

# **Towards a Pluralistic Nuclear Middle East**

Written by Mohammed Nuruzzaman

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## **Towards a Pluralistic Nuclear Middle East**

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MOHAMMED NURUZZAMAN, SEP 29 2013

Iran's nuclear program has long been an explosive issue in its relations with the West, particularly the US. Despite a series of open and secret negotiations held between Tehran and Washington since President Barack Obama stepped into the White House in January 2009, the dispute drags on. The US is particularly concerned about the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran as it perceives nuclear weapons in Iranian hands as a serious threat to its oil and strategic interests in the Middle East, an existential threat to Israel, a regional bully against the Gulf Arab allies, and a possible source of aid to terrorists.[1] The Iranians, on the contrary, view the US as a global bully bent on destroying Iran.[2] For the US and for Israel, dismantling the Iranian nuclear program is a top priority while Iran remains determined not to make any concessions on the nuclear track. This was clearly the case under former President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's government (2005 – 2013). The new Iranian President Hassan Rouhani sounds reconciliatory in his approach but that portends no quick hope for a negotiated settlement of the nuclear dispute.

In the last few years, the Iran – West political and diplomatic duel on the nuclear issue has generated a considerable academic debate. In 2007, Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan debated the promises and perils of a nuclear-armed Iran.[3] Waltz defended the idea that nuclear powers behave more responsibly than conventional powers. China and Russia, once arch enemies of the US, never fired nuclear-tipped missiles at US military installations or population centers. Hence, the credible threat of mutually assured destruction had worked '100 percent of the time'. Nuclear weapons in Iranian hands, he argued, would not be an exception. Waltz concluded that the Iranian nuclear program was driven not only by the geopolitical factors in the Middle East, but the replacement of threats posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq by the US after 2003 played a big role in Iran's rush to the program. Scott Sagan, in contrast, raised questions over control of nuclear weapons by civilian leadership and the dangers of nuclear weapons falling into terrorist hands. He cited the example of Pakistan, a nuclear-armed but deeply unstable country, as a source of future nuclear dangers. A nuclear-capable Iran, Sagan opined, might initiate aggressions or provoke the US to run into dangerous military situations precipitating another war in the Persian Gulf sub-region.

This short piece, while building on Waltz's arguments for nuclear deterrents as security promoters and stabilizers, takes a non-conventional position on nuclear programs and probable proliferation in the Middle East and adds to the debates by bringing in the historical tensions and structural compulsions that leave the states in the region with no practical option but to go nuclear. In other words, the imperatives for nuclear programs and proliferation in the region are deeply rooted in the historical-structural dynamics and strategic compulsions of the principal actors in the region – the Iranians, the Israelis, and the Arabs. Contrary to Western concerns for the dangers of nuclear programs and possible weapons in Iranian hands, it argues that a nuclear-armed Iran, alongside Israeli and Arab nuclear deterrents, will promote security stability and peace in the whole Middle East region.

### **Historical Tensions and Structural Dynamics**

Debates on the Iranian nuclear program and possible moves towards weapons often miss the more probing factors of historical tensions and structural dynamism that make the Iranians, the Arabs or the Israelis turn to nuclear deterrents. Historically, the Middle East has seen the rise and fall of many great empires – the Persian empire, the Arab empire, and the Ottoman empire. Various contemporary tensions between the Arabs and the Iranians, and between the Iranians and the Turks draws back to that imperial past. The penetration of the European colonial powers after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I further complicated the situation. Britain

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and France, under the League of Nations mandate systems, maintained strong military presence in the region during the interwar period and beyond. The US gradually got involved after Standard Oil of California (Socal) had discovered oil in the western shores of the Persian Gulf in 1936. Before leaving the region principally after World War II, London and Paris carved out the independent states of Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria with significant ethnic, religious and sectarian overlapping setting them up on a road to future conflicts. On top of that, simmering Iran – US tensions and hostility after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and Iran's call to the Arab populace to overthrow their pro-US dictatorial regimes turned the Middle East into a tinderbox. Counterbalancing political and security policies and measures followed suit. Present-day Iranian or Saudi Arabian bid for regional supremacy speaks much of that. The ongoing pro-democracy movements in the Arab world, have again convulsed the whole region rendering down a set of hostile political and diplomatic alignments and realignments involving both regional and external powers – Iran, Syria, and Russia, on one side, and the US, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, on the other.

