

Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East: Who is Next After Iran?

By Patrick Clawson, April 2003

Were Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, its neighbors and the entire region would have to carefully consider the impact on their own security situation. The sobering reality is that several other Middle Eastern countries would seriously consider acquiring nuclear weapons were Iran to do so. Indeed, there could be a vicious cycle in which first one additional country acquires nuclear weapons, then others concerned about that country's possession proceed with their own weapons programs, and that further proliferation in turn convinces more countries to act.

The thesis of this article is that such a proliferation outbreak is distinctly possible unless the United States responds to Iranian proliferation with firm, concrete measures to offset Iran's actions. The structure of the article is to briefly summarize the reasons for concern about the Iranian nuclear program and then to turn to the potential proliferants: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, other Arab states, and Turkey. The article closes with what the United States could do to influence the decisions of Middle East states about whether or not to imitate an Iranian proliferation.

Reasons to Worry about the Iranian Nuclear Program

Repeated warnings by U.S. officials about a potential Iranian nuclear weapon have been regarded as exaggerated by many academic students of Iran. The mid-1990s warnings that Iran might have a nuclear weapon within five years turned out to be overly pessimistic. But it appears that after years of problems and delays, Iran's nuclear ambitions have made considerable progress. The March 2003 visit by an IAEA team showed that Iran was well along on its announced commitment to developing a full fuel cycle capability. Iran has acknowledged to the IAEA that it is constructing a plan to convert natural uranium, which Iran is mining from domestic deposits, into uranium hexafluoride gas. That gas presumably would be used in the Nantanz enrichment facility visited by the IAEA team. The Nantanz facility has 160 functioning centrifuges in a pilot facility, while 1,000 more centrifuges are being assembled in another building which is planned to hold 5,000 centrifuges.¹ While Nantanz could be used to produce lightly enriched uranium to refuel the electrical-power-generating reactor under construction at Bushehr, it would also be capable of producing highly enriched uranium. Depending on the capacity of the machines, the facility when completed in 2005 could produce enough highly enriched uranium for two or more nuclear bombs per year.

¹ Joby Warrick and Glenn Kessler, "Iran's Nuclear Program Speeds Ahead," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2003, pp A1 and A17.

Meanwhile, satellite photos indicate Iran is also building a heavy water production plant, which raises troubling concerns, given that Iran is not known to have a reactor that would make use of the plant's production and such a reactor could well be a means to acquire plutonium, giving Iran a second route to a nuclear weapon. And construction on the light-water reactor at Bushehr is making substantial headway, with commissioning of the plant likely in 2004, which means that Iran will shortly thereafter accumulate spent fuel in holding tanks – the fuel will be too radioactive to be immediately returned to Russia, even assuming that the long-discussed agreement to return the fuel is made operative. If heroic efforts are made to return the spent fuel to Russia while still quite hot, the spent fuel in the holding tanks will provide Iran the material from which it could in relatively short order extract highly fissile material for several dozen weapons. In short, considering the progress it is making on several different facilities, it seems accurate to say that Iran is developing a substantial nuclear infrastructure.

It is of course possible Iran will use this nuclear infrastructure only for the announced goal of a self-sufficient nuclear power industry rather than for pursuing nuclear weapons. However, four factors suggest Iran will perceive that the constraints against proliferation are not great compared to the reasons to acquire nuclear weapons:

Attitude towards arms control agreements. Iran is a state-party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), but that may not constrain its nuclear program. Iran's attitude towards arms control agreements is not reassuring. Iran's declaration to the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) pursuant to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) denied that Iran had ever produced chemical weapons, which is a transparent lie. U.S. sources say Iran imported from China uranium hexafluoride without declaring this to the IAEA and that some of this has been enriched, which would violate its NPT obligations. Meanwhile, Iran has refused to accept the enhanced IAEA inspections under the Program 93+2 Additional Protocol; indeed, it has not modified its safeguard agreement with the IAEA to incorporate the IAEA's 1995 restatement of what it is empowered to do with its powers to enforce the NPT (this restatement was the first part of the two-part Program 93+2, with the Additional Protocol). Nor is Iran going beyond the minimum required under its current safeguard agreement, as evidenced by its recent delays in notifying the IAEA about the construction of new facilities (about which the IAEA was well aware because of satellite photos), as its refusal to allow inspection of those facilities (as distinct from a walk-through "visit" without any examination of the facility by experts). All of this despite the European Union (EU) pressure for progress about nuclear transparency before Iran can get the trade agreement with the EU it badly wants.

