

Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East: the Iran-Israel Problem

Written by Katy Pell

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KATY PELL, JUL 1 2011

We chose this moment: now, not later, because later may be too late, perhaps forever. ... we shall defend our people with all means at our disposal. We shall not allow any enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction turned against us[1].

Prime Minister Begin made this statement two days after Israeli fighter planes destroyed Iraq's nuclear facility in 1981. He was adamant that no explicit threat to Israel would exist and disregarded the negative response he was certain to garner from the international community. Twenty six years later, Israel stood by Begin's word and raided Syria's nuclear facilities in a surprise attack in 2007. A further two years on and news of Iran's covert nuclear facilities was broken to the international community – an armed Israeli response would not be a surprise to say the least. The international community at large is standing against Iran's covert actions and demanding transparency of its facilities[2]. However, such declarations and demands have had little effect in the past with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unwilling or unable to take physical action. Should Iran continue towards becoming a nuclear country the effect on the region is likely to be catastrophic. Middle Eastern stability would be a hard won achievement by any standards, so will a nuclear Iran really provide the best climate for encouraging this? The argument of stability is varied and must be based on theory as well as actual Middle Eastern politics.

Very briefly, before discussing the specific case of Iran and the Middle East, this essay will highlight three points that must be understood for the discussion to take place. The first is the Sagan-Waltz argument on stability, the second is Israel's current nuclear strategy and finally the assumed reasons for Iran's nuclear program. The body of this essay will then look at the impact when all three elements are combined.

To paraphrase Waltz, it is a case of the pessimist versus the optimist[3]. Sagan sees the potential for disaster, stressing the weaknesses of security of nuclear programmes (as proven by the A.Q. Khan network) and the different aims in international politics[4]. Waltz conversely sees the reality of over fifty years of nuclear peace and argues that hindsight is blinding the pessimist to reality. He determines that Sagan and other such pessimists are applying selective memory and limited facts to support their argument[5]. However, Middle Eastern politics are so specific to the region, virtually inequitable to other international politics, that understanding the Middle East is crucial to establishing stability.

Israel's current nuclear strategy is complex as they are officially unconfirmed as a nuclear power. Israel has never admitted to their technology despite a leak of intelligence in the 1980's and their stance has always been that they will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons (NW) to the Middle East[6]. Despite Israel's own, unacknowledged but widely accepted, power they will strike out against any state in the Middle East attempting to become a nuclear authority. In fact, Baghat, Sagan, Kaye and Wehrey all argue that it is perhaps the Israeli opacity, combined with the US acceptance of it, which instigated Iran's pursuance of their own nuclear program[7].

Iran's reasons for chasing nuclear power are likely to fall under three headings: security against the threat from the USA; the ability to negotiate by allowing Iran to step up to the table; and, the most controversial, to destroy Israel[8].

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For the purposes of this essay a nuclear Iran's threat to the stability of the region is possible from three different angles. The first angle is the threat to stability apparent during Iran's acquisition of NW. The second assumes that Iran has successfully completed its program and has acquired fully functional NW. The final angle assumes the relative completion of Iran's programme is irrelevant and looks instead at the effect of leaked or stolen technology.

The first and perhaps biggest threat to the stability of the Middle East comes not from the final acquisition of NW, but from the stages prior to this. Kaye and Wehrey argue that it is the actions of those outside Iran that provide the threat to stability in the Middle East[9]. In 1987 the then President of Iran said in reference to atomic energy "we need it now... our nation has always been threatened from the outside" and this feeling was still strong over ten years later[10]. Iran's statement that it desires to "wipe Israel from the earth" has led to instant tension since their covert facilities were discovered[11]. Kaye and Wehrey argue that Israel is not likely to wait and watch progression but is more likely to focus on unilateral defence[12]. Kadhim agrees with this assessment and argues that since the 1960's, Israel has made it abundantly clear to the international community that it will not condone nuclear weapons in the Middle East. They sabotaged Egypt's attempts at a nuclear program in the 1960's, they bombed the Osiraq reactor in Iraq in 1981 and, despite the international condemnation that followed Osiraq, they attacked a plant in Syria in 2007[13]. After Osiraq, Prime Minister Begin said that if the Iraqi's rebuilt, "we will just destroy it again"[14]. To make matters worse for the Middle East, the 2007 attack did not face public condemnation. Washington D.C. later admitted to sharing intelligence with Israel about the facility – heavily implying US support for the attack[15]. If this is indeed the case, then Iran can have no doubt that a pre-emptive strike is being discussed. Waltz argues that such an attack would be unnecessary as Iran's acquisition would not destabilise the Middle East, regardless of its political stance. He states that whilst Russia is now considered an ally, the Cold War saw the Soviet Union as the untrustworthy enemy and yet, no nuclear warfare broke out. Similarly, North Korea was told that they could not develop nuclear weapons under international law. They continued to do so, and yet their achievement has had no negative impact on global stability[16]. Whether Waltz is right in that Iran is not a nuclear threat is not clear, however, should a pre-emptive attack occur the repercussions would be boundless. Regardless of Iran's immediate response – second strike missile capabilities have long been part of their conventional response system should the USA or Israel attack – many Middle Eastern and international neighbours would become involved[17]. Assuming it was an Israeli attack due to locality, they would have to fly across Arab air space, which could be seen as an act of war against the Arab state involved and could therefore lead to Middle Eastern war. Alternatively there would be a potential safe fly zone across Saudi Arabia. However, that would come at a high cost to the USA as they would be forced into recognising Saudi Arab supremacy in the region[18]. This admittance would force other Arab nations up in arms and again, could lead to Middle Eastern war.

