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Can Cold War Deterrence Apply to a Nuclear Iran?

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- The policy documents published over the last year by the Obama administration indicate that it believes in the efficacy of traditional Cold War deterrence as the remedy to the challenge of rogue states acquiring nuclear weapons. This does not seem to be based on a sound strategic analysis but on the desire to project a purely defensive posture. Another assumption emerging from the administration's policy statements is that the Iranian regime is "rational" and hence deterrable.
- It is argued that a nuclear Iran will be risk averse and that "the Iranians are a rational people" and are not "suicidal." But the cultural propensity of a people toward "rationality" does not determine the behavior of their autocratic leadership. The claims by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that he communicates with the Hidden Imam should be taken seriously and should be seen in the context of an ideology purportedly held by key elements within the IRGC and the Basij.
- We should ask whether a polynuclear Middle East could be avoided in the wake of Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. The answer to this question seems to be clearly negative. Failure to prevent Iran from nearing the nuclear threshold will undoubtedly intensify the drive of other states in the region for nuclear weapons.
- How will a polynuclear Middle East function? It is nearly certain that it will not look like the latter years of the Cold War. The religious and political drivers that will determine nuclear decision-making in the countries of the region will preclude integration of many of the checks and balances which evolved between the superpowers in the Cold War era.

- The most powerful driver that has the potential to impel the region to nuclear war is religion. Both Sunni and Shiite traditions of Jihad view the willingness to challenge superior force as an exemplary deed. In Shiite Islam, this is augmented by the idealization of suffering and martyrdom.
- Given weak command and control structures in the region, nuclear weapons may filter down to quasi-states (such as Kurdistan or the Palestinian Authority), terrorist organizations, and rival ethnic groups for whom the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a hostile state would be an incentive to acquire at least a limited WMD capability.
- The countries of the region will probably be more predisposed than the Cold War protagonists to brandish their nuclear weapons not only rhetorically but through nuclear alerts or nuclear tests, leading to situations of multilateral nuclear escalation. However, such multilateral escalation will not be mitigated by Cold War-type hotlines and means of signaling, and the absence of a credible second-strike capability may well strengthen the tendency to opt for a first strike.

Background

The prospect of Tehran acquiring nuclear weapons has evoked debate in academic and strategic circles regarding the applicability of Cold War models of deterrence to a nuclear Iran. There is first and foremost the question of whether the Iranian leadership is indeed as committed as it professes to be to its radical and apocalyptic worldview or, perchance, it is more pragmatic than it seems and therefore will be as responsive to deterrence as was the former Soviet Union. The debate also extends to whether scenarios for a “polynuclear” Middle East are likely and whether the Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons might lead to a breakdown of the whole international nonproliferation regime or to a multilateral confrontation between countries in the Middle East.

Much of this debate focuses on the relevance of the lessons of the only historical example of rivalry between nuclear powers – the Cold War between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Some invoke the experience of that era to argue that a polynuclear Middle East can still be averted by extended assurances by the United States or NATO to their allies in the region, or that a nuclear Middle East may even provide the foundation for stability based on a Middle Eastern version of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).¹ According to this line of thought, the very possession of nuclear weapons tempers military adventurism and inculcates a degree of strategic responsibility commensurate with the grave consequences that would result from nuclear conflict. This point of view refers to the fears that permeated the Western military establishments of a nuclear China and the fact that a nuclear Indian subcontinent did not result in nuclear war, despite mutual hostility and frequent outbreaks of crisis. Others² emphasize the differences between the Cold War and a nuclear Middle East and point out that most of the characteristics of the Cold War that contributed to the fact that it did not escalate into nuclear crisis are conspicuously absent in the Middle East. Some even challenge the conventional wisdom regarding the history of the Cold War and the causes for its

propitious outcome, arguing that the Cold War era was far less stable than it appeared to be, that it was not the very nature of the nuclear weapons which averted confrontation but other factors, and that cultural differences, absent or different in the Middle East, played a critical role in the behavior of the parties to that conflict.

