

Deterrence Instability: Hizballah's Fuse to Iran's Bomb

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- Iran is moving steadily to a nuclear weapons capability, European diplomatic efforts notwithstanding. The "window" within which Iran might be stopped short of the finish line is closing quickly. But many Europeans argue that Iran will, of necessity, act as a responsible nuclear power in order to avoid catastrophic destruction.
- Iran pursues unstable revisionist policies, and its core-decision makers are isolated, with the elected government providing a facade, particularly in the strategic realm. The ability of Islamic clerical leaders to manage the intricacies of stable deterrence, and to prevent crisis situations from escalating out of control, is highly questionable.
- Iran, with its terrorist proxies and clients including Hizballah, poses the greatest danger to Israel's survival. Its frequent, emotion-filled declarations of intent to "wipe Israel off the map" are often matched by actions to support attacks. The evidence shows that the Iranian regime and its clients have aggressive objectives.
- Learning the lessons of Iraq's destroyed Osiraq nuclear reactor, Iran has dispersed, hidden, and hardened its nuclear facilities, making them far less vulnerable to attack than was the case in Iraq. No single air attack would be able to destroy the multiple elements that constitute the Iranian program.
- For the current political and strategic horizon, the prevention of Middle East nuclear proliferation by focusing on halting the illicit Iranian acquisition of fissile material remains the best policy option.

Comparing Iran to the U.S.-Soviet Deterrence Model is Dangerous

Iran is continuing to violate its commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), hide facilities and activities from the International Atomic Energy Agency, and move steadily to a nuclear weapons capability, European diplomatic efforts notwithstanding. Indeed, the extent of these activities and the repeated discovery of Iranian efforts to hide the evidence is the most telling confirmation of the weakness of the European approach. But instead of moving to a more visible and credible effort, including sanctions and the threat of military action, European diplomats such as Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy czar, dismiss and undermine the Bush administration's reminders that military options have not been ruled out. As a result, Iranian decisions-makers can confidently conclude that they can achieve a nuclear weapons capability without a significant penalty.

In private conversations, many Europeans are increasingly ready to admit the obvious - that without credible threats, Iran will not end its pursuit of nuclear weapons. They then argue that this is not disastrous, and that Iran will, of necessity, act as a responsible nuclear power in order to avoid catastrophic destruction. They point to the history of the U.S. and the Soviet Union as an example of successful deterrence, and draw a highly simplistic and dangerous analogy to compare it to the threat that would be posed by a nuclear-armed Iran with respect to its neighbors in the Middle East, including the Gulf oil producers, as well as Israel, the U.S., and even Europe.

More serious analysis reveals that the potential for the development and maintenance of a stable deterrence relationship with a radical and isolated Islamic Iranian leadership armed with nuclear weapons is highly problematic. Instead, as demonstrated by Pakistan in the 1999 Kargil crisis with India, this regime could trigger confrontations and crises that could quickly escalate out of control. The Iranian religious leaders who make the key decisions via the Expediency Council have very limited knowledge of and contact with the outside world, and have close links with terror groups such as Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad.

Given this assessment, and the prospect of continued failure in the diplomatic arena, military approaches are likely to be examined carefully, despite the inherent difficulties and risks.

Stopping Iran - Too Little, Too Late

Iran, with its allies and subsidiary groups, poses the greatest danger to Israel's survival. Its frequent, emotion-filled declarations of intent to "wipe Israel off the map" are often matched by actions in support of terrorist proxies. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, and other countries that are within range of Teheran's growing "sphere of influence," as well as in the U.S., the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran - a core member of the "axis of evil" - is very unsettling.

This nightmare scenario is not new and did not suddenly become apparent following the revelations regarding the extent of the links between Iran and A.Q. Khan, the head of the Pakistani "nuclear Walmart" - to use IAEA director Dr. Mohammed El-Baradei's terminology. The evidence that Iran has been secretly acquiring facilities and materials for an illicit nuclear weapons capability, in violation of its NPT commitments, has been increasingly evident. Continued development of large-scale uranium enrichment facilities, a heavy water production plant, and a plutonium production reactor in Arak,¹ as well as other key components of the atomic fuel cycle, clearly show Iran's goal of obtaining nuclear weapons. (IAEA inspectors were prevented from entering two large rooms and taking samples at the Kalaye Electric Co., a "watch-making factory" located in a Teheran suburb.)²

Over the past decade, high-level international committees were formed to consider the diplomatic and military options and their implications in detail. Attempts were made to persuade Russia and China to stop the flow of unsafeguarded technologies and expertise into Iran. This supply-side approach to non-proliferation was clearly an example of "too little, too late." Similarly, discussions of international fuel-cycle facilities that would prevent individual countries, such as Iran, from acquiring the technology and materials to make nuclear weapons may be well-intentioned but are unrealistic in the time-frame in which action must be taken before Teheran reaches the finish line.

