

CHAPTER 2

ARAB SECURITY RESPONSES TO A NUCLEAR-READY IRAN

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The current American and international attention on Iran's suspected nuclear weapons aspirations is high, but Tehran's belated admissions and continued maneuvering with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) may, in the medium to longer runs, allow Iran to press ahead with a clandestine nuclear weapons program. Tehran probably looks to the North Korean model in which Pyongyang ostensibly conformed to the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to politically diffuse any international or American resolve for preemptive military action to stem North Korea's nuclear weapons program. After establishing a minimal nuclear deterrent, North Korea was able to publicly withdraw from the NPT and announce its nuclear weapons capabilities to up the ante for any consideration of American-instigated military action against the hermit kingdom. Tehran also can look closer to home to Iraq's unsuccessful bid for nuclear weapons in the run up to the 1990-91 Gulf war. Saddam managed to remain in good standing with the NPT, while harboring an enormous nuclear weapons infrastructure that would have produced a nuclear weapons arsenal had Saddam not provoked international military intervention with his invasion of Kuwait. The lessons from North Korea and Iraq underscore for Iran how it is possible to continue working on nuclear weapons even with the presence of IAEA inspectors on the ground, while parlaying "compliance" with the NPT safeguards against international military action against suspected nuclear weapons-related sites and infrastructure.

Iran's confidence that it can pursue a clandestine nuclear weapons program under the watchful eye of the IAEA may be bolstered by American preoccupation with Iraq. The American military is stretched thin with operations against insurgents in Iraq and would be poorly suited to undertake yet another ambitious military campaign against

neighboring Iran. American political legitimacy also is strained over the course of events in Iraq. Moreover, domestic and international confidence in the quality of American intelligence is in doubt after an apparently less than stellar performance against Saddam's Iraq. For all of these reasons, Iran might calculate that the Americans are ill-prepared to move militarily against its nuclear weapons program.

Public and policy debate on Iran has focused on Tehran's bid for nuclear weapons, but significantly less attention is paid to the regional consequences if Iran is eventually successful in evading IAEA safeguards and acquiring nuclear weapons. To the extent that regional reaction to Iran's drive for nuclear weapons or its eventual possession of nuclear weapons is addressed, it is devoted largely to the dilemmas for American and Israeli policy. While Iran straddles the Middle East and South Asia, the major powers in South Asia—Pakistan and India—already have nuclear weapons, and their security perception is likely to be less startled by Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons than those in the Arab world. Parenthetically, Islamabad appears to have cast aside any long-term strategic concerns about Iranian nuclear weapons in favor of short-term financial windfalls from aiding Iran's nuclear weapons program.

But Arab states too will face new security challenges and burdens if faced with Iranian nuclear weapons capabilities. Authoritative Arab debate and discussion of the impact of Iranian nuclear weapons has not yet surfaced and probably should not be expected. Arab states, for all intents and purposes, still consider the public debate and discourse of national security policies to be taboo. Notwithstanding the arrival of satellite television and cable news programs, Arab public discussion of national security is muted, and what little does get aired publicly is intellectually superficial and resembles platitudes rather than hardheaded strategic analysis.

In light of the paucity of public sources, a great deal of analytic speculation, as well as analysis based on off-the-record conversations with officers and diplomats from the region, are required to answer the question, "How will Arab states react and respond to a nuclear-ready Iran?" This chapter sets the analytic scene by examining Arab threat perceptions of Iran writ large. The chapter assumes that most regional states believe that over the next 5 to 10 years Iran could

readily and rapidly have nuclear weapons, even if Tehran does not make a formal policy declaration or detonate a nuclear device to demonstrate its nuclear power status. The chapter examines Arab perception of American and Israeli security, which is intertwined intimately with Arab contemplation of Iranian nuclear weapons capabilities. The chapter then discusses likely courses of action by Arab states nearest Iran in the Persian Gulf, as well as Arab states geographically located farther afield in the Levant and northern Africa. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the options and limitations for U.S. policy in stemming political-military pressures on Arab states to redouble their weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and delivery system programs in the aftermath of a suspected or demonstrated Iranian nuclear weapons stockpile.

ARAB THREAT PERCEPTION OF IRAN

Arab states traditionally have worked to balance Iranian power in the Persian Gulf and Middle East. Most of the Arab states, with the notable exceptions of Syria and Yemen, politically, economically, and militarily backed Iraq in its war with Iran out of concern that Iranian forces threatened at various stages in the 1980-88 war to overwhelm Iraqi forces, thus gaining a strategic foothold in southern Iraq from which Tehran could exercise a stranglehold on Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Such a course of events would have positioned Tehran to better export its then revolutionary zeal to undermine moderate Arab states throughout the region and to dominate the regional distribution of power.

The Iran-Iraq war depleted Iranian political, military, and economic power and reduced the acuteness of Arab threat perception of Iran during the 1990s. The substantial American military presence in the region as a legacy of the 1990-91 war to monitor and deter any renewed Iraqi military ambitions in the Gulf, reassured Arab Gulf states that neither Iraq nor Iran would be able to mount an ambitious military campaign to upset the regional balance of power. Iran's election in 1997 of President Khatami, who was widely perceived as a moderating political influence in Tehran, dampened Iran's zeal for exporting the Islamic revolution and led to a further easing of the Arab threat perception of Iran.

The American ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq may have diminished further Arab concern about Iran's ability to leverage its geopolitical mass to dominate the Gulf. Arab states are in awe, if only privately, of American military capabilities that they witnessed slash through the massive Iraqi forces widely regarded as the most formidable Arab military forces in 1990. Arab military forces too must be impressed with the relative ease with which American and British forces smashed through Iraq to occupy Baghdad. Arab states must calculate that as long as American forces occupy Iraq, Tehran would not dare to undertake any conventional military operations to challenge the Gulf distribution of power. Indeed, many Arab officers and diplomats today are more concerned about American political and military intentions in the Gulf than they are about Iran in its weakened political, military, and economic condition.

