

Fuel to the Fire: Why a Nuclear Iran Will Further Destabilize the Middle East

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DAVID SOUSA, JUN 23 2014

The shadow of a nuclear Iran looms large over the Middle East. In operation for decades, the Iranian nuclear programme today stands at a very advanced stage.[1] Most experts agree that the nuclear programme is for military purposes.[2] This development has stimulated debate over what a nuclear Iran – encompassing breakout capacity as well as deployable nuclear weapons – might entail for the Middle East. Some scholars warn against a nuclear Iran, others dismiss a need for concern, and a few even welcome it.[3]

This essay argues that a nuclear Iran will further destabilize the Middle East. While there are many dangers lurking in the wake of a nuclear Iran – such as nuclear terrorism and nuclear mismanagement – the essay has chosen to emphasize what it shall dub ‘the four horsemen of a nuclear Iran’, since these constitute the gravest threats to regional stability. These four horsemen of risk consist of regional proliferation, the ‘imbalance of terror’, an emboldened Iran, and Israel’s response to a nuclear Iran. This essay shall analyse each in the aforementioned order, and, finally, briefly assess options available to the West in countering Iran’s nuclear programme after Tehran has crossed the nuclear threshold.

The First Horseman: Regional Responses

‘If Iran succeeded in developing nuclear weapons everyone in the region would do the same, including Saudi Arabia’, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia reportedly told US Ambassador in Riyadh, James Smith.[4] Indeed, with regional enemies encompassing largely all Sunni monarchies as well as secular military regimes, Iran’s nuclear ambition is causing alarm in capitals across the Middle East. Though many countries in the region – such as Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain – fear a nuclear Iran, three actors stand out as potential nuclear powers: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia fears Iran for a number reasons, and the two sides have resented each other since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Besides the obvious divide – Sunni Arabs in Saudi Arabia and Shia Persians in Iran – the ideological differences further fuel the fire: the clerical regime in Tehran considers the Saudi monarchy impious and challenges the Saudi claim to the guardianship of Islam’s holiest sites – a guardianship crucial to Saudi identity and thus a vital national objective.[5] The 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War adds another element to the Saudi-Iranian feelings of resentment. During the war, Saudi Arabia provided vast financial support for Iraq on the one hand, while on the other hand flooded the oil market, thus lowering the price and causing significant damage to Iran’s economy.[6] Issues of contemporary regional politics, however, constitute the main component of Saudi Arabia’s concerns.

Regionally, Saudi Arabia already sees growing Iranian influence in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq, forming a ‘noose’ around the Kingdom, which could cause instability at any given time.[7] Especially worrying is the Iranian influence in Iraq, a country, which used to balance out Iranian ambitions in the region. The recent historic arms-deal between Tehran and Baghdad undoubtedly intensifies these concerns.[8] Already wielding influence in many regional countries, Saudi Arabia fears that a nuclear Iran would cause a domino effect of bandwagoning. Realizing that Iran is the strongest player, and that neither the West nor anyone else could stop Iran, states could opt

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to simply throw its lot in with the perceived strong horse of the region. This trend can already be observed with states such as Qatar increasingly warming up to Iran.[9]

Finally, a stronger Iran would feel more confident in sparking incitement among Saudi Arabia's large Shia community, which constitutes 15% of the population. The Saudi Shias, relatively marginalized and impoverished in Saudi society, are viewed with suspicion from Riyadh. The Kingdom fears that the Shias could form a fifth column working to support Iran's export of the Islamic Revolution.[10] It is conceivable that a combination of Iranian incitement and Saudi discrimination could potentially stimulate a Shia revolt or smaller-scale anti-national actions, such as terrorism or spying for Iran.

Saudi fears over Iranian ambitions are greatly exacerbated by what it perceives as a US withdrawal from the Middle East as well as Washington's poor commitment to curbing Iranian influence in the region. As a result, the Saudis believe they can no longer count on the US as a guarantor of their security.[11]

Egypt

Albeit not as concerned as the Saudis, Cairo fears and resents Iran for a number of reasons. Egypt is, like Saudi Arabia, predominantly Sunni Arab, and the military secular Egyptian regime in Cairo shuns Islamism, which it views as a threat. The animosity between Iran and Egypt emerged in part as a result of several historic events and developments: the Arabist focus of then-President of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, left Iran out of the club during the 1950's and 1960's. When Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, took over relations worsened as Sadat opted for a peace-agreement with Israel, invited the deposed Shah to exile in Egypt, and sent Egyptians troops to fight Iran in the 1980-1988 War.