Taking another approach, the European "troika," consisting of Britain, France, and Germany, tried the opposite route, offering Iran advanced technology, including civil nuclear facilities but without the fuel cycle, in exchange for abandoning its illicit weapons program. In November 2003, with great fanfare, an agreement between Iran and the Europeans was announced in which Iran agreed, or so it seemed, to freeze its uranium enrichment activities and also open up the facilities to IAEA inspection. But a few months later, when IAEA inspectors began to arrive at these sites to check for signs of enrichment and other fuel cycle activities, their access was limited, and what they found confirmed that the Iranian activities were continuing.³ So the Europeans tried again, and a year later another agreement was

announced, but at the same time, Iran continued to move closer to an indigenous weapons capability.⁴

If the current regime that controls the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be persuaded to drop its nuclear ambitions, perhaps a different and more liberal regime would be less obsessed with this project and also recognize the inherent dangers. Indeed, a few years ago, many diplomats and analysts thought that the reformist movement under President Khatami would be that moderating force in Iran that would slow, if not stop, the pursuit of nuclear weapons and would pursue a more stable foreign policy. However, in the past few years, Iran's "hardliners" have reasserted control, making regime change in the next few years seem unlikely.

As a result of the failure of these initiatives, the "window" within which Iran might be stopped short of the finish line is closing quickly. Hopes that the political leadership of the IAEA would suddenly acknowledge the overwhelming evidence of cheating, which the agency's own reports (available at the IAEA Internet site) show began almost two decades ago, are disappearing (if such hopes were ever realistic), and the time remaining for the imposition of sanctions to prevent the production of enriched uranium is fading. The European efforts may have slowed the pace of uranium enrichment during the past year, and may be able to further extend the time-frame for a diplomatic solution, but the odds of success are small.

If, as is feared, diplomatic efforts led largely by Europe fail, this will leave two main options for responding to Iranian nuclear capabilities - military action in the form of a preventive attack, or acceptance of the situation and reliance on deterrence. As will be discussed below, military action would be complex and risky. But at the same time, an unstable and uncertain deterrence relationship may be even riskier, particularly for Israel, but also for the U.S. and Europe. The prospects for stable deterrence involving the current Iranian regime are quite slim, and the dangers posed by the potential involvement of Iran's terrorist proxies and clients, including Hizballah, are alarming.

Assessing the Military Option

In June 1981, the Israeli Air Force launched a daring raid that destroyed Iraq's Osiraq nuclear research reactor complex. The small sortie overflew Saudi Arabia and dropped a number of gravity bombs (as distinct from more modern precision-guided weapons) on the target before returning to Israel. The decision to use military force, despite the complexity and the inherent risks of detection and possible confrontation, was taken after the Israeli government had tried for many months to persuade the French, who were building and supplying the uranium fuel rods for this reactor, that this project would place nuclear weapons in the very dangerous hands of Saddam Hussein. When the diplomatic options had all failed and the reactor was about to go operational, the military alternative was chosen and implemented in what became known as the Begin Doctrine.⁵

The result was that Saddam Hussein never was able to realize his nuclear ambitions. The French did not rebuild the reactor at Osiraq, and the Iraqi nuclear program only began to recover at the end of the decade. While Saddam sought to make up for lost time with a crash program, the 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent rigorous inspection program kept him from realizing his goal. Thus, the Israeli strategy is seen as a successful model of counter-proliferation.

But there are many differences between Iraq of 1981 and Iran of 2005. Learning the lessons of Osiraq, Iran has dispersed, hidden, and hardened its nuclear facilities, making them far less vulnerable to attack than was the case in Iraq. No single air attack would be able to destroy the multiple elements that constitute the Iranian program. In addition, Iran has significant retaliatory capabilities, including Shihab-3 missiles with a range of 1,300 kilometers, which could be equipped with chemical or biological agents, as well as a dispersed and experienced terror network. In addition, recent revelations of Ukraine sales of long-range cruise missiles to Iran constitute an additional concern.

