

# An International Relations Perspective on the Iran Nuclear Deal

Written by Martin Beck

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MARTIN BECK, AUG 8 2018

When on May 9, 2018, US President Donald Trump publicly announced his decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – colloquially known as the Iran Nuclear Deal – this triggered a political outcry among major segments of global society. The move was vehemently applauded by the governments of only two prominent states: Israel and Saudi Arabia. Scholars pointed to the potentially disastrous consequences Trump's decision might have, for instance regarding the *Pacta sunt servanda* maintenance brocard as a basic principle of international affairs (see Niblett et al. 2018). This author shares these concerns. Yet, rather than adding another contribution that reasons on Trump's decisions and their impact, the task of the present article is to analyze the deeper problematique of the Iran Nuclear Deal from the perspective of political advisory inspired by three major schools of thought from the discipline of International Relations: Realism (Waltz 1979) and Institutionalism (Keohane 1984), which are both committed to a Rationalist epistemology, and a prominent representative of Social Constructivism, the securitization approach of the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al. 1998). This article shows that the making of the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2015 – the framework being agreed upon on April 2 and the final agreement being concluded on July 14 – reflected a problematic fixation of the international community on the regime in Tehran and its alleged ambitions to go for nuclear militarization.

From a Realist point of view, the scenario of Iran being a nuclear power is simply acceptable if not desirable. Rather than singling out the Iranian nuclear program, Institutionalism would opt for a policy approach that strengthens the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and envisions achieving a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. From the perspective of the Copenhagen School, rather than blowing the Iranian nuclear program out of proportion by dealing with it as if it constituted a major security threat to global peace, the international community should desecuritize the issue by ceasing to demonize it and setting it in perspective with the Middle Eastern security complex as a whole. The differences in advice of the three schools of thought notwithstanding, their discussion produces synergetic effects which generate ideas that put into question the political wisdom not only of Trump but also of his antagonists in the recent history of Western politics, these being the political leaders of China, France, Germany, the European Union, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the USA under then President Barack Obama who had negotiated and signed the nuclear deal with Iran.

### Realism

Realism claims that international relations are driven by the momentum that anarchy creates: As there is no central agency enforcing order in international affairs, states are exposed to a security dilemma. Driven by concerns about their autonomy vis-à-vis other states, states aim to acquire military power, which in turn provokes other states to counter this power. When applying this dynamic mechanism to the present case, it would appear to be normal behavior if Iran were to attempt to acquire nuclear weapons: Although Israel refrained from officially declaring itself a nuclear power, it is a widely accepted fact that it became one in the late 1960s (Norris and Kristensen 2010). Thus, according to a Realist balance-of-power logic, what is puzzling is not so much Iran's alleged attempt to go militarily nuclear, but rather the fact that there has been a nuclear monopoly for so long in the Middle East (Waltz 2012).

From a Realist view, a bipolar nuclear Middle East would be more stable than the present one with Israel's nuclear

# **An International Relations Perspective on the Iran Nuclear Deal**

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monopoly. In the current situation, Israel has an incentive to maintain its monopoly by attacking Iran. The scenario of balanced nuclear power between Israel and Iran is much less threatening for regional peace because in this case the logic of mutual deterrence would come to bear and the incentives of both actors to wage war against each other would then be diminished.

Moreover, if Iran acquired nuclear weaponry, Realists would expect the regime in Tehran to de-radicalize rather than to provide terrorist organizations with nuclear weapons (Waltz 2012). The reason is that nuclear states are aware of the destructive potential of nuclear weapons and are therefore reluctant to share them with actors that are not fully under their control. Once having gained access to the rather exclusive club of nuclear powers, states tend to defend the exclusivity of the club, which consists of only nine members, five of which are recognized by the NPT (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA) and four who are not (India, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan).

## **Institutionalism**

Institutionalism fundamentally contradicts Realism in regard to the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Institutionalism strongly advises that the further dispersion of nuclear weaponry beyond states that are recognized as nuclear military powers in the NPT must be impeded. Some shortcomings notwithstanding, many scholars consider the international regime constituted by the NPT as a success story, particularly because the ambitions of quite a number of middle powers to acquire military nuclear capabilities were successfully frustrated (Müller 2010). One of the major indicators of the NPT international regime's success is that in several regions of the Global South nuclear-weapon-free zones have been established, for instance in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and the South Pacific. Yet, despite the initiative for a Middle East nuclear-weapon-free zone (MENWFZ), no such zone has been established in the Middle East.

The MENWFZ initiative, which had been promoted by Egypt and pre-revolutionary Iran, was adopted by Resolution 3236 of the United Nations General Assembly in 1974. The idea is that Israel, which – contrary to Iran – is not a member of the NPT, should join it and then together with Iran and the Arab states agree upon a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East (Bahgat 2015).

In the 2015 Review Conference of the NPT held in New York between April 27 and May 22, 2015, Egypt launched another attempt to promote the MENWFZ. However, guided by the preference for maintaining its nuclear monopoly over promoting a denuclearized Middle East, Israel managed to convince the US Administration not to expose Israel to a situation in which its nuclear weaponry arsenal could become a negotiable matter (Bahgat 2015). Along with the September 2016 American-Israeli ten-year agreement on American military aid for Israel of an unprecedented amount, the support of the Obama Administration at the 2015 Review Conference is proof that the “special relationship” between Israel and the USA was fully intact during Obama's presidency despite some personal discord between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the latter's ostentatious disapproval of the nuclear deal (Morello and Eglash 2016).