The public disclosures in 2002 and 2003 about the scope and sophistication of Iran's nuclear weapons program is just beginning to seep into the strategic calculations of Arab diplomats, officials, and military officers. The Arab states have been slow to perceive the strategic threat posed by Iranian nuclear weapons. As Judith Yaphe observes, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, "have shrugged off dire predictions of the dangers of a nuclear armed Iran."¹

The author's discussions with a wide array of senior military officers and diplomats from the Middle East reveal a fairly commonly held view that Iranian nuclear weapons would have a stabilizing effect on the region. These officials and officers observe that Israel and the United States both have robust nuclear weapons capabilities while Arab states do not, and only one Muslim state, Pakistan, does. They reason that Iranian nuclear weapons would have salutary effects on regional security because Tehran's nuclear arsenal would "balance" Israeli and American nuclear weapons. The implicit assumption of this line of reasoning is that Israel and the United States have political, military, and economic ambitions in the region that could only be checked by Muslim nuclear weapons, even if in the hands of the Farsi-speaking Islamic regime in Tehran.

The superficial reasoning behind this Arab strategic thought may reflect the equivalent of an intellectual "knee jerk" reaction. As time passes and the reality of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons comes

into sharper focus, Arab diplomats and officers are more likely to come to grips with the dilemmas posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. They will have to worry that American security backing of Arab states may lessen in the face of Iranian nuclear weapons. Arab security policy officials would have to concede that the United States might be less willing to come to Arab states' aid in the event of a future regional crisis in which Iran wields nuclear weapons. Had Iraq had nuclear weapons in 1990, for example, the risks and potential costs of an American military campaign to liberate Kuwait would have been greater and might have led the United States to accept Iraq's occupation of Kuwait as a *fiat accompli*. In a future regional contingency, the Iranians could make limited land grabs in the Persian Gulf—whether against Iraq, Kuwait, or the United Arab Emirates—and hope to hold American conventional forces at bay with the threat of Iranian nuclear weapons. Iranian nuclear weapons too would afford Tehran the titular leadership role in the Gulf and give it substantial political sway with the Arab Gulf States.

Arab states also will have to worry that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons will embolden Tehran to revert to a more aggressive foreign policy. The clerical regime might calculate, for example, that it could give more material assistance and lessen restrictions on Hezbollah to engage in operations against Israeli and American interests. The Iranians have supported Hezbollah operations against American forces as an appendage of Iranian foreign policy to push the Americans out of the Gulf, most notably in assisting Saudi Hezbollah attacks against the Khobar Towers. Tehran might calculate that it could support an even more ambitious unconventional terrorist campaign against American forces in the Gulf and the smaller Arab Gulf states that host American forces if it has a nuclear weapons arsenal. Tehran might assess that, even if its hand is exposed, the risks of American military retaliation would be minimal, given Iranian nuclear weapons. If push came to shove, Tehran could use nuclear weapons against American military assets or hosting countries in the region with Iranian ballistic missiles, or clandestinely insert them into the United States to directly target American cities and citizens.

ARABS WEIGHING AMERICAN AND ISRAELI REACTIONS

Scratching the analytic surface of the dilemmas posed by Iranian nuclear weapons will lead Arab defense planners to contemplate American and Israeli security policies. For Arab states, the United States and Israel are the “bulls in the china shop” whose actions will have to be gauged in mapping out Arab reactions to Iranian nuclear weapons. How the United States and Israel behave toward an Iran armed with nuclear weapons will affect their security policies and strategies.

Arab officials already are alarmed at what they see as an American precedent for waging preemptive or preventive war. While American security studies scholars are careful to distinguish preemptive war as moving militarily first in a crisis against an adversary, and preventive war as moving to stop an adversary from growing too powerful, particularly with nuclear weapons, Arab officials appear to use these terms in conversations in English interchangeably. Arabs worry that the United States will move militarily against Iran either before or after Iran acquires nuclear weapons by using its military position in the Gulf to bring forces to bear against Iran.

The Arab states worry that they will be caught in a crossfire in an American military campaign against Iran. The Saudis, for example, may hope that the ending of the American military footprint in Saudi Arabia will lessen the potential for Saudi Arabia to become embroiled in a future conflict with Iran. The Saudis, after all, resisted the investigation of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing which killed numerous American servicemen out of fear that it would uncover Iranian ties to the operation and put the Kingdom in the middle of an American-Iranian conflict. The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, also worry that American military operations against Iran would give the Americans potentially too great an influence over the global oil market.

The Arab states will be concerned about Israeli preemptive or preventive military action. The Arab regimes especially will worry that Israeli military operations against Iran—whether by air or sea—would spark street demonstrations that could spark public resentment against Arab regimes. Despite their worst fears in the run up to

the 2003 war against Iraq, “the Arab street” was muted. But Arab regimes will worry that Israeli military action against Iran would prove to be more volatile politically than American military action against Iraq had been. Arab military officers and diplomats have a hard time, though, understanding Israel’s perception of geographic vulnerability and the severe security demands that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons would have on Israeli defense policy.

The Arab world has a begrudging respect for Israeli air power, in particular due to its prowess demonstrated in the Arab-Israeli wars, air battles with Syrian aircraft in struggles over Lebanon, the air strikes against Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in Tunis, and the preventive air strikes against Iraq’s nuclear reactor. The mystique of Israeli air power, however, probably is larger than reality in the case of Iran, which is located a far reach from Israeli airspace.² Depending on the flight route, Israeli aircraft would have to violate Jordanian, Syrian, Iraqi, or Saudi airspaces to strike Iranian targets. While some speculate that Israel could gain basing support to launch aircraft from Turkish bases, Ankara’s unease with working with the Americans vis-à-vis Iraq shows how squeamish the Turks are over relations with their southern neighbors. The Israeli air force’s ability to generate sorties for a sustained air bombardment of Iranian nuclear weapons-related facilities, moreover, pales in comparison of that of the United States which enjoys wide access in the Persian Gulf, both in host countries and based on aircraft carriers.