It would be fair to characterize Iran's attitude towards the NPT as doing the minimum required while loudly proclaiming its adherence. That is discouraging for the hopes of using the NPT to constrain Iran's nuclear program, because as interpreted by the IAEA, the NPT gives Iran every right to build robust uranium enrichment and plutonium extraction capabilities if it declares those activities, while simultaneously developing the expertise and equipment to weaponize the fissile material; that is, the IAEA view is that only assembling the fissile material into weapons is prohibited. And the NPT gives Iran the right to withdraw with six months

notice. So Iran could remain in good standing with the IAEA even as it acquired the capability for a rapid breakout once leaving the NPT, that is, for developing dozens of bombs within a short period. This route would allow Iran to claim adherence to the NPT while still having a nuclear potential so obvious and awesome as to worry if not intimidate neighboring countries.

International reaction to proliferation. The contrast between how the world – especially but not only the United States – reacts to Iraq and to North Korea could have troubling implications for Iranian proliferation. The correct lesson which Iran should draw from the contract is the advantages accruing to those who offer to negotiate with the United States and proclaim their willingness to make strategic compromises if offered the right incentives, compared to the high price paid by those who refuse to cooperate. But Iran may well draw from the contrast the wrong lesson, namely, that those who have nuclear weapons are treated with kid gloves while those who do not are treated with boxing gloves. In other words, Iran may conclude that the best, if not the only, way to deter the United States is to possess nuclear weapons. And there is the possibility that a defiant, nuclear North Korea might aid proliferation in Iran. Respected Israeli military analyst Ze'ev Schiff warns, "Israel fears that if the North Korean crisis is not settled, Pyongyang would try to form an anti-American coalition in the Middle East compromising Iran, Syria, and Libya."²

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Threat environment. The overthrow of Saddam Husayn greatly reduces the threat of invasion from Iraq; it is difficult to see why – or for that matter, how – a new Iraqi government would want to invade Iran. And the end of the Saddam regime could well lead over time to a reduced U.S. presence in the Gulf – a presence which Tehran has often complained is aimed at it rather than Baghdad. Plus Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are likely, post-Saddam, to cut their military spending; indeed, all the Arab monarchies of the Gulf are facing economic and social pressures which make large weapons purchases less attractive. Just as the threat from the Gulf is on the decline, so too the potential for an Iranian-Israeli confrontation fades if Hizbollah is reined in by Syria, which is distinctly possible given Syrian concerns about U.S. pressure after the overthrow of Saddam. But unfortunately, there is little reason to expect that the reduction in regional

² Ze'ev Schiff, "Weapons of Mass Destruction and the Middle East: The View from Israel," monograph from James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University, March 2003.

threats will change Iran's determination to acquire nuclear weapons. The perceived threat from the United States will remain; indeed, it could become more preoccupying, if Iran's leaders worry that Washington may be tempted to promote overthrow of the Islamic Republic by the increasingly disaffected youth. Since, as discussed above, deterrence of the United States could be seen by Iranian leaders to require nuclear weapons, the perceived greater U.S. threat would increase the motivation to acquire nuclear weapons.

Domestic political environment. Iran's domestic political scene is characterized by a bitter dispute between hardliners and reformers. But there is little evidence that the two camps differ in the approach to nuclear weapons. Being better informed about the outside world, the reformers may be more sensitive to the political price Iran would pay for proliferation. On the other hand, the reformers are more nationalist; indeed, they have at times criticized hardliners for putting ideological regime interests above national interests. It would seem that the opposition, which has blocked Majlis ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), came more from reformers than from hardliners. It seems that both hardliners and reformers see Iran as strategically isolated, unable to rely for its security on allies or on foreign weapons suppliers. The argument goes that Iran must therefore develop indigenous weapons capabilities. But the prospects are poor that Iran could develop on its own world-class conventional arms, despite the billions of dollars it is spending to develop a full range of conventional weapons systems. Convinced of this analysis, dedicated Iranian nationalists, no matter how democratic or desirous of good relations with America, may indeed support Iran pursuing nuclear weapons. In his 18 February 2003 testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee, CIA Director George Tenet stated, "No Iranian government, regardless of its ideological leanings, is likely to willingly abandon WMD programs that are seen as guaranteeing Iran's security."