The unhappy irony in trying to maintain stability with the likelihood of a pre-emptive strike against Iran is clear. Indeed, President Bush's labelling of North Korea, Iraq and Iran as the axis of evil, combined with the obvious American support of Israel (and their nuclear program) can leave little hope for Iran that they will not be bothered by the US[19]. In fact, Sagan argues that if such comments and American actions did not show a lack of tolerance for strength in other international states, Iran might not have felt the need to build a NW's programme at all[20]. The creation of such a program could in fact be because of the original instability created by the West. As such, whilst Iran would provide no danger to the stability of the Middle East, certainly during the process of acquiring NW's at any rate, its neighbours are likely to do so. The potential threat of Iran is felt too keenly by Israel and its western supporters to leave it alone. The smallest problem likely to arise is that of an ongoing battle – Iran builds, only to have Israel knock it down repeatedly for the next decade or so. They may slow the process but they will not halt it completely[21]. However, it is much more likely that a pre-emptive attack would fuel a bigger war in the region that would extend to include America and its allies. In this instance, it is clear that a nuclear progressive Iran will definitely make the Middle East less stable.

The second angle assumes that Iran has already acquired NW. At this point what threat do they actually face to other states? Kaye and Wehrey claim that this position will throw all the old security norms of the Middle East into question[22]. They, along with Kadhim and Sagan, argue that a regional arms race is likely to develop with Saudi Arabia at the forefront[23]. Waltz doesn't deny the shift in power in the Middle East but argues that Iran is not going to simply drop their NW on their enemy. The consequences would be far beyond their capabilities to deal with, and they are simply not that foolish[24]. If that is the case, the dominant effect of a nuclear Iran is likely to be the

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increased tensions of their neighbours. Israel is clearly likely to be the most concerned, as faced with an outright statement about the destruction of their state. Although I do agree with Waltz, in that a NW is unlikely to be used, this doesn't stop conventional warfare from breaking out and further destabilising the region. Looking at Israel, you can see that their unofficial nuclear power has done little to stop conventional warfare on Israeli land or their bordering states, non-state actors continue to fight them on a conventional level. The intricate politics of the Middle East will not allow for a massive shift in power, even if it would be seen to level the playing field in the Arab-Israeli conflict. A nuclear Iran could enable the region to lean towards peace, but with Israel's insecurities, stability will not originate from the growth of a new nuclear power in the Middle East.

However, based on Waltz's theory that the NW would never actually be used, Iran's statement against Israel could simply be rhetoric, not an honest declaration of intent[25]. If the reason for pursuing NW is not to use them, then the only alternative is to bring Iran to the negotiating table. Any peace process discussion of the Middle East has involved all major states in the region, but repeatedly ignores Iran[26]. Peace and stability will require involvement from everyone in the region and perhaps this is the only way Iran feels it can guarantee its opinions are heard. Of course, such a discussion is also impossible without Israel, and a nuclear Iran is without doubt something that they too would want to resolve. Therefore, the question arising from a nuclear Iran then really becomes whether the suggestion of peace talks can be settled before the fragile insecurities of Israel engulf the Middle East into yet another exchange of weapon fire.

The final concern, both during the acquisition of NW and once the program has been completed is the potential leaking of intelligence. Iran has actively supported terrorist groups in the region for many years and as such the international community is understandably wary that nuclear technology may find its way into non-state actors' hands[27]. Israel is most concerned about Iranian support for Hezbollah or Hamas. Should they gain any NW then Israel is instantly surrounded by enemy nuclear powers and in a very weak position. It would allow even conventional warfare to begin whilst Israel could risk very little to stop it. Indeed should Hamas (a non-state actor) choose to attack whilst openly owning nuclear arsenal, Israel's retaliation would have to be minimal. Israel could not risk a nuclear response both out of concern for their people and for the international response that would no doubt surpass simple condemnation of previous warfare dramatically. And yet as non-state actors, Hamas have no authority to obey the same strictures of international judgment and could essentially play above the law. Of course, should such intelligence appear in Iranian allies' hands, Iran would instantly be blamed. Israel would be keen to show strength against an enemy that has to follow similar rules and would no doubt feel compelled to run a conventional attack against Iran and its nuclear supplies. Countries with nuclear programmes are subject to allegedly strict controls, based on constant inspections that monitor security, development and containment of nuclear intelligence. However, despite the combined best efforts of the IAEA, the NPT and UNSCO, such regulations do not always achieve success. The IAEA was stonewalled during Iraqi inspections, the NPT whilst abundant in rules, has little to enforce them and UNSCO, although verbally condemned Iraq during the Gulf War, allowed no action against Iraq for explicitly developing weapons of mass destruction[28]. With international governing bodies no real threat to the state or non-state actor, a nuclear Middle East provides shady comfort when Iranian terrorist support is so widely acknowledged.