Tel Aviv, for its part, will try to work closely with Washington on the shared threat from Iran’s nuclear weapons. In November 2003, the head of the Israeli intelligence service, the Mossad, told the Israeli Knesset that Iran’s nuclear weapons program represented “the biggest threat to Israel’s existence since its creation” in 1948.³ The Israelis would be relieved to have the Americans carry the lion’s share of the burden for working diplomatically and, if necessary, militarily to stop Iran’s nuclear weapons drive.

THE GULF NEIGHBORHOOD

The policy plate of U.S. security officials is already overflowing with its current load of security responsibilities, and the contemplation or implementation of yet another formidable security task represented

by moving militarily—even in a limited air campaign—against Iran’s nuclear weapons infrastructure may simply be one bridge too far for American policymakers. Should the United States be unable or unwilling to use military actions against Iran’s nuclear weapons program, Tehran will likely acquire nuclear weapons sooner rather than later. How, then, are Arab states likely to react in the next 5 to 10 years to a suspected or demonstrated Iranian nuclear weapons stockpile and robust ballistic missile inventories as delivery means?

Arab Gulf states will feel the Iranian threat most acutely. Iraq, for example, will continue to see Iran as the largest and most formidable national security threat in the region regardless what shape, form, or nature the post-Saddam government in Baghdad eventually takes. A relatively transparent, moderately disposed government in Baghdad probably would want American military reassurance to shore up its security vis-à-vis Iran. The Iraqis might be amenable to residual American and international ground and air forces hosted in Iraq. The Iraqis might want a profile small enough to minimize charges by political opposition that the Iraqis are subservient to the Americans, but large enough to serve as a “trip wire” to deter Iranian military ambitions against Iraq, particularly as Iraq’s new armed forces are just taking root. The American presence in Iraq also would reassure Iraqis that the Iranians could not parlay their nuclear weapons for political coercion against Iraq.

The Iraqis, too, probably will want force projection capabilities to deter Iranian military activities as well as to strike Iran in the event that deterrence fails. The residual American and international presence in Iraq might work to dampen Iraqi interests and ability to restart ballistic missile programs to match Iran’s ballistic missile capabilities. The Iraqis, though, probably would press the United States and the West for advanced air force capabilities to project power and to compensate for not resuming ballistic missile endeavors. Parenthetically, while much public discussion has centered on the size and nature of Iraq’s post-Saddam army, little debate has touched upon the legitimate air power needs of the future Iraq.

Over the longer run, the withdrawal of American and international forces from Iraq probably would heighten Iraqi fears vis-à-vis Iran’s nuclear weapons arsenal. Even if Iraqi conventional forces evolve

into relatively modern, professional, and capable forces—albeit in fewer numbers than the forces during Saddam’s rule—the Iraqis will be under strong pressure to contemplate resurrecting Iraq’s nuclear program to counterbalance Iran’s nuclear weapons inventory. From Baghdad’s perspective, Iran could parlay its nuclear weapons advantage to politically coerce Iraq. The Iranians, for example, could embark on an aggressive campaign to support Iraqi Shia opposition in the south or challenge the Shat al Arab, calculating that Baghdad would be deterred by Iranian nuclear forces from undertaking conventional military reprisals across the border. The Iraqis would have to worry that, should they seek to strike conventionally against Iran, Tehran could resort to tactical nuclear weapons to destroy Iraqi forces on the battlefield.

A Turkish decision to acquire nuclear weapons in response to Iran’s nuclear arsenal would further increase Iraq’s incentive to resurrect its nuclear weapons programs. A deterioration in Turkish-American relations, coupled with failed efforts to gain entry into the EU, over time could lead Ankara to be substantially less confident in NATO’s resolve to come to Turkey’s defense in the event of a military contingency with Iran. The Turks might then calculate that they need to have their own, independent nuclear deterrent as a hedge against Iran’s nuclear forces, as well as future nuclear weapons aspirants to Turkey’s southern borders.

Saudi Arabia has worked to restore diplomatic ties with Tehran that were ruptured by the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, but Tehran’s possession of nuclear weapons is likely to cause discomfort in the kingdom. While the restoration of normal diplomatic relations appears on the surface to ease tensions, neither the Saudis nor the Iranians have abandoned their traditional aspirations to be the most influential nation-state in the Gulf. The Saudis are likely to view Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons as a substantial Iranian effort toward politically and militarily dominating the Gulf. The Saudis probably would suffer a sense of political humiliation that the Iranians have the political prestige or reputation for power that accompanies nuclear weapons.

Iranian nuclear weapons would add already substantial political-military incentive for Saudi Arabia to pursue its own nuclear weapons capabilities. The Saudis have limited conventional

military capabilities to defend their large geographic space from outside threats, the most serious of which, Iran and Iraq, could be armed with nuclear weapons. The Saudis worried in the Iran-Iraq war that Iranian forces would defeat Iraqi forces in southern Iraq to threaten Kuwait and the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis would have to worry that a nuclear-armed Iran could again militarily threaten the Gulf. The Saudis, too, would have to worry about the foreign policy orientation of the future government in Iraq and hedge against the specter of Iraq in the long run, tapping its technical expertise to resurrect a nuclear weapons program. The Saudis also harbor deep mistrust of Israel and resent Israeli military prowess and nuclear weapons capabilities.