Structurally, the Middle East has had a polynodal power structure for centuries. The region was never under the control of a single imperial or democratic ruler. Different Arab and non-Arab dynasties have ruled different parts of the Middle East at different historical periods with their power centers based either in Babylon, Baghdad, Damascus, Constantinople or Esfahan. No single regional political core, as a result, emerged with the commanding power to forge a regional political identity and foster security integration.[4] Instead, different rival powers have constantly vied against each other for control and dominance which further intensified in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and drew in external powers.

The northern head of the Persian Gulf emerged as the center of economic and political gravitation once oil was discovered for the first time in Iran's Abadan region in 1907. Iranian Abadan-centered northwest, oil-rich Iraqi province of Basra and Kuwait together make up the northern head of the Persian Gulf. Some of the major oil fields, refineries, oil pipelines, and petrochemical industries of the Middle East region are located in this area.[5] The British attempt to push the Ottomans out of Persian Gulf area before and during the First World War, the Russian historical drive to find a foothold in the Gulf through Iraq or Iran, the 1991 Gulf War over Kuwait and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq all had deep roots in the struggle for control over this economically and strategically important northern head of the Persian Gulf.

Developments during and after the Iraq war (2003–2011) have further heightened structural tensions by dividing up the region into two competing power blocs – America, Israel and their Arab allies versus Iran, Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah alliance. The two power blocs are locked-in competition over control of the Gulf region, particularly the northern head. Much of the imperatives for the Iranian nuclear program and the efforts to stop it lie in this game of competition for control of the Gulf. Iran is pursuing a nuclear program not only to guarantee its security and survival, but also to make sure that it does not lose the competition for control in the Gulf. This has, in turn, pushed the Gulf Arabs to think of nuclear deterrence as a security hedge against Iranian dominance and hegemony. Israel is not a part the Gulf neighborhood but its security strategy forces it to take proliferation efforts by any Middle Eastern party seriously.

## **Iranian nuclear compulsions**

Geographically, Iran is located in a dangerous nuclear neighborhood. Two of its eastern neighbors – India and Pakistan have active nuclear weapons programs. Tehran's northwestern regional rival Israel secretly developed the bomb in the 1960s and continues to maintain a policy of 'nuclear ambiguity' – neither denying nor acknowledging that it possesses nuclear weapons. This seemingly frustrates the Iranians that their regional power position is incongruent with the geostrategic significance and structural advantages their country enjoys in the Gulf and in the Middle East.

Iran occupies a unique geostrategic location in the Middle East. It borders on two of the world's most important areas of oil and gas reserves – the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, and geographically connects Central Asia and South Asia to the Gulf. The geostrategic significance of Iran is further enhanced by its capacity to control the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow water lane that connects the Gulf to the Sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean and through which 17 million barrels of oil pass each day. Other than being the world's fourth largest oil exporter, Iran also possesses the third-largest proven oil reserves after Saudi Arabia and Iraq and the second-largest natural gas reserves in the world.

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after the Russian Federation.

Among the Middle Eastern countries (excluding Turkey), Iran's economy is the largest. Its 78 million-strong population puts it at the top of Middle Eastern demographic list. It is also a formidable conventional military power equipped with Russian, Chinese and indigenous weapons systems. The Iranians, being propped up by a sense of strategic and structural superiority, see themselves as the natural leader of the Persian Gulf area, and they aspire after a greater role in the whole Middle East region. Two principal constraints – the Arab challenge to Iranian power and the US military presence in and around the Gulf – hamstringing Tehran's bid for regional supremacy. [6]

The quick fall of Saddam's Iraq to US occupation forces in May 2003 and the Bush administration's policy of regime change fundamentally changed Iranian security perceptions and strategic defense thinking. The Iranian leaders – conservative hardliners and reformists alike – moved to the option of developing a nuclear capability as the last line of defense against possible US attack and aggression.[7] A host of other factors, such as Iran's regional leadership ambitions, avoidance of future carnage like the one that resulted from the long Iraq – Iran war in the 1980s, Israel's undeclared nuclear weapons, and domestic political dynamics played significant roles to propelled Iran to invest in the nuclear option.[8]

## **Israeli compulsions**

Since its creation, Israel has largely remained a hostile neighbor to the Arab states and vice versa. Major armed hostilities of 1948, 1967 and 1973 set Israel and its Arab neighbors on a repeating collision course, though relations with Egypt and Jordan normalized after peace treaties were signed respectively in 1979 and 1994. The 2006 summer war with Iran and Syria-backed Lebanese guerilla group Hezbollah again exacerbated regional tensions pitting the two sides for dangerous military encounters in the future.