This debate coincides with a reexamination by the United States and its NATO allies of the very fundamentals of the doctrine of deterrence. The policy documents published over the last year by the Obama administration³ indicate that it believes in the efficacy of traditional Cold War deterrence as the remedy to the challenge of rogue states acquiring nuclear weapons. Moreover, these documents indicate that the key to deterrence should not be punishment (which was a key building block of MAD)⁴ but, rather, denial. This preference does not seem to be based on a sound strategic analysis of the efficacy of such deterrence but on the desire to project a purely defensive posture. Another assumption emerging from the administration's policy statements is that the Iranian regime is "rational" and hence deterrable.

This analysis challenges a number of fallacies inherent in these assumptions: the fallacy that deterrence doctrine may be applied equally toward adversaries of fundamentally different cultural, structural, and political features; the fallacy that possession of nuclear weapons dictates, *ipso facto*, a sense of responsibility and a need to put safeguards in place against unintended use; the non-distinction between bilateral and multilateral deterrence; the disregard of the implications of religion – particularly of Islamic concepts of war – for application of deterrence; and the implications of different paradigms of command and control than those that existed in the Cold War nuclear powers.

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The fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt and the potential spillover of political unrest into other countries in the Middle East have strengthened Iran's hand in the region and made any forceful policy of dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions much more costly. The argument which was frequently raised that the U.S. could prevent a polynuclear Middle East by assurances of extended deterrence to its allies is much less convincing in the light of the prospects of Egypt – one of the mainstays of American influence in the region – co-opting the Muslim Brotherhood into government and the possibility of regime change in countries in the Gulf such as Bahrain. The willingness of such new populist (and partially Islamist) regimes to rely on American assurances will be even less than that of their predecessors and their motivation to acquire the holy grail of a nuclear weapon will be greater. This situation is still in flux but must be in the back of our minds when addressing the issues discussed below.

The Myth of Cold War Stability

Deterrence doctrine during the Cold War was perceived, by and large, as a "one size fits all" doctrine based on a rational-actor model. As such, Cold War deterrence doctrine obfuscated cultural and religious factors that have a potentially far-reaching influence on the susceptibility of the target leadership to deterrence. In his analysis of the fallacies of Cold War deterrence, Keith Payne points out that the narrative of that era is anachronistic – colored by the fact that in the end nuclear war did not break out. It refers

primarily to that part of the Cold War which followed the Cuban Missile Crisis, before the two superpowers developed the stockpiles and delivery systems for MAD and the command and control mechanism to prevent such a catastrophe, and ignores the evolution of the relationship between them in the first part of that era and the cases in which they came close to the brink of nuclear war.

In retrospect, the Cold War was far less stable than it seemed to be.⁵ The U.S. deployment in Western Europe and in the Middle East played a pivotal role in American deterrence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the risk of nuclear war was far higher than the conventional wisdom indicates and, as mutual deterrence evolved, it provided an “umbrella” for conventional and low-intensity conflicts. Furthermore, while the leaderships of the United States and the Soviet Union did make most decisions on the basis of a cost-benefit calculus and compatibility between goals and courses of action, their perception of reality (the “data set”) on which the rational process was applied was deeply influenced by cultural perceptions. In many cases, the decision of adversaries to back down from conflict was not due to the deterrent signals that the other side transmitted (these were frequently not even received or were misinterpreted) but to other factors that the adversary was not even aware of.⁶

Ultimately, the doctrines of strategic decision-making (on deployment and use of nuclear weapons) of both the U.S. and the Soviet Union were rationalist, centralist, and neutralized from populist considerations and public pressures. Never during the Cold War did either superpower initiate a nuclear crisis for domestic consumption. To assume that this precedent will guide future nuclear rivalries between countries with different decision-making mechanisms would be naïve.

One of the key lessons of the Cold War era and of the post-Cold War conflicts is, therefore, that the efficacy of a deterrent signal depends ultimately on the ability of the signal to penetrate filters of history, culture, language, ideological axioms, and social-psychological factors. To develop a doctrine of “tailored deterrence” it is necessary to understand these factors along with the psyche of the leadership of the party to be deterred, identification of the decision-makers with the interests which are threatened, and the dynamics of threat assessment within that leadership.