The Saudis, too, have a wary eye on the military power of the United States. The Saudis have been shaken by post-September 11, 2001, events. They were shocked both by signs of formidable domestic political opposition against the Saudi regime and internationally by the anger in the United States over the stark, if belated, recognition that Saudi Arabia was a hotbed for al-Qaeda. The political backlash in the United States must have heightened Saudi concern that the United States could one day pose a threat to the Kingdom. Although this concern is never uttered, Saudi officials remember that the Kingdom was vulnerably dependent on the United States for its survival in the 1990 war. It would not take too much Saudi imagination to appreciate that the United States, with its 500,000 troops then stationed in Saudi Arabia, could have forcibly taken over the Kingdom in a couple of days. The Saudis today probably worry that that United States could, in the future, “overreact” to an al-Qaeda attack against American interests with retaliatory strikes or military occupation in Saudi Arabia, much as the Americans have done in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A Saudi nuclear weapons capability would work strategically to shore-up Saudi insecurities vis-à-vis Iran’s nuclear weapons capabilities, but also against potential hostile actions in the longer run from Israel, Iraq, and the United States. The Saudis have already taken several steps in this direction. In the 1980s, unknown to the United States, they secretly negotiated for and purchased intermediate range CSS-2 ballistic missiles from China. According to Anthony

Cordesman, the Saudis purchased 50-60 CSS-2 missiles, 10-15 mobile launchers, and technical support from China.⁴ The missiles would be ideal for delivering nuclear weapons, but poorly suited for the delivery of conventional munitions because they are very inaccurate and too limited in numbers in the Saudi arsenal to be used in the massive missile barrages with the conventional weapons necessary to compensate for inaccuracies. The missiles, moreover, were sold from Chinese operational nuclear force inventories. Although Beijing and Riyadh claim that the missiles in Saudi Arabia are armed with conventional weapons, no American or international observers have been allowed by the Saudis to inspect and independently verify Chinese and Saudi claims.⁵

The international revelations in 2003 about the scope and depth of Iran's nuclear weapons-related activities have brought to the public domain reports of Saudi contemplation of nuclear weapons with the assistance of Pakistan. The British newspaper, the *Guardian*, reported that Saudi officials have admitted that, in light of Iran's nuclear weapons program and the post-September 11 security environment, the Kingdom is considering a variety of national security policy options, one of which is the pursuit of nuclear weapons.⁶ Other press reports allege that then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz traveled to Pakistan in October 2003 and secured a secret agreement with President Pervez Musharraf, under which Pakistan will provide the Saudis with nuclear-weapons technology in exchange for cheap oil.⁷ Naturally, Pakistani and Saudi officials deny these reports, but both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have national interests consistent with such a course of actions. Pakistan needs money to support its military competition with India, while Saudi Arabia needs a deterrent to compete with Iran and Israel, and as a hedge against a distancing of security ties with the United States.

While a body of circumstantial evidence suggests that Saudi Arabia has the interests, means, and intentions to lean toward a nuclear weapons option, there is little to suggest that the smaller Gulf Arab states are as far along in their strategic thinking as Saudi Arabia. To greater and lesser degrees, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman gauge a threat from Iran in general. Yemen, on the other hand, takes great reassurance from its geographic separation from Iran and sees little to no direct military

threat coming from Tehran. Yemen's security preoccupation, despite Iranian nuclear weapons in the Gulf region, will continue to be its neighbor to the north, Saudi Arabia.

The richer small Arab Gulf states have the financial wherewithal to purchase nuclear weapons and delivery systems, but they would face obstacles in moving along such a strategic path. China and Pakistan, for example, probably are more willing to press the envelope of risk with international and American backlash for public discovery of clandestine WMD-related dealings in exchange for the strategic prize of security ties with Saudi Arabia, the richest and one of the three major states in the Gulf balance of power, but they might be less willing to take these risks for the sake of security ties with the smaller Gulf states. The Chinese and Pakistanis might be more concerned with the operational security of any clandestine WMD cooperation with the smaller Arab Gulf states, recognizing that they need strong ties with the Americans that would increase the risk of public exposure. The Saudis, in contrast, have proven themselves adept at keeping secrets from the Americans. While Saudi Arabia may calculate that it could survive the international and American opprobrium that would accompany revelations of a Saudi nuclear weapons program, the smaller Arab Gulf states would have to worry that exposure of nuclear weapons aspirations would alienate their security backers—namely the United States and Saudi Arabia—which are the cornerstones for ensuring their autonomies from the larger states of Iraq and Iran.

Small Gulf Arab state efforts to develop their own nuclear fuel cycles and nuclear power plants under the guise of civilian electric power generation would be a long and expensive undertaking. Such a course of action, moreover, might set off international alarm bells in light of Iran's successful exploitation of this route for acquiring nuclear weapons. The small Arab Gulf states might be less able than Iran to ride out international criticisms of ostensible civilian nuclear power infrastructure; they are far more dependent on critical trade and security from the West than Iran and therefore more vulnerable to the effects of international economic sanctions and ruptures in bilateral security arrangements, particularly with the United States, Britain, and, to a lesser extent, France. The small Gulf Arab states, too,

would have to worry that their nascent nuclear power infrastructure would be vulnerable to preventive and preemptive attacks from larger regional powers.

The notable exception to this line of reasoning might be the UAE, which perceives the Iranians as a threat more acutely than their Gulf Arab counterparts. The UAE still harbors resentment toward the Iranians for their occupation of the contested territories of Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa Islands.⁸ The UAE might calculate that Iran's nuclear weapons will reduce, if not eliminate, what little incentive Tehran has to negotiate a settlement to the island disputes, as well as embolden Tehran to take even more assertive actions against the UAE.