Faced with Iranian nuclear progress and the limited prospects that international or domestic factors will lead Iran to back off from the pursuit of nuclear weapons, it would be quite appropriate for Middle Eastern countries to consider the security implications were Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. It would not be surprising if some countries were already developing their contingency plans. This article asks, what are the prospect those plans could include acquisition of nuclear weapons?

Saudi Arabia: Proliferation Consistent with the NPT

Saudi Arabia is the state most likely to proliferate in response to an Iranian nuclear threat. To be sure, such an action could threaten the U.S.-Saudi relationship which has been the foundation of Saudi security. But the Saudis keenly remember that when they felt threatened by Iran – in the early days of the revolution, when the Iran-Iraq war was starting – the U.S. response to their entreaties was to send to the Gulf F-15 fighters which President Jimmy Carter publicly described as being unarmed. As Richard Russell put it, "It would be imprudent, to say the least, for Riyadh to make the cornerstone of their national-security posture out of an assumption that the United States would come to the kingdom's defence – under any and all circumstances."³

³ Richard Russell, "A Saudi Nuclear Option?," *Survival*, Vol. 43 No. 2, Summer 2001, p

A nuclear-armed Iran could well see itself as the natural leader of the region to which all other states should listen closely. That would fit with the Iranian nationalist self-conception, which sees Iran as a great and ancient civilization in contrast to the parvenu unsophisticates in the Arab minor statelets of the Gulf (that is a toned-down version of comments Iranian nationalists make about their neighbors in the Arab Gulf monarchies). Saudi Arabia would have excellent reason to worry about Iran projecting itself as the protector of the Saudi Shia community and as a state which should be consulted about how to manage the Mecca pilgrimage and holy sites – all of which would be utterly unacceptable to Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia might be unsure how much assistance it could count on from the United States in face of such Iranian indirect intimidation, which might not rise to the level at which Washington would be prepared to risk a crisis with Iran. Riyadh may therefore deem it necessary to possess a self-defense capability against Iranian intimidation. And Saudi Arabia is in no position to defend itself with conventional means, as is well illustrated by how ineffective the Saudi military remains despite spending billions of dollars each year on the most advanced weaponry and on training by U.S. advisors. So a nuclear option could fit with the Saudi needs.

An instructive case to consider is the Saudi 1986 acquisition of 50-60 CSS-2 missiles and 10-15 mobile launchers from China – missiles used by China for its nuclear forces which can carry a warhead of up to 2,500 kg to a range of 700 km.⁴ While the Saudis and the Chinese both insist that the warheads are conventional, the missiles are a peculiar way to deliver conventional explosives, since they are highly inaccurate (with a circular error of probability of about 1-2 km). The Saudis acquired the missiles without detection by the United States, and they have since steadily refused to allow any outside inspections of the missiles – suggesting that the Saudis have both the capability and the willingness to acquire advanced weapons in the face of U.S. strong objections.

The CSS-2s raise an interesting question. There is a widespread impression in West and South Asia that Saudi Arabia provided much of the finance for the Pakistani nuclear program in return for a rumored Pakistani commitment to provide Saudi Arabia nuclear warheads if needed. Pakistan has been interested in developing nuclear warheads for its missiles. Richard Russell speculates, “The Saudis might be willing to help fund Pakistani research, development, and deployment costs for their nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles in exchange for nuclear warheads.”⁵ It would be possible to structure such an arrangement without violating Saudi obligations under the NPT. As explained to this writer by a senior Pakistani official well versed in the matter, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia could follow the example set by the United States and Germany during the

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⁴ Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997, p 178.

⁵ Russell, op. cit., p 75.

Cold War with dual-key missiles. America and Germany took the position that Germany was not violating the NPT when the United States stored nuclear warheads under its control in Germany even those the delivery means for those warheads were missiles under German control. So Pakistan could store in Saudi Arabia nuclear warheads designed to fit on to Saudi-controlled missiles.

Egypt: Proliferation to Maintain Its Status

Were Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, that would affect the on-going debate in Egypt about whether it needs to nuclearize to maintain its status as a regional power. If in addition Saudi Arabia were to acquire nuclear weapons – even if by the indirect Pakistani route described above – it is difficult to see Egypt remaining non-nuclear, because it would be unacceptable to Egypt to be perceived as a less potent power than another Arab country.

