 2005), Iran's nuclear programme nonetheless has raised concerns that run the danger of spiralling into a nuclear arms race due to the security dilemma (Mattair, 2007). On the contrary, Waltz's nuclear deterrence theory offers a more positive outlook, suggesting that, because of the possibility of MAD, a nuclear arms race would inhibit direct military conflict, compelling states to adopt more diplomatic means to solve crises. However, the lack of adequate inter-state communication infrastructures, the high possibility of an Israeli pre-emptive strike and the potential crystallisation of a proliferation-induced anarchic multipolar system serve only to nullify the argument for nuclear deterrence, shaping the post-nuclear Middle East into a region characterised by an increasingly unstable multipolar strategic order, plagued by the spectre of all-out nuclear apocalypse.

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