The UAE has demonstrated a willingness to spend top dollar for defense as evident in procurement of combat aircraft from France and the United States, as well as *Scud* missiles from North Korea. The UAE blindsided the United States when Dubai purchased *Scud-B* missiles from North Korea in 1989, according to Simon Henderson.⁹ Dubai is suspected of having six *Scud-B* launchers.¹⁰ The UAE might see its *Mirage* 2000 and its F-16 aircraft as ideal nuclear weapons delivery systems and could turn to Pakistan for technical assistance. These aircraft and well-trained UAE pilots could readily navigate the Persian Gulf to hold at risk Iran's nuclear weapons infrastructure at Bushier and major naval facilities at Bandar Abbas. The UAE, moreover, has demonstrated willingness to purchase controversial weapons systems such as *Scud* missiles and suffer economic sanctions as a consequence. The Chinese and the Pakistanis might be willing to undertake the risk of exposure for substantial economic reward to assist the UAE in developing nuclear, chemical, or biological payloads for its combat aircraft or ballistic missiles.

THE LEVANT NEIGHBORHOOD

Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will have security repercussions for Arab states beyond the immediate Persian Gulf area. Syria and Egypt are geopolitically central to Middle Eastern security and will see their interests most directly affected by Iran's nuclear weapons power. Concerns about the prospects of Syrian or Egyptian nuclear weapons programs, however, have been muted in part due

to the economic weaknesses of both states. Common wisdom holds that nuclear weapons programs often are prohibitively expensive undertakings that put the nuclear weapons option beyond the grasp of many nation-states with poor, if not dysfunctional, economies, such as Syria and Egypt.

A cursory look at reality shatters that common assumption. Two of the world's poorest and most ineffective economies in Pakistan and North Korea illuminate the stubborn fact that countries with an expert technical elite and the determination to siphon off scarce financial resources from their economies can defy reasonable assumptions and establish nuclear weapons programs. Pakistan and North Korea are estimated to have 2002 per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of \$462 and \$903, respectively.¹¹ Egypt and Syria have estimated 2002 per capita GDPs of \$1,190 and \$1,100, respectively,¹² which puts Cairo and Damascus on a richer footing than both Islamabad and Pyongyang. And like Pakistan and North Korea, Syria and Egypt have black market means for making funding streams for clandestine nuclear weapons programs. With the Pakistani and North Korean nuclear weapons histories in mind, one should not be too confident in dismissing futures in which the poorly performing economic states of Syria and Egypt embark on nuclear weapons programs.

Syria, at least initially, might take some solace from Iran's nuclear weapons stocks. Damascus is increasingly isolated and in a weakened regional security position. It is encircled by states that enjoy strong security relationships with the United States; Israel to the southwest, Jordan to the south, Iraq to the east, and Turkey to the north. Syria, while the reigning influence in Lebanon, has only Iran to cooperate with in regional politics against the other regional powers influenced by the United States. In the short term, Damascus might welcome Iran's nuclear weapons as a means to bolster, by association, its marginal regional power.

Over the longer run, Syria probably would come to see the negative strategic consequences of Iranian nuclear weapons. If, in response to Iranian nuclear weapons, Turkey and Iraq pursue nuclear weapons options, Syria will see its power position in the region deteriorate even further.¹³ Turkish or Iraqi nuclear weapons will add to the already strong Syrian strategic incentive to pursue nuclear weapons because Damascus views Israel as its most formidable security threat.

The Syrian regime is isolated politically and might calculate that it has no other means to ensure its survival other than a nuclear deterrent. Damascus might calculate that it has no alternative to running the risk of Israeli military action in the near and medium terms in order to achieve a margin of security in the longer run under a nuclear umbrella. The Syrians have a rudimentary nuclear infrastructure upon which to build.¹⁴ But aside from the formidable technical obstacles for acquiring the fuel cycle infrastructure to support a nuclear weapons program, Damascus would have a major challenge keeping its nuclear program secret to avoid provoking Israeli preemptive or preventive military action either against Syria's clandestine nuclear weapons infrastructure or against the regime itself. Tel Aviv probably could not tolerate Syrian possession of nuclear weapons, and, unlike the case of Iran, Israel has more than sufficient military capabilities needed to wage a sustained air campaign to damage Syrian political, military, and economic nodes significantly.

Syria could respond more readily to accelerated regional nuclear weapons proliferation by strengthening its "poor man's nuclear weapon option." The Syrian conventional military is dying on the vine since it lost its principal military backer with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, Syria's conventional military is less capable on the battlefield than the Iraqi military of the 1991 war. The Syrian military is a thoroughly political institution unable to compete with Israel's military on the battlefield. Damascus compensates for conventional military inferiority by relying on chemical, and perhaps biological, weapons and ballistic missiles to deter Israeli military action. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton testified to a House hearing in September 2003 that Syria has "a stockpile of the nerve agent sarin that can be delivered by aircraft or ballistic missiles, and has engaged in the research and development of more toxic and persistent nerve agents such as VX." Bolton also stated that Syria "is continuing to develop an offensive biological weapons capability" and expressed concern about Syria's nuclear activities, noting that Russia and Syria "have approved a draft program on cooperation on civil nuclear power."¹⁵ Damascus probably will redouble efforts in the chemical and biological weapons arenas to

shore up its weak deterrent capabilities against Israeli, Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian conventional and nuclear forces in the distant future.

The Syrians would have to depend on their substantial ballistic missile forces to deliver chemical or biological weapons against regional threats because of the uncertainty over their air force capabilities. Only Syria's ballistic missiles would stand a chance of penetrating Israeli airspace, probably even with the deployment of the Israeli *Arrow* ballistic missile defense system which cannot be entirely foolproof. Syria's air force would be an unreliable means to deliver WMD payloads, given the exceptionally poor performance of Syrian aircraft and pilots against Israeli forces in the air battles of the 1980s in which Israel downed some 80 Syrian aircraft without a loss of one Israeli. The Syrians have 18 *Scud-B* launchers with 200 missiles, 8 *Scud-C* launchers with 80 missiles, and an unknown number of *Scud-D* missiles.¹⁶

The Syrians appear to be working on modernizing their ballistic missile forces in fits and starts. "Syria tested a 700-kilometer range *Scud-D* on September 23, 2000, following a successful test of Israel's *Arrow* missile defense system."¹⁷ Syria also could look to acquire more modern, mobile, reliable, and accurate ballistic missiles such as the M-9—whether from China directly, or indirectly from Pakistan. Syrian President Bashar has yet to demonstrate much prudence in regional politics and might be persuaded by Syria's old guard military that new missiles will bring Syria greater security and influence vis-à-vis Israel. Tel Aviv might, in turn, shatter that Syrian assessment and judge that such a change of the status quo is unacceptable and militarily move against Damascus, particularly since Damascus is in a profoundly weaker position in the Middle East than it had been during the Cold War.

