

Can a Nuclear Iran be Considered a Threat to Regional and Global Security?

Written by Charlotte Love

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CHARLOTTE LOVE, APR 12 2014

For a number of years Iran's nuclear program has been purposefully ambiguous. However when Iran announced progress in its nuclear enrichment program in 2007[1], the intentions of its government came under scrutiny as a result of the threat a nuclear-armed Iran poses to regional and global security. In evaluating this threat, it is important to firstly look at how Iran could pose a threat and then the credibility of such threats as will be shown. By looking at points made by Waltz, it can be argued that Iran presents a less significant threat than may be portrayed by the US or Israel. However Waltz is only correct to a certain extent as the threat of actions pursued by an Iran emboldened by its nuclear capabilities, and the possibility of inadvertent escalation presents an acute threat to both regional and global security.

The threat presented by a nuclear Iran is largely determined by how rational Iran is considered to be, and therefore the likelihood of Iran initiating a nuclear attack. In the US and Israel, Iran is deemed an irrational actor and therefore poses an acute threat to security if it acquires nuclear weapons[2] because it follows that Iran will not hesitate from using an atomic bomb during conflict. This is not misplaced concern as Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, chairman of Iran's expediency council, stated that Iran's nuclear enrichment program was peaceful, "for the moment", and, "irreversible, like a bullet fired from a gun"[3]. However despite fanatical rhetoric, there is in fact little precedent to show that Iran would act irrationally with nuclear weapons and engage in a nuclear attack. This is due to the fact that if Iranian leaders were to initiate a nuclear attack it would prove to be suicidal due to the nature of nuclear warfare. The threat of a nuclear Iran is therefore, "grossly exaggerated"[4], because the leadership is in fact not suicidal. Waltz argues that the US and Israel have merely portrayed Iran as irrational and therefore a threat to security as an attempt to prevent Iran from acquiring such weapons[5]. He explains that, "whoever gets nuclear weapons behaves with caution and moderation"[6], and Iran would be no exception. During the Cold War the Soviet Union was thought to be irrational and untrustworthy with nuclear capabilities, and yet a nuclear attack was avoided. So even if a state *is* deemed irrational, it will still act with caution in the possession of an atomic bomb as other countries have before. Therefore it is, "highly unlikely that a nuclear-armed Iran would deliberately use a nuclear device"[7], because even a mistrusted country will act rationally with nuclear weapons in order to avoid a nuclear conflict and self-destruction. As a result, even though the threat of a nuclear Iran may seem significant *if* Iran is portrayed as irrational and therefore willing to engage in a direct attack. In reality the credibility of this threat and the chance of an attack actually occurring dramatically reduces as there is little evidence to show that Iran is significantly irrational, so Iran is not a threat to security via direct attack.

However, a nuclear Iran may significantly threaten regional security by triggering a Middle East nuclear arms race. If Iran acquired nuclear weapons its neighboring countries may feel increasingly vulnerable sparking proliferation in the region, as countries like Egypt or Saudi Arabia would dislike Iran's ability to dominate the Middle East through its nuclear superiority. This poses a significant threat to regional security simply because the more countries that acquire nuclear weapons, the greater the chance one may eventually be used. In 2007 the Gulf Cooperation Council met with the International Atomic Energy Agency to discuss preventing nuclear proliferation[8]. However Jordan's King Abdullah later commented, "The Egyptians are looking for a nuclear program... and we are actually looking at nuclear power for peaceful and energy purposes"[9]. This shows that the initial stages of a nuclear program are coming together in various countries in the region and, even if peaceful programs, they make the threat of proliferation

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increasingly possible and a substantial threat to regional security.

However, just like the threat posed by a nuclear Iran initiating a nuclear attack, the level of threat a nuclear Iran presents to regional security through proliferation is greatly diminished by how unlikely it is to *actually* happen. Considering the likelihood of proliferation, the threat of a nuclear Iran to security is in fact very low for two reasons. Firstly because a nuclear weapons program is difficult to build. For example, even though Saudi Arabia may be able to fund a program the technology and supplies needed to do so are closely watched by the international arena and difficult to acquire[10]. Consequently developing an atomic bomb would take many years making proliferation impossible. Secondly, if proliferation was a significant threat it would have happened elsewhere already[11]. Nuclear weapons have now existed in the international arena for a number of decades yet proliferation, the spread of weapons like wildfire, has not occurred and therefore there is no reason to believe that it will. Waltz states, "if an atomic Israel did not trigger an arms race... there is no reason a nuclear Iran should now"[12]. Instead a nuclear Iran would bring stability to the region by balancing the currently unchecked nuclear-armed Israel. So overall, a nuclear Iran would not present a significant threat to regional security through proliferation but be, "most likely to restore stability in the Middle East"[13].