Nevertheless, the military option for dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat cannot be ruled out. Although Iranian decision-makers have taken steps to insure the survivability of these targets, they remain vulnerable. The U.S. and Israel have also advanced significantly in terms of intelligence, targeting, and penetration in the past 24 years. Ground attacks and massive waves of airborne missiles aimed at Iranian military assets are unnecessary to destroy the 15 to 20 key installations that are at the heart of Iran's nuclear weapons program. Even if some survive, and others are well hidden and are not subject to attack, the large buildings housing the banks of centrifuges used for enrichment, as well as their very visible power supplies and related systems, and the foundations of the production reactor, could be damaged to the point that rebuilding would take many years.

However, preventive attack is an option of "last resort." It would unite the Iranian public behind the current regime, ending or at least delaying hope for the emergence of a moderate and representative government for many years. As noted, Iran might also seek to use missiles and weapons of mass destruction, or terror groups, in attacks of revenge and retaliation against the U.S., Israel, and the West (regardless of which forces might have carried out a preventive attack). Therefore, decision-makers and analysts are understandably attracted by the image of a stable deterrence relationship with a sober and responsible nuclear-armed Iranian regime.

The Myth of Stable Deterrence with Iran

Opponents of military action to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons often argue that while a preventive attack could unleash a cycle of retribution and counter-attack, the Iranian leadership is cautious and would not use nuclear weapons to attack other countries, including Israel. Indeed, a strong (if incomplete) case can be made for this relatively benign analysis. Iran's drive for nuclear weapons has numerous sources, including regional power ambitions, the sense of vulnerability in a hostile Arab and Sunni-dominated region, and a history of warfare, including the Iraqi invasion and eight-year-long war during the 1980s. In addition, the survival of the regime is under threat, both from internal pressure and from the U.S. government, and WMD is seen as a form of insurance policy rather than an inherently belligerent option.⁶

But the evidence also shows that the Iranian regime and its clients have aggressive objectives that contribute greatly to instability in the region. In the terminology of international relations theory, Iran is a revisionist state, uninterested in preserving the status quo but, rather, seeking to expand and use its capabilities to alter the international and regional political framework. The regime's extreme Islamic ideology and declarations of unmitigated hostility are seen as posing an existential threat to Israel. In 2001, then-President Rafsanjani called the establishment of Israel the "worst event in history," and declared, "In due time the Islamic world will have a military nuclear device, and then the strategy of the West would reach a dead end, since one bomb is enough to destroy all Israel."⁷ Similarly, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei declared "that the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted."⁸ This obsession is also reflected in highly anti-Semitic programs on Iranian television, as well as the transfer of shiploads of missiles, explosives, and weapons to Palestinian terror groups. Israeli security officials point to Iranian financing, planning, training, intelligence, and other involvement in suicide bombing and other terror attacks by groups such as Hamas.

Hizballah - Iran's Proxy on Israel's Northern Border

Iran is also the major supporter of Hizballah, whose leaders also call repeatedly for the destruction of Israel. Operating as an independent military force from bases within Lebanon, Hizballah continues to launch limited attacks across the Lebanese border with Israel, and has deployed a huge arsenal of tactical missiles, including the Iranian-made Fajr-5, with a range of 75 kilometers. Iranian experts and members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard were reportedly involved in the deployment of Hizballah's rocket formation.⁹

Prime Minister Sharon told a visiting delegation from the European Parliament in 2003, "Together with Syria, Iran has built an infrastructure of over 11,000 rockets in Lebanon - with a range capable of reaching the entire northern part of Israel."¹⁰

These weapons provide an umbrella for periodic assaults on the Israeli side of the border, as well as a model for Palestinian groups operating in Gaza. This confrontation is inherently unstable, and at some point, Hizballah's salami tactics are likely to trigger a rapid escalation into a full-scale confrontation.