Egypt is geographically farther from Iran and does not feel the direct Iranian military threat as acutely as those states located closer. Nevertheless, Cairo is likely to view Iran's nuclear weapons as another blow to the Egyptian worldview as the leader in the Arab and Islamic worlds. As journalist Nicholas Kralev observes, "Egyptian politicians, intellectuals, and journalists are worried that their country is losing its status as a major regional player in the Middle East."¹⁸ The blow to Egyptian prestige because of Iran's

nuclear weapons status may not be sufficient in and of itself to alter Egypt's restraint from a nuclear weapons program, but it adds to an already large pile of incentives to pursue nuclear weapons.

Egypt had incentive to contemplate nuclear weapons well before Iran's nuclear weapons come to the foreground in regional politics. The Egyptians, notwithstanding the peace treaty with Israel, have long resented Israel's nuclear weapons program that they see as a substantial source of Israeli political leverage over Egypt and the other Arab states. Cairo has long pressed diplomatically for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East as a means to negotiate away Israel's unilateral nuclear weapons advantage in the region. Cairo has long warned that it could reconsider its nuclear weapons restraint if the Israelis indefinitely refuse to negotiate for a nuclear free zone.

Egypt does have a nuclear power infrastructure upon which to begin a program with military applications. In the 1970s, Egypt may have debated pursuing nuclear weapons, but the peace treaty with Israel, aid from the United States, and limited financial means derailed a policy in this direction.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Egyptians have a nuclear research center with a Soviet-supplied two megawatt research reactor that started in 1961, and an Argentine-supplied 22 megawatt light water reactor that started in 1997.²⁰ The Wisconsin Project estimates that the Argentine reactor gives Cairo access to bomb quantities of fissile material, possibly enough plutonium to make one nuclear weapon per year.²¹ If the Egyptians were to embark on a nuclear weapons program based on its nuclear power infrastructure, they would have to move gingerly much as the Syrians to reduce the risk of Israeli military action. Cairo, however, might judge that it would face less of a risk from Israeli military action than Syria because of Egypt's security relationship with the United States. Cairo could also calculate that Tel Aviv would be loath to undertake military action that would threaten the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty and risk the return of hot wars between Arab states and Israel.

The Egyptians, much like the Syrians, also could redouble their "poor man's nuclear weapon" option. The Egyptian military in the 1980s modernized its chemical warfare agent production facilities to manufacture the nerve agents and even cooperated with Iraq on chemical weapons; in 1981 Iraq gave Egypt \$12 million to expand

Egypt's chemical agent production facilities and, in return, Cairo assisted Baghdad in the production and storage of chemical weapons agents.²² And the Egyptians could undertake similar modernization efforts of their suspected biological warfare capabilities. "In 1996, U.S. officials reported that by 1972 Egypt had developed biological warfare agents and that there was no evidence to indicate that Egypt has eliminated this capability and it remains likely that the Egyptian capability to conduct biological warfare continues to exist."²³

Egyptian and Syrian pursuit of the "poor man's nuclear option" might prove in the end to be only stopgap measures. The Egyptians and Syrians, drawing lessons from the 1991 and 2003 wars against Iraq, might conclude that nuclear weapons are inherently greater sources of deterrence than chemical and biological weapons. The Iraqis had robust chemical and biological weapons inventories in 1991, and the United States believed that Baghdad had retained some of these capabilities in the run-up to the 2003 war. The American campaign against Saddam probably has shaken Egyptian and Syrian confidence in the deterrence value of chemical and biological weapons because the U.S. perception of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons stores was insufficient to deter the United States from waging a war against Baghdad. Israeli, American, and Iranian possession of nuclear weapons might pressure Syria and Egypt to pursue nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantor of their securities.

The Egyptians appear to be continuing efforts to modernize their ballistic missile forces, which could be used as a foundation for a nuclear weapons deterrent posture. The Egyptians probably already have on hand at least 24 *Scud B/C* launchers with about 100 missiles.²⁴ The Wisconsin Project assesses that the long-standing relationship with North Korea has given Egypt the capability to indigenously produced *Scud-B* missiles, and Cairo is developing *Scud-C* missile production capabilities.²⁵ In August 2002, Slovak authorities revealed that two North Korean agents based in Slovakia were procuring millions of dollars of ballistic missile components for Egypt. Although the North Korean agents fled the country before Slovak authorities could arrest them, remaining documents showed that between 1999 and mid-2001, they ordered more than \$10 million worth of equipment and supplies for Egypt, to include items that

suggest that Cairo is trying to acquire a ballistic missile with a range of about 1,500km.²⁶ The Egyptian ballistic missile program, which has escaped much international scrutiny, has benefited from substantial North Korea assistance, which Cairo might eventually tap to support a nuclear weapons program such as warhead designs to carry on top of Egypt's ballistic missiles.

Egypt's interest in ballistic missiles with longer ranges than the *Scud* is long-standing. In the 1980s, Egypt cooperated with Iraq and Argentina on the Condor missile program. The United States in 1988 revealed that the Egyptians turned to Argentina for production help and Iraq for funding in a \$3.2 billion *Condor-2* project intended to provide Egypt and Iraq each with 200 solid-fuel ballistic missiles comparable to the American *Pershing II* nuclear delivery system.²⁷ Intense U.S. diplomatic pressure, as well as the 1990 Gulf war, forced the collapse of the program. Cairo might be rekindling its efforts to procure longer range missiles, calculating that U.S. attention is diverted elsewhere.