What would drive Egyptian decisions about proliferation would be its determination to be the leading Arab power. There is broad consensus among the Egyptian elite that such a status requires that Egypt have the most powerful Arab army: the Egyptian view is that great states have great armies. It is worth recalling that the original Egyptian proposal for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East came after Iraqi president Saddam Husayn threatened in 1990 to “burn half of Israel.” Perhaps Egypt’s motivation was to protect Israel, but certainly one could argue for the alternative interpretation that Egypt could not accept another Arab state having a more potent WMD capability than Egypt possessed. Indeed, the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests led to a debate in Egypt about proliferation, with Egyptian President Hosny Mubarak suggesting that these could lead to a generalized proliferation throughout the region.

An obvious factor in the Egyptian calculus about proliferation is Israel. The WMD imbalance with Israel is a deep wound. Egypt is bitter that it has had no success in securing an Israeli commitment to give up nuclear weapons within a fixed time frame (Israel has offered that two years after it has peace treaties with all regional states, it would begin negotiations on a robust regional inspection process which once functional would monitor Israeli denuclearization). Faced with the perceived imbalance, Egypt has long had a strong pro-nuclear lobby. Egyptian president Hosny Mubarak stated in 1998, “when the time comes and we need nuclear weapons, we will not hesitate.” In May 2002, former Egyptian representative to the IAEA Dr. Mustafa al-Fiqi wrote an article for the semi-official *ALAhram* newspaper questioning whether President Anwar Sadat made the right decision when he suddenly and surprisingly signed the NPT in 1981; al-Fiqi argued that nuclear weapons might have been a useful deterrent against Israel.⁶

It is also worth noting that Egypt has long had an ambiguous attitude about WMD. Egypt has refused to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention. It has a history of using chemical weapons in 1964 in its war in Yemen – at the time, documented by the International Committee

⁶ Cited in Emily Landau, “Egypt’s Nuclear Dilemma,” *Strategic Assessment* (from the Tel Aviv University Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies), Vol. 5, No. 3, November 2002, p 26.

of the Red Cross and discussed in the Security Council. So there is no taboo in Egyptian thinking about the use of WMD.

Other Arab States: Those With Ambitions Lack Capability

Other Arab states would not pose as much a proliferation worry. Those that could proliferate would not particularly want to; those that would want to would have a hard time doing so.

Syria would be very unlikely to change its approach to nuclear weapons in the event of an Iranian nuclear acquisition. Syrian weapons decisions are not driven by prestige factors, in part because Syria does not see itself as the natural leader of the Arab world. And Syria is quite aware of how severely Israel would react to a Syrian nuclear acquisition. Syria has been quite clear-headed in thinking through its WMD options. It has been bent for more than a decade on acquiring a large enough inventory of CW-tipped missiles that it can threaten Israeli with unacceptable losses. And Syria has been relatively responsible about its CW-tipped missiles, giving every indication that it sees these as weapons of last resort to be used only were Israel threaten Syria's national existence. Given the strategic logic to this approach – it is after all reasonable for Syria to worry about the country being overrun and to therefore have a weapon of last resort – it is not surprising that the U.S. response to the Syrian CW proliferation effort has been rather low-key. So much for the charge that the U.S. government has a dual standard about the Israeli nuclear program: in fact, Washington has been rather understanding when Middle East states faced with existential threats acquire a WMD capability appropriate to that threat. Indeed, it is remarkable that the United States has done so little about the Syrian WMD threat, given the bad relations between the two countries and the fact that Syria's WMD threatens a close U.S. ally, namely, Israel.

In the category of countries that would want to proliferate but would have problems doing so, the most obvious case is Libya. Qaddafi is enamored of advanced technologies in all fields, but his regime has been singularly incompetent at focusing its energies, and Libya is woefully lacking in the industrial and scientific base for a nuclear weapons program. The Palestinians might try to proliferate – after all, most of them think they are already being attacked with WMD (i.e., chemical and biological weapons) by Israel – but they have a low capability to buy or build nuclear weapons. Of greater proliferation worry would be the smaller GCC states, especially the United Arab Emirates, which are well placed to buy nuclear weapons if anyone can, but it is not at all clear that there would be anyone prepared to sell such weapons.

Turkey: Will NATO Be Enough?

Historically Turkey has been at peace with Iran, and the two countries have generally paid relatively little attention to each other, compared to what one might expect from two neighbors with considerable economic interaction. That said, Turkey has many reasons to worry about meddling by an Islamic Republic which is ideologically opposed to Ankara's secular policies. If Turkey faces serious internal problems – be it from Islamists or from Kurds – Iran might seek to take advantage of that situation, and Iranian nuclear weapons would make Turkey think long and hard about how much it could complain about such Iranian meddling. In other words, an Iranian nuclear capability could make the Turkish General Staff nervous.