## **Copenhagen School**

The Copenhagen School differs from the two Rationalist schools presented above insofar as it is embedded in Social Constructivist thinking according to which security threats are not objectively given. Rather, whether and to what degree states and societies feel threatened by arsenals held by other states depends on the quality of the relationship they hold with them. An arsenal controlled by a state with whom the relationship follows a Kantian logic of friendship will not be considered threatening. If the relationship is based on a Lockean logic of rivalry, the threat perception may be moderate only. If, however, the relationship follows a Hobbesian logic of enmity, threat perception will be pronounced (Wendt 1992).

Nuclear militarization in the Middle East is a case *par excellence* of securitization as conceptualized by the Copenhagen School. Securitization is an extreme version of politicization. In distinction to politicization, securitization is in effect when an issue is dramatized as a matter of utmost urgency that requires special actions beyond the routines of daily politics (Buzan et al. 1998: 26; Williams 2003). Many politicians and political observers, particularly

# **An International Relations Perspective on the Iran Nuclear Deal**

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from the West, tend to securitize the potential nuclear arsenal of Iran but not so the actual arsenal of Israel.

In terms of policy advisory, the Copenhagen School leans toward desecuritization. Desecuritization refers to a shift away from an emergency mode toward regular politics and bargaining processes (Hansen 2012). Thus, desecuritization is a form of politicization. Hansen (2012) argues that there are strong affinities between the logic of securitization and Carl Schmitt's conceptualization of politics which is based on the friend-enemy distinction. Thus, desecuritization means overcoming the handling of an issue as a battle between friends and enemies. In the present analysis, politicization not only refers to desecuritization but also to re-politicization: Policy advisory inspired by the Copenhagen School puts forward that securitized issues (such as Iran's nuclear program) should be desecuritized and issues that are de-politicized, i.e. hushed up or treated as purely technical issues, should be re-politicized (such as Israel's nuclear program), i.e. the issue should be brought (back) to the political debate.

## **Toward a debate of politicizing the issue of Middle Eastern nuclear weaponry**

The two Rationalist schools of thought applied to our case provide, on a practical level, different advice on how to deal with the issue of Iran's alleged military nuclear program. Realism recommends that military nuclearization of Iran should be tolerated, if not encouraged, whereas Institutionalism advises the international community to prevent such a scenario from happening. However, both schools meet on a higher analytical level inspired by the Copenhagen School of securitization: A fruitful politicization of the issue – as well as a meaningful analysis – must bring the Israeli military nuclear program back into the discussion.

The Copenhagen School enriches the debate on the issue of Middle Eastern military nuclearization by applying insights of Social Constructivism. The Copenhagen-inspired idea of simultaneously launching a policy of re-politicization (of the issue of the Israeli nuclear program) and desecuritization (of the issue of the Iranian nuclear program) embeds Rationalist ideas of Realism and Institutionalism in a Social Constructivist setting and thus creates a synthesized approach. In other words, the securitization approach as applied to the issue of military nuclearization in the Middle East learns from both Realism and Institutionalism what concrete issue should be de-dramatized and politicized in what way. In particular, Waltz (2012), Walt (2015), and Bahgat (2015) clarify that there are no good arguments for constructing a nuclear Iran as an existential threat for Israel. The ideological fundamentals of the Islamic Republic of Iran are hostile to Israel but there are no indicators that the regime in Tehran is an apocalyptic rider that prioritizes the destruction of Israel over its own survival. If Iran acquired nuclear bombs, it would at most have very low incentives to wage a nuclear war on Israel, as Israel is a nuclear power itself that could and would retaliate.

Moreover, there is no good reason to believe that the regime in Tehran should not be aware that the USA would not refrain from a regime-changing war on Iran even if for some extremely unlikely reasons the Israeli government failed to respond to an Iranian attack. In terms of political ethics, the Copenhagen School may learn from the Rationalist approaches that the Iranian regime notoriously violates moral standards in its foreign policies. However, the foreign policies of Western allies, including Israel, also offend standards of human rights. Moreover, major deficits of the Iranian regime in terms of democratic rights notwithstanding, the Iranian political system is much more open and provides its citizens with more options of political participation than Arab Western allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Thus, as Walt (2015) argues, it would serve American (and European) self-interest, but also be ethically preferable, if relations to Iran were normalized.

## **Conclusion and outlook: Assessment of the 2015 Nuclear Deal in the light of the US withdrawal**

From the perspective of all three schools of thought presented in this article, the Iran Nuclear Deal, as designed and bargained mainly by the Europeans and the Obama Administration in 2015, was highly problematic, since it failed to normalize relationships between the USA and Europe on the one hand and Iran on the other – be it (as advised by Realism) on the basis of allowing or even encouraging Iran to go for nuclear militarization, thereby creating a balance of power between Iran and Israel; by promoting a Middle Eastern nuclear-weapon-free zone, including the two regional adversaries of Iran and Israel, as put forward by Institutionalism; or, as suggested by the Copenhagen School of securitization, by desecuritizing the Iranian nuclear program and re-politicizing Israel's possession of nuclear weapons.

# An International Relations Perspective on the Iran Nuclear Deal

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The main problem of the nuclear deal was that it upheld the image of Iran going militarily nuclear as a horror scenario to be prevented, thereby cementing the securitization of Iran's alleged military nuclear program without at least re-politicizing Israel's actual possession of nuclear weapons. Walt (2015) spots this point aptly insofar as he declares the issue of Iranian nuclear weapons as irrelevant to the nuclear deal. However, it takes the insights of the Copenhagen School to address in an appropriate way that it is not sufficient when a scholar comes to this 'objective' finding. What matters is that the political actors desecuritize the issue. As this had not been done in 2015, Trump, assisted by Netanyahu, had leverage to launch an aggressive policy toward Iran with potentially far-reaching repercussions for the Middle Eastern security complex.

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