In response, when Iranian-inspired – some say Iranian-backed- terrorist groups- assassinated Sadat in 1981, a street was named after the killer in Tehran.[12] In 1995, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, with the backing of Iran and Sudan, tried to assassinate Mubarak while on a trip to Ethiopia in an apparent attempt to provoke regime change.[13]

Furthermore, both Egypt and Iran perceive themselves as natural regional hegemony who have both been denied of this status by outside powers. [14] Today, this expresses itself in regional battles over influence: Egypt has regularly decried Iranian support for Islamist terrorist groups such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas in Gaza and Hizbollah in Lebanon. Following an arrest of a Hezbollah cell in Egypt in 2009, Mubarak blamed Iran for interfering in the Arab World by 'introducing hostile elements into the region, in efforts to threaten Egypt's national security'.[15] In a reference to Iran's support for Palestinian Islamists, Mubarak claimed that 'Iran has created an Islamic state in Egypt's backyard' and consequently that Iran should be 'warned of Egypt's wrath'.[16] To be sure, Egypt's fear of a nuclear – and thus stronger – Iran was made crystal clear in 2009 as Mubarak told the assembly at The Arab Summit that ' a nuclear armed Iran with hegemonic ambitions is the greatest threat to Arab nations today'.[17]

Turkey

While Iran has traditionally been a rival of Turkey in the region, the relationship between Ankara and Tehran from 1925-2011 has been described by scholars such as Anoushiravan Ehteshami as one of 'cooperative and competitive détente'. [18] The Islamist character of Iran clashing with the secular regime of Turkey has caused some friction in the past, as well as two minor diplomatic incidents including a brawl over the Salman Rushdie affair.[19] The two sides, however, have never been at war, and Turkish fears over Iran cannot be compared to those of Saudi Arabia. Rather, since 2002, when the Turkish Justice and Development party came to power, relations have been good. Tension has been mounting over the Syrian Civil War where Turkey and Iran are supporting opposite sides, but as a recent large trade agreement shows, relations remain stable.[20]

Still, Turkey opposes the Iranian nuclear program. Ankara does not fear an Iranian strike on Turkey, but it believes a nuclear Iran would set off a regional arms race, which in turn would force Turkey to get its own nuclear capacity. Domestic public pressure would further compel Turkey to go nuclear. A 2012 survey found that a majority of Turks supported a Turkish A-bomb, should Iran achieve nuclear weapon's capacity.[21] Within the Turkish military, similar

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sentiments are expressed. Two former commanders of the Turkish Air Force, Generals Ergin Celasin and Halis Burhan, have stated that 'if Iran develops nuclear weapons, Turkey should do the same so as to be able to preserve the balance of power between the two countries and in the region.'^[22]

Critics of the notion of a regional arms race rightly point to several practical and political counter-arguments: Saudi Arabia has little existing nuclear infrastructure or scientific expertise, Egypt has few funds, and Turkey already enjoys protection under the NATO nuclear-umbrella.^[23] Furthermore, all three are to some extent dependent on the US and would risk political confrontation if they were to pursue a nuclear weapon. These caveats, however, are a far cry from dismantling the scenario of a regional arms race.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh could potentially call in a favour from the Pakistanis, whose own nuclear program the Saudis financed, and whose economy was consequently kept afloat when American sanctions hit Pakistan.^[24] This favour could come in the shape of nuclear technology and expertise, the transfer of ready-to-launch nuclear weapons or, alternatively, as a Pakistani-run nuclear weapon on Saudi soil. According to a former CIA analyst and presidential advisor, the two states have an 'unacknowledged nuclear partnership to provide the Kingdom with a nuclear deterrent on short notice if ever needed'.^[25] A recent large-scale arms deal between Islamabad and Riyadh struck under the shadow of Iran's continued nuclear enrichment underscores the close military relationship between the two nations and Pakistan's commitment to Saudi Arabia's security.^[26]