A series of scenarios could be envisioned in which Egypt could embark on a nuclear weapons program in earnest. If American grant assistance were cut significantly, the lifeblood for Egypt's conventional military modernization would evaporate and put more pressure on Cairo to compensate with comparatively cheaper investments in unconventional weapons. A continuing political deterioration over the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Arab street backlash over American military occupation of Iraq, popular Egyptian uprisings against the Mubarak regime, or Mubarak's death all could work to reduce Cairo's responsiveness to U.S. diplomatic pressure below what was the case when Egypt abandoned the *Condor* missile program. Cairo could look to nuclear weapons acquisition as a means for the political prestige needed to shore-up Egypt's domestic security situation and sagging political stature in the Arab world. Egypt might look to Pakistan as a model in this regard; a poor state, but one in which popular support for the nuclear program worked to Musharraf's political advantage at home and abroad. Arguably, Pakistan benefits from more international attention and American assistance than would have been the case had Pakistan not had nuclear weapons. Cairo also could calculate that only nuclear weapons could bring sufficient

political pressure on Israel to engage in serious arms control talks, much as they had between the Americans and Soviets during the Cold War.

AMERICAN POLICY AVENUES

The United States will have leverage and influence over Iraqi responses to Iranian nuclear weapons inventory as long as American and international forces play critical roles inside Iraq, but, over the longer run, that influence will subside and the incentives for Iraq to resume ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs will grow stronger to balance growing Iranian ballistic missile and nuclear forces. The smaller Gulf Arab states, moreover, might be supportive of Iraqi efforts in this direction because they would see Iraq as a geopolitical counterbalance to Iranian and Saudi power much as they had during the 1980-88 Gulf war.

To stem this course of events, the United States will have to bolster Iraq's force projection capabilities by providing assistance in building a modern, capable air force to compensate for Iraqi restraint in resurrecting Iraqi ballistic missile programs. The Iraqis will have legitimate security demands for force projection capabilities against Iran's growing ballistic missile forces. The Iraqis also will need American and international security reassurance in continued linkages to western militaries to ensure that Iraqi conventional forces, while smaller than Iranian forces, are more capable in conventional military operations to deter Iranian ambitions. The Iraqis, too, will need international security reassurance to dampen the powerful incentive to pursue nuclear weapons to counterbalance Iran's nuclear weapons inventory.

The United States should be forward-leaning in diplomatic efforts to stem Egyptian and Saudi incentives to pursue nuclear weapons options. The United States is bound to have more leverage over Egypt, which benefits from substantial American military and economic assistance. As Jon Alterman observes, "the \$1.3 billion in military aid that the United States provides annually is useful as the present regime distributes patronage in the armed forces. U.S. economic aid, just under \$800 million annually and slowly declining, also helps the regime consolidate its patronage networks."²⁸

Egypt demonstrated sensitivity to U.S. diplomatic and political pressure that ended its *Condor* ballistic missile program in the late 1980s. The Egyptians, however, probably calculate that the United States has a short attention span and is easily distracted by other global events, especially today in Iraq and Afghanistan. In light of Iran's nuclear weapons program, the United States needs to squeeze Egypt's ballistic missile program and potential nuclear weapons aspirations back on to the policy agenda. The United States needs to speak firmly and directly with the Egyptians and challenge the country on the activities of its ballistic missile forces, which could be the platform for nuclear weapons delivery in the future.

American leverage against Saudi Arabia will be less than is the case with Egypt. The Saudis by no means depend on American economic support or largesse for the modernization of the Saudi military. Still though, the Saudis continue to see the United States as a strategic backdrop that could potentially again bolster the Kingdom in a future contingency. The United States needs to leverage the security reassurance it gives to the Saudis to gain access and Saudi updates on the status of CSS-2s. The United States should argue that the Saudi military benefits from access to American military facilities, and that the Saudis should reciprocate by allowing U.S. officials to inspect on a bilateral basis Saudi military facilities, missiles, and warheads, and to speak with Saudi personnel. Such efforts would give the United States a better understanding of the Saudi infrastructure, as well as underscore the potential negative consequences of the Saudis undertaking a bid for nuclear weapons on ballistic missiles.

The possession of nuclear weapons in Egypt and Saudi Arabia would be particularly troubling given the potential for political instability in these countries over the longer run. Both countries have a burgeoning demographic bulge of young and unemployed men who will be vulnerable for recruitment by domestic—especially militant Islamic—political opposition. Egypt in the past has had its armed forces penetrated by Islamic militants, witness the assassination of President Sadat during a military parade, and might again suffer from Islamic militants in military ranks who might have knowledge and access to nuclear weapons inventories. The same case could be made of Saudi Arabia. While these scenarios would not appear likely in the near term, they might not appear so hypothetical in 15 or 20 years.

These scenarios underscore the imperative of American statecraft to try to head off the Egyptian or Saudi acquisition of nuclear weapons in the near term to avoid being saddled in the future with unstable regimes politically struggling against militant Islam opposition both inside and outside the gates of power, much as the United States faces today with respect to Pakistan.

Syria will require more use of coercive diplomacy that entails the threat of force than the cases of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, if the United States is to discourage Syria from undertaking the nuclear weapons route. The Syrians have demonstrated a stubborn resistance to conciliatory measures from outside as well as a propensity to put their near-term interests over longer-term strategic interests. The Syrians, for example, appear to have rendered logistics assistance for Iraqi regime exodus from Iraq after the 2003 war, as well as facilitated the travel of Jihadists from the region into Iraq to fight American occupation forces. The United States needs to reaffirm directly to Syria that it is an isolated regime squeezed between powers—Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq—which are more favorably disposed to American than Syrian strategic interests. Damascus needs to know directly and clearly that the initiation of a nuclear weapons program would not be tolerated and the American or Israeli military forces could wreak havoc on Syria's limited infrastructure and obsolete conventional forces, the destruction of which would leave the ruling regime wobbly.