Iran and the Rational-Actor Model

Some analysts maintain that for the foreseeable future, Iran will not dare confront Israel with nuclear weapons in the light of the latter’s quantitative and qualitative nuclear superiority and formidable missile defenses. It is argued that a nuclear Iran will be risk averse and hence deterrable.⁷ This is based on the premise that “the Iranians are a rational people” and are not “suicidal” and that the ostensibly “irrational” apocalyptic Mahdivist elements are either projecting an image of irrationality as a means of deterrence or alternatively – to the extent that they believe in the narrative they profess – are effectively controlled by the rational “Supreme Leader” who represents a traditional risk-averse tradition. Some⁸ even argue that the ascendancy of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in itself bodes well for the prospective “rationality” of the regime, as

the organization has material interests which it will strive to preserve, and hence will shy away from potentially devastating conflict.

Others, such as James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh,⁹ downplay the implications of a nuclear Iran and argue that such an Iran can be contained by American statesmanship. Lindsay and Takeyh argue that the record of Iran has been pragmatic, that the regime prefers power to ideological purity, and that this pragmatism will continue to define it even after it acquires a nuclear weapon. The danger that Iran would use its proxies – first and foremost Hizbullah – to deliver nuclear weapons in order to maintain deniability is ruled out on the basis of historic precedent (Iran has not provided chemical weapons to its proxies). Similarly, the possibility of a cascade of regional proliferation resulting from a nuclear Iran is presented as not likely – again in the light of historic precedent in the Cold War. By minimizing this possibility, the authors free themselves from the need to examine a scenario of inadvertent nuclear confrontation between more than two nuclear powers.

However, proof by historic precedent is tenuous. The Middle East is not equivalent in terms of culture, politics, religion, and regime nature to Europe or East Asia. The primary fault of these two scholars, however, is the assumption that the U.S. can contain Iran by projection of deterrence. The constraints that they propose for American action in the face of a nuclear Iran leave very little room for credible deterrence: the U.S. should not impose crippling sanctions on the Iranian regime (as that would harm “Iran’s disenfranchised citizenry”) but should rather “improve export controls” – i.e., to close the stable door after the horse has bolted; it should refrain from expanding the sale of weaponry to the region and abstain from signing security pacts with the countries of the region. What will be left to assure America’s allies (the ones that will remain) will be America’s word of honor that it will provide extended deterrence to those countries – however, in the spirit of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPR) – not necessarily by retaliation for a nuclear attack with nuclear weapons.

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This logic is fundamentally flawed. The cultural propensity of a people toward “rationality” does not determine the behavior of their autocratic leadership.¹⁰ Furthermore, the claims by President Ahmadinejad that he communicates with the Hidden Imam should be taken seriously.¹¹ Since such a claim is so patently unorthodox and politically counterproductive for his relations with the ayatollahs in Qom, it should be seen in the context of an ideology purportedly¹² held by key elements within the IRGC and the Basij (the popular Islamic militia), according to which by confronting the enemies of the Hidden Imam, his believers can induce the apocalypse and hasten his advent. Even if Ahmadinejad himself has doubts regarding the real nature of the epiphany that he has experienced, the claim that he has received “extended assurances” from Heaven can seriously constrain his capacity to retreat from potential conflict. Anticipation of the appearance of the Mahdi who will fight on the side of Allah’s soldiers – if only they show themselves worthy of Him by proving that they rely only on divine provenance – heightens the risk. Even without going as far as imputing apocalyptic goals to regional leaders, it may be argued that their domestic posturing as believing in such goals or in claiming divine protection from any devastating reprisal from the enemy will feed the potential for escalation.