The threat of a nuclear Iran through both direct attack and proliferation has been diminished by the credibility of these threats because, as shown, it is unlikely that either will occur. However a nuclear Iran presents a credible threat to security, the greatest by far, through an Iranian nuclear capability allowing it to act more aggressively. Feeling protected by a nuclear shield Iran's leaders may, "engage in more reckless pursuits"[14], in their support for terrorist groups and in intervention abroad. Iran's government has long been aligned with terrorist organizations like Hezbollah in the region, supporting them in part as retaliation against the United States. An Iran emboldened by nuclear weapons may increase support for such groups using them not only as a form of retaliation, but an offensive tool[15]. If Tehran gave more sophisticated weapons to such groups, the consequences could be severe. Therefore a nuclear Iran emboldened in its support for terrorist groups through the belief that its nuclear shield will protect it, presents a real and dangerous threat to regional and global security.

A nuclear Iran, "believing that it possessed a powerful deterrent"[16], may also engage in more conflicts abroad. As mentioned, Waltz states a nuclear Iran could bring about stability in the Middle East. However, for Scott Sagan this assumption is misplaced because where nuclear capabilities emerge, there is increased instability below the nuclear threshold due to an increase in smaller conflicts[17]. This stability-instability paradox, a situation whereby the stability created by two nuclear states leads to greater instability below the nuclear threshold[18] has happened throughout the history of nuclear weapons.

For example, when Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons it sent soldiers disguised as insurgents into the Kargil district of Kashmir in India[19]. This move was prompted by Pakistan's belief that their nuclear deterrent limited India's ability to retaliate. However India did retaliate leading to a dangerous missile stand off. In this instance, "nuclear weapons created the particular problem and sparked the Kargil war"[20], therefore they present a clear threat to security by emboldening states actions.

Conflicts like this below the nuclear threshold are also a high risk to security as there is every chance they may develop to a level where nuclear missiles become involved. This inadvertent escalation where states engage in small conventional conflicts that progress to a nuclear level present a huge threat to security, especially in the turbulent Middle East where conflicts frequently occur. Cronin notes, "What is disturbing is that the Iranian leadership appears to condone considerable risk taking that could well erupt into larger conflict"[21], consequently inadvertent escalation is a significant threat in Iran because the government is likely pursue even greater risks if it felt emboldened by nuclear weapons. Therefore a nuclear Iran presents a meaningful threat to regional and global security because of the many destabilizing courses of conventional action Iran may take believing a nuclear shield protected it, which may escalate to a detrimental level.

Overall, in considering the threat posed by a nuclear to Iran to security, there is good reason to acknowledge the points made by Waltz about how unlikely it is that a direct attack or proliferation will occur. The threat of a nuclear Iran is less than may be portrayed by countries like the US or Israel who emphasize Iran's assumed irrationality with

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a nuclear weapon. As explained it is unlikely Iran will act in such a way with an atomic bomb, so there is little credibility in the threat of a direct attack or proliferation. Yet Waltz is wrong to suggest a nuclear Iran, "isn't an object of great worry"[22], because it still poses a major threat as a state pursuing aggressive actions in alliance with terrorism, and engaging in small conflicts. It is specifically an emboldened Iran engaging in small conflicts that presents such an acute threat to security because the threat of inadvertent escalation is so dangerous. In all states, "humans are fallible, organizations can be incompetent and technology often fails us"[23], therefore the chances of small conventional conflicts progressing to a nuclear level are high because misunderstandings and misperceptions are common with nuclear weapons, as shown in the Kargil war. This threat is heightened in the case of Iran because it is a state willing to pursue reckless actions already, so the number of small conflicts is likely to increase with a nuclear shield. Therefore despite Waltz's compelling points a nuclear Iran does present a substantial threat to regional and global security because, quite simply, the more small conflicts that occur pursued by an emboldened, nuclear Iran; the greater the chance of misunderstanding or misperceptions leading to inadvertent nuclear escalation, The results of which could be detrimental.

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