Rather than procure their own nuclear weapons capabilities, the smaller Gulf Arab States might seek to use a set of overlapping security arrangements to acquire a rough, if minimal measure, of deterrence against the Iranian nuclear weapons threat. Iranian nuclear weapons could act as a further catalyst for Arab Gulf States to nurture their security relationships with the United States. Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar might increase the already substantial security links that have bloomed with the United States since the 1991 Gulf war. These states see security ties with the United States as critical to ensure their autonomies from the major regional states of Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. If they were to become wedged between nuclear powers in Iran—and subsequently in Iraq and Saudi Arabia—the small Arab Gulf states might try to get themselves more closely tied with American conventional deterrence as well as under

a potential American nuclear umbrella. The small Arab Gulf states, moreover, would need to hedge their bets and simultaneously work to nurture ties with Saudi Arabia and Iraq to counterbalance Iranian aspirations for dominance in the Gulf.

The small Arab Gulf states will be looking to secure a protective coverage of American nuclear deterrence. They will seek to leverage their hosting and support of American conventional forces in the region for American security guarantees that an American nuclear forces deterrent will be leveraged against Iranian nuclear capabilities. Gulf States might ask the United States for a contemporary rendition of the “Carter Doctrine,” in which the United States made a veiled threat to respond with nuclear weapons in the event that the Soviet Union made a military bid for warm water Gulf ports. President Carter announced in January 1980, in response to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan and closer proximity to the Persian Gulf, that “Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America; any such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”²⁹ Although the United States might opt to couch a policy that applies to the whole region—as the Carter Doctrine had—the Arab Gulf states are unlikely to be able to coordinate among themselves a coordinated pitch to the United States. The United States, though, would be well-advised to steer clear of a renewed Carter Doctrine that imprudently relies on nuclear weapons. The Carter Doctrine made strong strategic sense, but because the United States at the time lacked the conventional force projection capabilities to make good the threat against Soviet forces, the doctrine amounted to a veiled American threat to resort to nuclear weapons.

The United States would be better off offering ballistic missile defense coverage than a new grand doctrine with veiled threats of American nuclear retaliation for military disruptions to the Gulf balance of power. The Gulf States with the experience of the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars have grown accustomed to benefiting from the provision of American ballistic missile defense coverage. And Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons undoubtedly will increase the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states’ sense of vulnerability because one nuclear tipped Iranian missile could decimate the government,

ruling families, and societies of the smaller GCC states that, in some respects, have more in common with ancient city-states than modern nation-states. The United States might look to the GCC states for financial assistance to offset the research, development, procurement, and deployment of ballistic missile defense systems in the region, whether land- or sea-based. While sea- and land-based American ballistic missile defense systems are unable to provide strategic defense protection of the United States with its large landmass, they are capable of providing strategic protection to small states such as Qatar and Bahrain.

The Arab Gulf states and the United States would have advantages in drawing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into the Gulf to shore-up deterrence against a nuclear-ready Iran. From the Gulf state perspective, encouraging greater European security involvement in the Gulf via NATO is a potential means to hold in check what they perceive as assertive “unilateral” American diplomacy and statecraft vis-à-vis Iran. From the American perspective, NATO involvement potentially would give U.S. endeavors aimed at countering Iran at least a cloak of multilateral legitimacy. NATO’s European members, moreover, have recently shown more interest in Alliance involvement in the greater Middle East—particularly in Afghanistan—in no small measure to help repair the damage done to the trans-Atlantic relationship due to bitter French and German opposition to the war in Iraq. Washington should parlay European interest in repairing security ties to the United States to move NATO’s traditional focus on continental Europe to the greater Middle East, with a concentrated focus on dealing with a nuclear-ready Iran.

NATO involvement should complement rather than replace the U.S. role as the premier security broker in the Persian Gulf. Despite a recent upswing in European interest in the Gulf, the worldviews of European capitals remain focused on security issues in and around Europe. The Europeans are all too willing to let political and military problems in the Middle East fester, to step aside and let the Americans carry the lion’s share of the region’s political-military burdens, and to eagerly criticize American policy for failing to deliver a “perpetual peace” to the troubled region. While NATO’s European members devote considerable attention to political pomp and circumstance, their military capabilities are seriously eroding, leaving them with

little to no means to project military power into the Gulf.³⁰ The Gulf States understand that NATO can help politically contain American power, but, if push comes to shove in a future military contingency in the Gulf, only the Americans have the military power needed to act.

The United States today—unlike its European allies—does not lack the conventional means to project power in the Gulf as demonstrated in the wars of 1991 and 2003 against Iraq. And the United States would be wise strategically to tap that reputation for power to reassure partners in the region—in order to dampen incentives for exploring the nuclear weapons option—with ballistic missile defenses and conventional military means. The United States, with its preponderance of conventional forces, could threaten to remove the regime in Iran should nuclear weapons be used against American forces and regional partners. The reliance on conventional deterrence will underscore internationally the lack of usability of nuclear weapons, a mindset that, in turn, would dampen regional interest and prestige linked to nuclear weapons acquisition. Conversely, the American threat of nuclear weapons response in kind would heighten the importance and prestige of nuclear weapons and contribute to incentive for nuclear weapons proliferation. In the event that nuclear deterrence fails, the United States would have to make good on its nuclear threat and retaliate with nuclear weapons to cause most likely the end of the regime in Tehran, but at the unacceptable moral cost of thousands to millions of innocent Iranian civilian lives. Massive and tightly targeted conventional force retaliation offers a profoundly more moral and strategically effective deterrent because the threat is more credible than nuclear weapons response in light of the American restraint in inflicting civilian casualties in numerous conflicts since the end of the Cold War.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 2

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