In addition, Hizballah, aided directly by Iranian officials, is viewed by Israeli and others as responsible for the terror blasts in Buenos Aires, Argentina, that destroyed the Israeli embassy and the Jewish community building in 1992 and 1994, killing dozens of people. Hizballah (via its al-Manar satellite television broadcasts) has emerged as one of the most virulent sources of incitement and anti-Semitism.¹¹ (Ignoring all of this evidence, in February 2005, France led the EU in rejecting a proposal to classify Hizballah as a terror organization, citing hopes for a political dialogue in the changing Lebanese political context.) On this basis, Israeli planners cannot rule out the possibility that Hizballah's leaders will also obtain access to Iranian nuclear weapons.

Israel's Deterrence Policy

Historically, in response to other threats to national survival, Israel has placed primary emphasis on maintaining a credible and robust deterrence capability. The deep structural asymmetries in the region in terms of territory and population make Israel appear to be vulnerable to a crippling first strike. Thus, Israel's capability to inflict overwhelming and disproportionate costs regardless of the extent of the initial attack has been a central feature in deterring attack. This is the case with respect to conventional warfare (based on overwhelming air superiority and highly mobile ground forces), as well as providing the foundation for the development of its policy of "deliberate ambiguity" with respect to nuclear capabilities.

This policy has served Israel well, to date. Egyptian military planners have acknowledged their decision to opt for a limited strategy in the 1973 war in order to avoid triggering an Israeli strategic response. In 1991, the fact that Saddam Hussein did not use chemical or biological warheads in the missile attacks on Israel is also attributed to fear of overwhelming Israeli retaliation. Furthermore, Israel's nuclear capability and the realization that Israel could not be "wiped off the map" without massive retaliation were important factors in initiating peace processes with Egypt, Jordan, and beyond.¹²

However, the development of an Iranian nuclear capability and a multipolar nuclear environment would end the stability resulting from the ambiguous Israeli nuclear posture, and would fundamentally change the calculus of strategic deterrence in all major dimensions. In the context of a multipolar nuclear Middle East and the need for a credible second-strike capability, maintenance of Israel's policy of deliberate ambiguity ("don't ask, don't declare, and don't test") would become increasingly difficult.

Credibility and communications are central components of stable deterrence, and a more overt and visible nuclear weapons capability may be seen as necessary to avoid Iranian (and wider regional) misperceptions, particularly given the isolation of decision-makers in Iran. However, the isolation of Iran's leaders, the fog that surrounds its decision-making structures, the absence of direct channels of communication, and its radical, religious-based, revisionist objectives will make the development of stable deterrence extremely difficult. While the Iranian leadership is not seen as suicidal or particularly prone to high-stakes risk-taking (in contrast to Saddam Hussein and other Arab leaders), there are likely to be many misperceptions regarding Israeli intentions and red lines. With many potential triggers for crises and escalation between Teheran and Jerusalem, including Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, and extremist elements within Iran, the difficulty in managing these crises in a nuclear environment will pose a formidable challenge.

In comparing a potential Israeli-Iranian deterrence relationship to the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the key event is the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. The successful management of this crisis, which brought the two nuclear superpowers "eyeball to eyeball" and to the brink of mutual destruction, depended on the existing diplomatic ties and channels of direct communications. There were periodic summit meetings between U.S. and Soviet leaders, and at the height of the confrontation, they could at least fall back on these shaky links. This is also true with respect to India and Pakistan, which came close to mutual destruction during the Kargil crisis following their respective decisions to test nuclear weapons. But no such links exist in the case of Iran, which maintains a policy of boycotting the "Zionist entity" and supporting terrorist groups, thus maintaining a proxy war against Israel. This policy is particularly irresponsible and dangerous for a country armed with nuclear weapons and itself a target for massive retaliation. As a result, while deterrence theory provides a basis for hope for survival in this dangerous environment, in practice, in the Iranian case, this relationship will be highly dangerous and unstable.

Postscript: Messianic Visions - A Middle East WMD-Free Zone

One of the proposed means to prevent Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons is a "grand agreement" that would include, in addition to resolution of U.S.-Iran issues, a trade-off involving Israel's nuclear deterrent option.

However, as long as the Middle East conflict is unresolved, such "grand bargain" concepts are unrealistic. As the cases of Iraq, North Korea, and now Iran clearly demonstrate, the ability of international mechanisms such as the IAEA to effectively monitor and assure compliance with non-proliferation treaties is far from adequate. Furthermore, the U.S. and the other members of the UN Security Council have shown that they will not take risks regarding their own interests by using force or even imposing effective sanctions to gain compliance. From the perspective of Israel's core security perceptions and requirements, these idealistic hopes are not credible options in a Middle East characterized by warfare and continuous terrorism, which are, in turn, fueled by deep hostility.