For Egypt, money is a problem, but its nuclear programme is described as 'one the region's most advanced' bar for Iran and Israel's.^[27] However, it is not wholly unthinkable that an outside power would provide the funds for an Egyptian bomb. Following the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, Gulf countries immediately pledged to send billions of dollars to Egypt.^[28] As noted, many Gulf countries are fearful of Iran and would have an interest in financing an Egyptian bomb. That would serve as a way to counter Iran without having to go through the same trouble as any regional proliferator would. Adding to this, the example of North Korea goes to show that it is possible for a poor regime to obtain nuclear weapons, providing it is hell-bent on the goal and disregards the health of its own population.

For Turkey, resources are not an immediate problem.^[29] Its nuclear infrastructure is not insignificant, but it is still a far cry from anything resembling a potent nuclear programme. As previously mentioned, the Turks have a lesser need for a nuclear capacity status. However, as a regional great power and a democracy, which must pay attention to the desires of the public, Turkey may in the end feel compelled to obtain a nuclear weapon of its own, following other regional players.

For all three, political rift with the US would be unavoidable. America will surely express its dismay over regional proliferation among its allies – possibly in the form of sanctions or aid cuts – but it is unlikely that this will continue for very long. As American policy towards allied or non-hostile regimes shows, Washington does very little following a proliferations event. When a military nuclear program in Pakistan was discovered in 1979, the Americans suspended aid to Pakistan. In 1981, aid was resumed (\$3.2 billion) and a purchase of 40 American F-16 fighter jets was approved.^[30] When India in 1974 conducted a nuclear test explosion, Washington responded by boosting aid to India and, paradoxically, continued its shipments of uranium to the Tarapur reactor.^[31] When Israel's nuclear programme was discovered in 1969, Nixon made due with Israeli guarantees that it would neither 'introduce' nuclear weapons to the region nor undertake any tests, declassified documents reveal.^[32] There is thus good reason to believe that US responses to successful proliferation in any of the three allied countries would be muted.

In sum, while there are practical and political difficulties standing in the way of proliferation, risks for a regional arms race remain alarmingly high, in the event of a nuclear Iran.

The Second Horseman: Imbalance of Terror in the Middle East

Some scholars argue that a nuclear Iran would bring much needed balance to the Middle East, with nuclear weapons establishing a 'balance of terror'.^[33] Most notably among them is Kenneth Waltz, the father of neorealism. In a 2012 article entitled 'Why Iran Should Get The Bomb', Waltz argues that Israel's nuclear monopoly 'has long fuelled

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instability in the Middle East' and that 'once Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, deterrence will apply...' thus stabilizing the region.[34] He further argues that nuclear states have historically become more cautious after obtaining nuclear capability.[35] Finally, Waltz claims,

'no other country in the region will have an incentive to acquire its own nuclear capability, and the current crisis will finally dissipate, leading to a Middle East that is more stable than it is today.'[36]

As others have argued, this view is based on the assumption that the Middle East essentially consists of two monolithic entities: Israel and the non-Israel bloc.[37] Consequently, only one member of the non-Israel bloc will need to develop nuclear weapons so as to put an end to the instability Israel's nuclear weapons are causing. This is at best a gross oversimplification and at worst a show of total ignorance of Middle East politics. It goes without saying that the Middle East is a cacophony of conflicts: civil wars, jihadi terrorism, uprisings, and inter-state conflict between Muslim countries occur frequently. Put in layman's terms, the Israel-Iran show is not the only one in town. As established previously in this essay, the two main Arab powers – Saudi Arabia and Egypt- both perceive Iran to be a greater threat than Israel. If Iran develops nuclear weapons, other powers within the non-Israel bloc will most definitely *have an incentive*[38] (emphasis added) to follow. As a result, a nuclear Iran will neither bring about a balance of terror balance nor lead the crisis to 'dissipate'.

The Third Horseman: Emboldened Iran

As for the other of Waltz' claims, he reassures that Iran would not become emboldened by the acquisition of a nuclear capacity since nuclear powers become more responsible upon crossing the threshold. Upon scrutinizing the general claim that new nuclear powers act more responsibly, significant doubts arise. Waltz mentions the Soviet Union, China, and the India-Pakistan conflict as proofs of this thesis. The behaviour of these nations (with the possible exception of India) in the immediate years following nuclear capability suggests otherwise.