On the other hand, to assume the restraining authority of the Supreme Leader is also flawed. Khamenei's authority has eroded since Ahmadinejad's election and we should expect further degrading of the Supreme Leader's status after his death. The regime has become increasingly dominated by the IRGC – a development which manifests itself in all three centers of power: the Supreme Leader's office (now effectively staffed by senior IRGC officers who serve as information filters for the Supreme Leader); the presidential office, staffed predominantly by former Basij (the "popular militia" now integrated into the IRGC) officers; and the IRGC itself with both its military and economic arms. The Bazaar and even the clerical elite in Qom have become less and less central for the regime. The weight of decision-making in the Iranian regime will continue to shift from the Supreme Leader to the IRGC for the foreseeable future.

Another argument in favor of assuming that Iran will behave according to a rational-actor model is that the ascendancy of the IRGC as the main power broker is actually a blessing in disguise. This hope is based on the assumption that the IRGC's growing economic interests will make it more concerned about stability and hence more "rational" and more susceptible to deterrence. True, the IRGC has a wide range of material interests. However, the dynamics of decision-making in that organization tends to be risk-prone and with a penchant for brinkmanship. There is no reason to assume that this will change when Iranian self-confidence is bolstered by a nuclear capability. Furthermore, the IRGC itself is the embodiment of the revolutionary nature of the Iranian regime.

In addition, the Iranian regime is, by its own admission, in favor of revolution and against the status quo in the region. Since its inception, it has been committed to "propagation of Islam" (*tablighi eslami*) and "export of revolution" (*sudur inqilab*). The former is viewed by the regime as a fundamental Islamic duty and the latter as a prime tenet of the regime's ideology, enshrined in the constitution and the works of the Imam Khomeini. Together they form a worldview that sees Islamic Iran as a nation with a "manifest destiny": to lead the Muslim world and to become a predominant regional "superpower" in the Gulf, the heart of the Arab world, and in Central Asia. While the claim that the Iranian regime will moderate its goals after it acquires nuclear weapons (due to the sense of enormity of the destructive capacity of those weapons) cannot be summarily disproven, it may be argued that it does not reflect earlier experience with the Iranian regime and that the cost of it being tested and failing would be too high.

Another argument is that the use of nuclear weapons has been declared "illegal" by the supreme authorities of Iranian Islam. While traditional Shiite scholars have expressed reservations regarding the Islamic legality of use of nuclear weapons, those ayatollahs who are considered close to the regime – and particularly to the IRGC – have indicated that Islamic law may justify the acquisition and even use of nuclear weapons.¹³ The claim that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had issued a *fatwa* declaring the use of nuclear weapons "*haram*" – forbidden by Islamic law – has never been substantiated. This constructive ambiguity leaves the regime the option to justify the brandishing and use of nuclear weapons if the occasion arises. On the other hand, there has been increasing support for acquisition of nuclear weapons and even justification of their use by clerics associated with Ahmadinejad.¹⁴

The Iranian regime has a history of initiating crises with its neighbors for domestic purposes or because of “one-upmanship” and struggles between different foci of power. Even assuming the underlying “rationality” of each of the components of the regime – the Supreme Leader, the IRGC, and the clerical hierarchy in Qom – the sum of those parts may not necessarily yield a “rational” decision-making process. The extension of Iranian missile range will play a part in encouraging Iranian brinkmanship in the region, thinking that a nonconventional missile capability that extends to Western Europe would be a sufficient deterrent against Western responses to its regional policies. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which Iran brandishes its nuclear weapons in an effort to impose reduced oil production on its Arab neighbors, increases its subversion of Gulf states under the cover of a nuclear umbrella, or steps up its destabilization of Lebanon under that cover. There is no guarantee that such brinkmanship will not ultimately escalate into nuclear confrontation.

Another factor which raises doubts about the validity of the rational-actor model in the case of Iran is the centrality of the ethos of martyrdom for the Iranian regime, which may well contribute to escalatory rhetoric and action through subversion and even conventional military action. Religion and nationalistic fervor have contributed in the past to a predilection by the Iranian regime for brinkmanship and for perseverance in conflicts despite rational considerations against such behavior. A case in point is the continuation of the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s with enormous costs in human lives and material due to Khomeini’s insistence that the elimination of Saddam Hussein was a religious duty and that the war could not end without achieving that goal. There are no grounds to believe that the possession of nuclear weapons will fundamentally change these patterns of behavior.