Save the historical enmity with the Arab states, Syria and Lebanon in particular, Israel suffers a litany of structural weaknesses in the face of growing Arab and non-Arab military might in the region. Israel's major infrastructures – including power plants, the Dimona nuclear facility, sea ports and population centers are within easy reach of missile and heavy artillery fires from Hamas-controlled Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority-governed West Bank. Additionally, the latest war with Hamas in November 2012 has exposed Israeli vulnerability to military counter-offensives by anti-Israeli armed groups or states.

Israel's structural weaknesses, in contrast to Iran's structural advantages, have haunted Israeli leaders right from the beginning to develop and execute a defense doctrine to fight the war on enemy territory and end the war quickly to avoid human and economic losses. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, adopted the policy of a people's army of mainly reserve soldiers and maintaining superiority in conventional and non-conventional weapons to deny adversaries any chance of victory in a war.[9] Wars with the Arabs and structural disadvantages gradually forced Israel to develop a nuclear deterrent to convince hostile Arab states of severe retaliation in case they dared to attack it.[10]

Maintaining a deterrent posture appears not enough for Israel; it has also sought to make sure that no neighboring country in the Middle East can ever develop a weapon capability to threaten Israel's survival and existence. Late Prime Minister Menachem Begin declared in May 1977 that the development of nuclear facilities by any hostile country was a "red line" for Israel warranting actions to destroy the facilities. The air raid on Iraq's Osirak nuclear plant in June 1981 and the bombing of Syria's nuclear facilities in the northern part of the country in September 2007 were prompted by Israel's self-declared "red line" policy. Israeli threats of military actions against Iranian nuclear facilities are also tied to this "red line".

Israeli scholars and strategists in general rule out the possibility of Israel being a party to any treaty declaring the Middle East a nuclear weapon-free zone. It would compromise Israel's ultimate defense and put it at par with conventional Arab or non-Arab military powers in the region. They cite clandestine efforts by Iraq, Libya and Syria to violate the NPT, Iran's defiance of the West to keep its uranium enrichment program running, and deep-rooted Arab reluctance to accept the legitimacy of Israel as an independent state as reasons why Israel cannot support a WMD-

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free Middle East.[11]

## **Arab compulsions**

Arab compulsions for nuclear deterrence originate less from Israel and more from Iranian nuclear efforts. The Arab states did not go for the nuclear option in the past, despite frequent difficulties in waging conventional wars, because of a lack of technological know-how and also because of US pressures. Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility was more in line with its hostility towards Iran and its bid for Arab leadership; Syria's nuclear efforts had an obvious anti-Israel, not an anti-Iran, dimension.

The Gulf Arab states have rallied behind the US to mount pressures on Tehran to abandon its nuclear program. The Arab opposition is propelled by their historical rivalry with Iran, their threat perceptions in the Gulf neighborhood and related structural factors. Three factors collectively instill a strong sense of Iran-threat in the Gulf Arab states that led to the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 as a bulwark against Iran:

- i) Iran's structural advantages like vast territorial size, population strength, a powerful conventional army etc.
- ii) The fall of Iraq, a frontline Arab state that for long kept Iran's regional dominance under check
- iii) Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The last factor, according to WikiLeaks revelations, has even prompted Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE to exhort the US to take out Iranian nuclear facilities through military strikes.[12] The GCC states, at the same time, have sought strong military relations with the US to counter Iranian power and influence which Iran views as a security problem in the Gulf area.