Iran's biggest fear in this situation has to be the potential for the intelligence being stolen or rogue actors within their program. Assuming that Iran wishes to avoid war and that the NW are simply a case of levelling the playing field, non-state actors gaining their NW would be catastrophic. Guarding such intelligence and weaponry is incredibly hard, as mentioned above, and forms the basis for Sagan's argument against proliferation[29]. In Pakistan, A.Q. Khan ran an entire network outside of the governments control to aid the Muslim world in acquiring NW's. His network ran for over twenty years and boosted a number of countries onto the nuclear platform. Both his clients and his suppliers were often members of the NPT and yet acquisition continued until Khan's confession in 2004. A.Q. Khan is a clear example that all it takes within the program is one person to feel that a group or individual is being unfairly dealt with for information to begin leaking out. At that stage Middle East stability and the peace process would be an improbable ideal. Even Waltz in a candid and, dare I say, pessimistic moment, declared that although he believes proliferation to be a good thing for increasing stability, not all states should acquire the technology[30]. Whether this is in reaction to the possibility of the technology being leaked I don't know, but it does seem likely based on his earlier arguments. The threat of poor security for a nuclear Iran is fundamental to the future of stability in the Middle East.

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Despite the bearing of the international community, it would only take one error for the technology to be leaked. And should that be discovered too late, Iran would without doubt incur the wrath of Israel and its allies in conventional warfare and destruction of the nuclear program.

With focus on Middle Eastern stability, a nuclear Iran will go one of two ways. It will either have no obvious effect – the NW won't be used for fear of repercussion yet conventional wars will continue; a stalemate within the region. Or, the Middle East will face the prospect of a complete breakdown as either Iran is pre-empted, Israel feels cornered by the likely arms race or technology is leaked; the only recourse available will be war. Despite Waltz's theory of proliferation allowing stability, I don't think such an outlook really takes into consideration the intensity of feeling in the Middle East. He is adamant that the clock cannot be dialled back on nuclear technology, and in this we agree. No matter how many times Israel launches a pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, or if the Iranian government decides to disarm after acquiring them, the intelligence is still a danger to the stability of the region. Waltz and Sagan's argument does highlight some viable points for proliferation stability, and yet in the Middle East neither argument is totally applicable. This essay is not arguing that Iran should not develop its nuclear technology, nor is it saying that stability would reign if it did. Instead, this essay argues that a nuclear Iran will work to push that goal further away, whether through increased conventional warfare or fears over intelligence leaks. Until the region agrees upon peace (without duress) and Israel stops feeling constantly under threat, nuclear weapons will never stabilise the region alone.

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[4] *ibid.*, pp. 140-1.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 143.

[6] Baghat (2006), pp.125-126.

[7] *ibid.*, p. 126; Sagan, Waltz and Bennet (2007), p. 144; Kaye and Wehrey (2007), p. 115.

[8] Kaye and Wehrey (2007), p. 111-112; Sagan, Waltz and Bennet (2007), p. 137.

[9] Kaye and Wehrey (2007), p. 111.

[10] Spector (1993), pp. 142 and 145.

[11] Kaye and Wehrey (2007), p. 112

[12] *ibid.*, p. 121.

[13] Kadhim, p. 582.

[14] *ibid.*, p. 582.

[15] Spector and Cohen (2008).

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[16] Sagan, Waltz and Bennet (2007), pp. 143 and 147.

[17] Kaye and Wehrey (2007), p. 113; Shoham (2007), p. 550.

[18] Kaye and Wehrey (2007), p. 114

[19] Sagan, Waltz and Bennet (2007), p. 137; Spector and Cohen (2008).

[20] Sagan, Waltz and Bennet (2007), p. 144.

[21] *ibid.*, p. 149.

[22] Kaye and Wehrey (2007), p. 112.

[23] *ibid.*, pp. 112-113; Sagan, Waltz and Bennet (2007), p. 147; Kadhim (2006), pp. 586-7.

[24] Sagan, Waltz and Bennet (2007), p. 147.

[25] Kaye and Wehrey (2007), p. 112.

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[27] Kaye and Wehrey (2007), pp.111 and 117; Sagan, Waltz and Bennet (2007), pp. 140-143.

[28] Litwak (2002-03), p. 63.

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Date Written: April 2010,

Written for Dr Massimiliano Fiore

Written at: King's College, London