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Finally, Iran’s nuclear status may not remain under exclusive Iranian control. Weapons of mass destruction may filter down to Iranian surrogates and proxies such as Hizbullah, Hamas, and others. The argument that no nuclear power has ever provided nuclear weapons to a nonstate proxy is not one that can guide us. The very weakness of the Iranian nuclear posture in its initial stage (a small arsenal, a fear that its few weapons may not penetrate Israel’s defenses, and even if they do, the absence of a capability for a retaliatory strike if Israel does succeed in striking Iran) may lead the Iranian leadership – quite rationally – to develop a strategy of “forward deployment” of nuclear weapons with its proxies in Lebanon and alternative means of delivery that are not missile-based (by sea or small aircraft from Lebanon). The level of trust and symbiosis between Hizbullah and Iran would provide the Iranians with a level of comfort that no state has ever enjoyed with a proxy nonstate organization.

The Shape of the Polynuclear Middle East

Along with the question of Iran’s own behavior as a nuclear power, we should ask whether a polynuclear Middle East could be avoided in the wake of Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. The answer to this question seems to be clearly negative. Failure to prevent Iran from nearing the nuclear threshold will undoubtedly intensify the drive of other states in the region for nuclear weapons. An Iranian bomb would be perceived in

the Sunni Arab world as an Iranian (i.e., anti-Arab) and Shiite (i.e., anti-Sunni) capability. Furthermore, the increased demand for nuclear materials and know-how in the Middle East will probably encourage potential suppliers – first and foremost Pakistan and North Korea. The possibility of a “meltdown” in these countries may bring the elements responsible for the nuclear program to enter the market. Increased demand may even bring Chinese and Russian companies back into the market as well. Increased supply will most likely induce additional demand, with countries in the Middle East and other regions speeding up their nuclear programs to take advantage of what this market has to offer.

An argument heard frequently is that the neighbors of Communist China in the 1950s were similarly motivated to acquire a nuclear capability as a counterbalance to that of Beijing, but they were persuaded not to go down that path by American assurances of extended deterrence. This logic leads some to believe that such an offer to the countries of the Middle East may stem the tide of proliferation in that region. Indeed, such a suggestion was even raised openly by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. This suggestion ignores the damage that the credibility of such guarantees will have sustained after the U.S. has failed to prevent Iran from going nuclear and the decline in American stature in the region after the withdrawal from Iraq. Difficulties will come both from domestic American considerations and from domestic pressures in the region, with America’s allies facing Iranian-led and Islamist opposition to close security relations with the U.S.

The initial countries which will attempt to acquire a military nuclear capability would include: Saudi Arabia (which will probably exploit its links to Pakistan or attempt to purchase a “turnkey” capability from other sources); Turkey (particularly if its relations with the EU and NATO continue to deteriorate); Egypt (which would view itself as the champion of the Sunni Arab world against the nuclear threat of Shiite Iran, even under a regime dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, which would add the need for a counter-balance to Israel to its motivations); Iraq (which will have to start from scratch in terms of hardware but has the human capital for a new nuclear program); Syria (which almost succeeded in clandestinely constructing a nuclear reactor acquired covertly from North Korea, obviously intended for the production of weapons-grade plutonium for a nuclear weapons program, and may do so again in the future); Libya and, in its path, other North African countries (Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco).

How Will the Nuclear Middle East Function?

So how will this polynuclear Middle East function? Although the answer is not clear, we may say with a high level of certainty that it will not look like the latter years of the Cold War. The religious and political drivers that will determine nuclear decision-making in the countries of the region will preclude integration of many of the checks and balances which evolved between the superpowers in the Cold War era.

A principal difference between the two cases derives from the multipolar nature of the region and the size of the nuclear arsenals. Mutual deterrence in the Cold War was facilitated by the fact that each party to the conflict knew that the other party was

virtually the sole possible origin of a nuclear attack. However, this will not be the case in the Middle East. The existence of a number of mutually hostile nuclear states will create ambiguity regarding the source of any threat, and hence the target for reprisal. Nuclear alerts or actual launching of weapons by one party will not be interpreted only by the party it was intended for but by all other parties.