The GCC's largest partner, Saudi Arabia, directly competes with Iran both in the Gulf and in the wider Middle East. In recent years, Riyadh has been dismayed by the fall of Iraq into Shiite hands (that gravitate towards Tehran) and the rise of Shiite power in Lebanon – as well as Shiite dominance in Syria. Though Bahrain has been put under quasi-Saudi control via Saudi troops, Riyadh remains disconnected from the northern head of the Persian Gulf and its presence in the Levant is almost eliminated. Iran's regional dominance, according to Saudi perceptions, would enter its final stage if Tehran succeeds in completing its nuclear program and builds the bomb. A possible 'Grand Bargain' between Iran and the US under President Obama, the Saudis fear, may eventually allow this to happen. This fear was crudely expressed by Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud in December 2010: "This term [Grand Bargain], generally, means that anything to do with the Middle East has to pass by Iranian doors".[13] This is what the Saudis and other Arabs find unacceptable.

The fear of a nuclear-armed Iran has apparently pushed the Arab states to consider their own nuclear option. The GCC expressed its intent to jointly establish a nuclear program in December 2006; the UAE signed nuclear cooperation agreement with France in January 2008; in September 2007 Jordan signed a nuclear memorandum of understanding with the US. Saudi Arabia expects to establish its first nuclear reactor by the year 2020. The Arab governments justify their move to nuclear cooperation on economic and commercial grounds: to meet growing energy needs to boost economic growth, to diversify energy sources or to stop environmental consequences, but there is a growing concern in the West that the Gulf Arabs may divert their nuclear facilities to a weaponized option in the future.[14] Past nuclear developments in the region corroborate this concern. The Indians had started their nuclear program as a peaceful program; the Pakistanis followed suit but eventually both ended up in producing nuclear weapons.

## **Nuclear Plurality, Peace and Security**

In the Middle East it is clear that the nuclear programs of its rival states are pushed hard by complex geopolitical and security concerns. They are, in fact, the outcomes of historical and structural compulsions. Like their historical parallels elsewhere, such as China-India, India-Pakistan or US-Soviet nuclear rivalries, Iranian, Israeli or possible Arab nuclear programs/proliferations are intended to deter massive aggressions by neighboring or distant parties and to ensure their survival. Does that mean an end to conflicts and wars and the beginning of a dawn of peace in the

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## **Middle East?**

A look at past and recent history supports the idea that nuclear weapons keep the peace and prevent major wars between great and regional powers, though proxy wars are fought by the rivals on the turfs of smaller allies or client states. India and Pakistan, for example, stepped on the brink of a full-scale war over Pakistan's Kargil adventure in the spring of 1999 but both parties backed down once they were convinced that escalation had high risk of moving up to the nuclear level. It was reported then that at one stage of the Kargil war the Pakistani army readied its missiles tipped with nuclear warheads for possible use against India. This nerve-breaking move forced the then civilian Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to order troop pullouts from Indian-held Kargil to avoid retaliation by India.

If deterrence works in India-Pakistan relations, it can equally work in Iran-US or Iran-Israel relations. After all, the Iranian leaders, whom the Western press negatively projects as "mad mullahs", are rational and well-calculated political actors who are adept in taking care of their national interests. Iran's siding with Armenia against Shiite Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or support for Russian military offensive against Muslim rebels in Chechnya tell a lot about Iranian foreign policy pragmatism.

Nuclear programs/proliferation in the Middle East promises benefits on three specific fronts: restrained regional and international behavior of the hostile parties, incentives for minimizing and resolving conflicts, and incentives for cooperation for development and peace. Nuclear weapons make conflicting parties more responsible actors – as with power comes responsibility. Of course, this may not hold true if a nuclear-armed country with conventional firepower superiority decides to invade and occupy a militarily weak conventional power. The March 2003 US invasion of Iraq is a case at hand.

Of the three rival parties in the Middle East, Israel is a nuclear power; Iran seems determined to keep its nuclear option, and Saudi Arabia alone or in collaboration with the GCC states may be desirous of a nuclear option. More restraints on their foreign policy behavior can be expected once all parties become known nuclear powers. A war of aggression is not an option when the costs far outweigh the benefits and threaten the very survival of a state that threatens another.

Similarly, nuclear deterrence holds the potential to convince the Arabs and the Israelis to resolve their conflicts and make peace. In that sense, it brings more political, diplomatic and security benefits for Israel than for the Arab states. It is no secret that Israel survives on military force with direct support from the US; even after sixty-five years of its existence in the Middle East, Israel is not politically and diplomatically recognized by the Arab states (other than Egypt and Jordan). Though physically Israel is located in the Middle East, it is politically, diplomatically and culturally isolated from the region. It is in the best interests of Israel to come out of this isolation and gain legitimacy by making compromises with the Arabs and by recognizing the rights of the Palestinian people. Peace with the Arab states may enable Israel to channel more resources to economic development and generate more benefits for its people.