In 1950, a year after the first atomic bomb test, the Soviet Union gave the green light for North Korea to invade South Korea, calculating that the US would not interfere because of the Soviet Union's newly acquired nuclear capacity.[39] Similarly, in 1965, when China attacked Soviet soldiers to prevent border provocations, Mao thought China's nuclear weapons would dampen the Soviet Union's response. Mao was wrong, and the conflict escalated until China had to back down.[40]

In the case of India and Pakistan, there have been several acts of aggression as Islamabad's nuclear capabilities increased. In 1999, a year after both countries had conducted open nuclear tests, Pakistan sent conventional forces disguised as insurgents across the Line of Control into Kashmir, which triggered a war with India.[41] Going beyond the cases introduced by Waltz, Michael Horowitz compiles data from all events of nuclear proliferation from 1945-2001, and concludes that:

New nuclear states, with a nascent arsenal and lack of experience in nuclearized disputes, play the "nuclear card" significantly more often than their more experienced nuclear counterparts, making them more likely to reciprocate militarized disputes.[42]

These lessons of history thus provide poor reassurance that Iran as new nuclear power would be expected to behave responsibly.

Waltz further claims that states are only interested in survival. While it is true that the regime in Iran is a rational actor, concerned with regime survival, Waltz ignores the fact that Iran is a revisionist power. [43] It is well-established that Iran sponsors Islamic terrorists such as Hizbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and seeks to spread its influence and ultimately export the Islamic Revolution within the region.[44] As previously shown, Iran as a new nuclear power, is expected to be more conflict-prone. Combined with its revisionist ambitions and support for terrorism, a nuclear Iran is likely to engage in a variety of destabilizing and coercive actions.

In the Gulf area, Iran could force smaller Gulf neighbours like Bahrain and Kuwait to shut down US military bases or

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coerce oil-rich states to diminish its oil production in an effort to boost Iranian oil revenues.[45] Some of these states also could become targets for increased Iranian-supported anti-regime incitement and subversive activities.[46] With regards to its Hezbollah and other groups, Iran might transfer more sophisticated weapons, enabling its proxies to strike Israel with greater accurateness and lethality than previously.[47] On the global level, an emboldened Iran could be expected to carry out more terrorist attacks abroad on Israeli and American targets, similar to the one in Burgas in 2012.[48]

In sum, a nuclear Iran should not be expected to bring stability to the Middle East through a nuclear balance of terror scenario. Rather, if Iran crosses the threshold, it could use its power to blackmail neighbours, increase subversion, provide terrorist proxies with more lethal weapons, and carry out more attacks on Israeli and American civilians abroad.

The Fourth Horseman: Israel's Nuclear Strategy

Another important factor affecting a future Middle East with a nuclear Iran is the actions of the only other nuclear power in the region, namely Israel. In order to assess whether Iran's nuclear weapons will bring stability, it is crucial to consider how Israel might react. In light of Israel's history, and the comments made by Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, it seems an Israeli pre-emptive strike is highly likely. Pre-emption is embedded into Israeli strategic doctrine. In 1956, Israel attacked Egypt, deeming a Soviet weapons-delivery as a prelude to an Egyptian attack. In 1967, although under a more imminent threat, Israel attacked Egypt again. In 1982, Israel attacked Lebanon on the basis of pre-empting terror threats.[49]

Furthermore, Israel has never allowed regional enemy states to develop nuclear capabilities. Through assassinations and covert action, Israel dissuaded German scientists from helping Egypt with its nuclear programme in the 1960's, which made it come to a halt.[50] When Iraq's nuclear programme in 1981 reached an advanced stage, Israel destroyed its nuclear facility and annihilated the programme. Similarly in 2006, when Israel discovered a North Korean built nuclear facility in Syria, it was attacked and destroyed.[51]

In terms of Israel's leadership, Netanyahu's rhetoric on Iran suggests that Israel would attack. In a 2012 speech on Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel, Netanyahu said:

Not only does the Prime Minister of Israel have the right, when speaking of these existential dangers [Iran], to invoke the memory of a third of our nation which was annihilated [The Holocaust]. It is his duty.[52]