Faced with a nuclear-armed Iran, Turkey's first instinct will be to turn to NATO. Turkey places extraordinary value on its NATO membership, which symbolizes the West's acceptance of Turkey – a delicate issue for a country which feels it is excluded from the EU on civilizational grounds more than for any other reason. The cold reality is that NATO was not designed to defend Turkey: assisting Turkey faced with a general Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe is one thing; defending Turkey when it alone faces a threat is an altogether different matter. It is not clear how much NATO members want to take on this burden. It will be only natural for Turkey to wonder how much it can rely on NATO.

Were Turkey to decide that it had to proliferate in order to defend itself, it has good industrial and scientific infrastructures which it could draw upon to build nuclear weapons on its own. It would be difficult to prevent a determined Turkey from building nuclear weapons in well under a decade.

How Can America Influence Middle East Decisions After Iranian Proliferation?

Whether or not Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons leads to further proliferation among America's friends in the region will depend in considerable part on what policies the United States adopts as Iran's nuclear capabilities become more evident. Were Washington to do little besides deploring Iran's actions, further proliferation is likely. That is the case irrespective of how loudly and frequently the United States condemns Iran's actions.

Calls for economic sanctions or diplomatic steps against Iran seem an unpromising way to affect the calculus of other proliferants. For one thing, it is not clear that the international community would agree to impose sanctions. For more than a decade, the United States and the EU nations have profoundly disagreed about the utility of sanctions on Iran, and attitudes have hardened on both sides. It is hard to see the EU abandoning its long-held opposition to sanctions, since it is firmly convinced that engagement is the best way to moderate Iranian policy and to support Iranian moderates. Furthermore, it is not clear how much impact sanctions would have on Iranian actions; the impact of the long-standing unilateral U.S. sanctions is subject to different readings. All in all, other regional states pondering proliferation would probably be skeptical that sanctions would change Iran's policy, and they might not even be greatly concerned that they would face sanctions were they to proliferate.

Nor is it clear how much impact there would be if the United States responded by reemphasizing controls on exports of sensitive technology. Such export controls would seem unlikely to influence Iranian actions, since Iran has in theory faced strict controls for some time and yet has managed to make do, one way and another. The impact of re-invigorated export controls on the proliferation plans of the regional states would vary. A country like Turkey, which might consider building its own weapons, would presumably be more vulnerable, whereas countries that might consider acquiring nuclear weapons fully assembled, such as the Gulf monarchies, would presumably be less affected.

In the event of Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons, the most promising U.S. anti-

proliferation tool would be closer security ties with allies threatened by the Iranian proliferation breakthrough. America's friends in the region are going to feel more vulnerable in the face of Iranian nuclear weapons, and they will need to be reassured that their security concerns are being met if they are to be dissuaded from imitating Iran's proliferation. The United States could reassure them through some combination of policies that:

- * Change declaratory posture. For instance, were the United States to explicitly extend a nuclear umbrella over its regional friends, that could weigh heavily in the minds of regional leaders – especially if done loudly, frequently, and at the highest levels.

- * Enhance access to advanced weapons. For instance, if the United States assisted regional states in acquiring improved missile/air defenses, that could lessen the threat posed by Iranian nuclear-tipped missiles.

- * Expanded U.S. presence in the region. To take an extreme example, if the United States were to station off Iran's shores ships with nuclear-capable cruise missiles, that would make a powerful point about the depth of U.S. commitment to the changed declaratory posture cited above.

These policies to reassure U.S. friends in the region would have the added advantage of showing that Iran's security has become worse off because of its acquisition of nuclear weapons – that is, Iran's nuclear weapons would have increased the U.S. military threat to Iran, rather than providing a means to balance the U.S.'s greater power. That would be a useful precedent for other regional actors to contemplate, in that it would suggest that the acquisition of nuclear weapons may not in fact be a force-enhancer. If the United States can point to strong actions it has taken to counter Iranian nuclear weapons, that will lend more credibility to U.S. warnings to its friends in the region that were they to proliferate, Washington might take the strong step of reducing or ending the U.S. security relationship with their country. This could become a significant factor in their calculations about whether to head down the proliferation path.

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