Menachem Begin acknowledged the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people by signing onto the 1978 Camp David Framework Agreement which, other than making peace with Egypt, was planned to include the Palestinians in the peace framework. Current Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu also accepts a two-state solution on the conditions that the Palestinian state must be demilitarized and that it should recognize Israel as a Jewish State.[15] It is unlikely that Israel can, or should, survive on force for good. The force option would only keep convincing the regional Arab and non-Arab leaders to seek nuclear capability openly or secretly. Nuclear deterrence in Iranian or Saudi hands adds to the power of the Palestinians who are likely to wage more violent wars until Israel accepts their legitimate rights. A softening of hearts by Israel can convince the Arabs that the Israeli leadership is serious about peace, and that a breakthrough is within reach.

The loss of ground by Netanyahu's Likud party and coalition partners in the January 2013 parliamentary elections reflects an evolving pattern of Israelis caring more about their social and economic well-being than the belligerent foreign policy postures of their leaders. That requires peace with the Arabs with a guarantee for survival and independence. One way to do this is to publicly declare Israel a nuclear power and thus shun its ambiguous nuclear status. Indeed, a debate is currently going on in Israel on this very issue.[16] A break with this policy sends a clear

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message to radical Arab groups and to Iran and Syria that they should permanently stop thinking of destroying the state of Israel. It may also dilute anti-Israel rhetoric by Iran and deny its proxies – Hamas and Hezbollah – any opportunity to initiate armed activities against Israel. Further, the move would increase Israel's international legitimacy and foster inducements among the Arabs and non-Arabs to accept Israel as a legitimate state. Finally, it also promises a new window of cooperation between the Arabs and the Israelis in the future once the basic requirements of mutual recognitions and guarantees for survival are met.

In conclusion, a few points stand out to be highlighted. Firstly, nuclear programs/deterrence is not a luxury option for the Middle Eastern rivals; it is rather an outcome of historical tensions and structural compulsions. Secondly, deterrence guarantees the mutual survival and independence of the Iranians against Israeli and American threats, and of the Israelis against Arab and Iranian threats. It guarantees the Arabs protections from Iranian dominance and hegemony in the Gulf area and greater Middle East region. Thirdly, a pluralistic nuclear Middle East holds the potential to induce the Arabs and the Israelis to make peace and co-exist peacefully.

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[3] Scott Sagan, Kenneth Waltz and Richard Betts, "A Nuclear Iran: Promoting Stability or Courting Disaster", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, spring/summer 2007, pp. 135 – 150.

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[10] Jonathan Spyer, "Israel in the Middle East: Threats and Countermeasures", *International Relations*, vol. 22, no. 3, p. 351.

[11] Jonathan Spyer, "Israel in the Middle East..." p. 351.

[12] See Jonathan Spyer, "Israel and the WikiLeaks Cables", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2011, pp. 13 – 19.

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[14] Mark Fitzpatrick, "Will Nuclear Energy Plans in the Middle East Become Nuclear Weapons strategy?", *International Relations*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2008, pp. 381 – 385.

[15] Meron Medzini, "Israel's Evolving Security Concept", p. 89.

[16] Meron Medzini, p. 92

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**Mohammed Nuruzzaman** is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST), Kuwait. He earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Alberta in 2003 and has taught at different universities in Canada, Bangladesh, and Kuwait. Dr. Nuruzzaman specializes in international relations theory, global political economy, human rights and human security, great powers in the global order, political Islam, and politics and international relations of the Middle East. His major publications have appeared in leading peer-reviewed international journals, including *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *International Studies Perspectives*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, *International Studies*, *International Area Studies Review*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, and *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, among others. He is also a contributor to influential global news magazines and online publication outlets, including *The National Interest*, *E-International Relations*, *The Conversation*, and *Informed Comments*. Winner of some prestigious scholarships and fellowships, including Durham Senior International Research Fellowship 2016 – 17, KFAS (Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences) research grants in 2013, the F.S. Chia Doctoral Scholarships (University of Alberta) in 1998, and the GUST – UMSL Summer Research Fellowship in 2011, his current research more focuses on contemporary Middle Eastern security issues.