In the long term, however, and assuming that the region survives the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the potential for negotiation of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone is likely to increase. In contrast to the international and universal arms control frameworks, including the NPT, IAEA, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which have proven highly ineffective in the case of Iran, as well as in Iraq and Libya, a system of mutual inspection based on a specially tailored verification regime could, in theory, be successful.

In the process of learning to develop and manage a stable deterrence relationship, direct communication links will eventually be established. The populations of the respective players, including Iran, may go through a transition similar to that of the U.S. and the Soviet Union, as well as Europe during the Cold War, and demand measures that reduce the risks of mutual assured destruction. This process can be assisted by external pressures, and could also lead to internal political changes including democratization, in order to create more responsive and accountable governments (although, realistically, the politics of extremist nationalism and religious exclusivity will remain very powerful forces).

At the same time, the zero-sum frameworks that have dominated may evolve into more cooperative situations, in which confidence- and security-building measures may evolve, not due to pressures and inducements from the outside, but from the internal recognition of the elements necessary for national survival.

Yet for all of the reasons explained in this analysis, this process, if it happens, could take many years or decades, and during this period, avoidance of nuclear destruction will be tenuous, at best. For the current political and strategic horizon, the prevention of Middle East nuclear proliferation by focusing on halting the illicit Iranian acquisition of fissile material remains the best policy option. Other regional steps such as mutual recognition and reliable communications will be necessary in order to manage the relationship and prevent nuclear

destruction. At the same time, proposals that lack credibility and are based on amorphous and unreliable "international guarantees," such as those which have failed to prevent Iranian, Iraqi, Libyan, and other violations of their NPT commitments, and that will endanger Israel's survival, are counterproductive and unrealistic.

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Notes

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2. Douglas Frantz, "Iran Closes In on Ability to Build a Nuclear Bomb," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 2003.
3. Links to the relevant IAEA documents are found at <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/laealran/index.shtml>
4. The troika referred to is the so-called E-3 of the European Union - Britain, France, and Germany - that have been negotiating with Iran on nuclear issues.
5. *Ha'aretz*, June 9, 1981, cited in Shai Feldman, "The Bombing of Osiraq Revisited," *International Security*, 7 (Fall 1982):114-143; and Gerald M. Steinberg, "The Begin Doctrine and Deterrence," in *Israel in the Middle East - The Legacy of Menachem Begin*, BESA Center for Strategic Studies, BESA Colloquia on Strategy and Diplomacy No. 15, September 2000.
6. Kori N. Schake and Judith S. Yaphe, *The Strategic Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, McNair Paper 64, Washington, D.C., 2001, pp. 1-15.
7. The Iranian broadcast agency released two versions of Rafsanjani's remarks, which were made during a Friday sermon (on "Quds" or Jerusalem Day) at a mosque on the campus of Teheran University. See "Iran: Rafsanjani Blames U.S., UK for Israel's 'Crimes,' Says Intifida Will Last," IAP20011214000069 Teheran, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio 1 in Persian 1130 GMT 14 Dec 01 [Excerpt from Friday prayer first sermon delivered by Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, head of the Expediency Council at Teheran University on 14 December] FBIS translated excerpt; and "Iran: Hashemi-Rafsanjani's Office Says Zionists Distorted His Comments," IAP20020120000016 Teheran, Nowruz in Persian 02 Jan 02, 16 [Letter from Hashemi-Rafsanjani's office and response by Nowruz] FBIS translated text.
8. "Iran Leader Urges Destruction of 'Cancerous' Israel," Reuters, December 15, 2000, <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/meast/12/15/mideast.iran.reut/>
9. Ze'ev Schiff, "Israel: Iranian Guard Must Withdraw from Lebanon Along with Syrian Troops," *Ha'aretz*, March 6, 2005.
10. "Prime Minister Ariel Sharon Speaks to Members of the European Parliament," IMRA, October 27, 2003.
11. Avi Jorisch, *Beacon of Hatred: Inside Hizballah's al-Manar Television*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004.
12. Gerald M. Steinberg, "Parameters of Stable Deterrence in a Proliferated Middle East: Lessons from the 1991 Gulf War," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Fall/Winter 2000).

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