Adding to this, a recent order has been issued to the Israeli army to prepare a strike on Iran – at the cost of \$2.89 billion – despite current talks between Iran and the West.[53]

Indeed, it is a widespread belief among experts that Netanyahu genuinely worries about Iran and that Israel will strike.[54] Some analysts further argue that Israel cannot destroy Iran's nuclear facilities – which are located inside mountains or deep underground – solely by the use of conventional weapons. One proponent, Foreign Policy's Micah Zenko, believes that Israel is aware of this fact. Disturbingly, Zenko argues that Jerusalem's strategic response will not be containment, but instead a nuclear strike on Iran.[55]

Either by conventional or nuclear strike, it seems highly likely that Israel would strike Iran, given its history of pre-emption and the ambitions of its current leader. It is hard to assess what will happen after an Israeli strike, but it is widely assumed that Iran would respond militarily attacking Israeli and US targets in the region and ordering its proxies to attack Israel.[56] As mentioned, Israel has a long tradition of pre-emption and of stopping enemies from obtaining nuclear capability. Coupled with the ambitions of Prime Minister Netanyahu, it seems highly likely that Israel would strike Iran before Tehran could develop a second strike capability, which will then be followed by Iranian retaliation. In sum, Israel's nuclear strategy is likely to produce armed conflict if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold.

Western Options

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While the other parts of this essay dealt with the possible consequences of a nuclear Iran, this part briefly analyses options available to the West after Iran becomes a nuclear power. While other Western powers may play a part in upholding a sanctions regime or providing legitimacy for a course of action, all major decisions are taken in Washington. Therefore, this section will analyse US options of dealing with Iran.

According to Kenneth Timmerman, US options can be boiled down to two distinct choices: 'capitulation or war'.^[57] James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh add the option of containment.^[58] The former option of capitulation would include a US offer of normalized diplomatic and trade relations as well as ending American calls for regime change in Tehran. In return, the US would get promises such as no-first use of nuclear weapons and no proliferation spread to third parties. ^[59] The option of war would – as explained earlier – provoke an Iranian retaliation of which we do not know the scope. Moreover, a pre-emptive US strike on Iran would be conducted in isolation and with opposition from Europe, Russia, China, and other great powers, since America will most likely be labelled an aggressor.^[60]

Finally, Lindsay & Takeyh suggest the US could contain Iran. They argue that the US should explicitly and publicly state that it would retaliate militarily 'by any and all means necessary including and up to nuclear weapons' if Iran crosses one of the following three US red lines: 1) Initiation of conventional warfare against another other countries, 2) transfer of nuclear weapons, materials or technology, and 3) support for terrorist of subversive actions.^[61] It is doubtful whether Iran would initiate conventional warfare or transfer nuclear weapons, but the support for terrorism is likely to continue.

Given the loyal and deep relationship between Iran and its proxies, it is highly unlikely that Iran will cease support for Hezbollah. Especially in the current situation, in which Hezbollah fights on Iranian orders to prevent the downfall of Tehran's only great friend in the Arab World, Bashar Assad's regime in Syria.^[62] Such red lines, the author believes, would give Iran the ultimate say over US foreign policy. If Iran opts to continue with support for proxies or continues its subversive actions in neighbouring countries, the US would be forced to attack or, alternatively, accept looking like a weak power whose threats are empty and need not be heeded. In sum, the West has very limited choices, in which it seems there are only bad choices and really bad choices.

Conclusion

A nuclear Iran is something the Middle East should not long for. Regionally, a nuclear arms race is highly likely to occur with Saudi Arabia and Egypt as the first regional powers to follow suit. The ensuing result, a Middle East with several nuclear powers, would thus annul any illusions of establishing a 'balance of terror'. Moreover, a nuclear Iran is expected to behave more aggressively – subverting neighbours and supporting terrorists such as Hezbollah. Finally, since Israel is historically prone to pre-emption and is preparing for an attack, an Israeli response would materialize in a military strike and could cause war in the Middle East. The West – namely the US – is faced with only unappealing choices: war, capitulation, or containment, of which none is likely to lead to a more stable Middle East. In sum, a nuclear Iran will further destabilize the Middle East.

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