At the same time, a key ingredient of the Cold War that prevented escalation to nuclear war – MAD – will be absent from the Middle East for some time to come. For the foreseeable future, none of the nuclear states in the Middle East will possess a capability for total destruction of any – and certainly not all – its adversaries. Hence the “cost” of nuclear war in the region will be less than was perceived in the Cold War. For some time to come, the new nuclear powers will also lack a credible second-strike capability based on a large-enough stockpile of nuclear weapons and the ability to protect them from a first strike. Therefore, even if a regional nuclear power were able to retaliate effectively against one adversary, there would remain the possibility of retaliation by one of the allies of the attacked country. This will increase the inclination of a country, which sees itself threatened, to deliver the first strike.

Another key difference lies in the injection of populist considerations in the deployment and use of nuclear weapons. In all the nuclear states of the Cold War era, there was little or no public involvement in the formulation and implementation of nuclear strategy. To the extent that public input existed (for example, in public fear of nuclear war in the United States or in the campaign of the Church of England against a British policy of nuclear deterrence),¹⁵ it was limited and was always on the side of caution. The ability of the American and Soviet leaderships to make decisions on strategic issues with minimal domestic input was much greater than that of the regimes in the Middle East. The leaders of both countries identified with their constituent populations enough so that they could be deterred by “counter-population” and “counter-value” threats.

The most powerful driver, however, which has the potential to impel the region to nuclear war, is religion. Islam plays a pivotal role in the political culture of the Middle East. Belief in divine intervention may counterbalance the strategic advantage of the enemy, fostering a cost-benefit calculus in which the reward for obedience to divine will and the punishment for disobedience – both in the hereafter – will transcend any earthly punishment that the enemy can inflict. Both Sunni and Shiite traditions of Jihad view the willingness to challenge superior force as an exemplary deed.¹⁶ In Shiite Islam, this is augmented by the idealization of suffering and martyrdom as exemplified in the martyrology of Ali and his sons. Thus, discretion becomes a breach of faith and not “the better part of valor.” In the case that a leader – such as Ahmadinejad – truly believes that he can evoke divine intervention by challenging superior force, he will surely be less susceptible to deterrence. However, even if he does not personally expect divine intervention, the very indoctrination of the military leaders and the rank and file in this spirit is a potent anti-deterrent.

Another important aspect is the absence of a religious taboo in Islam on the use of nuclear weapons. While the public discourse in the Middle East perceives nuclear weapons as a means that will allow their owner to deter its enemies by threat of total

annihilation, it does not reflect the sense of a “taboo” on the actual use of nuclear weapons that developed in the international community. This is particularly evident in Islamic writings – both Jihadi-Salafi and mainstream – which tend to analyze nuclear weapons as extrapolations of weapons which existed in the early days of Islam and were permitted by the Prophet, so that their use is permissible.

Because of the absence of MAD, a nuclear attack may be perceived as survivable, especially if such a notion were to be legitimized by religious edict. Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes with an “*après moi le déluge*” mentality may choose to predelegate authority to particularly loyal, predesignated, trusted field commanders in case of decapitation of the leadership. Such behavior may also be compatible with a leader or regime that has a strong apocalyptic, or messianic, belief, and views such action not merely as revenge but as possibly hastening the apocalyptic or messianic stage of history, and ultimate victory.

Political Structures and Command and Control

Even if we assume that the leaderships of the region will normally wish to avoid nuclear confrontation, the command and control (C2) capabilities in the region’s regimes and military establishments raise serious problems. The factors that will influence the C2 paradigms of nuclear weapons in the Middle East include a wide range of political, military, bureaucratic, religious, and technological issues. The C2 paradigms that will evolve in the Middle East may not be able to cope with the hair-trigger situations that nuclear confrontations create.

Nascent nuclear powers in the Middle East will begin with different concepts of deployment, command and control. The Iranian motivation for acquisition of nuclear weapons is not only as a deterrent against its enemies but also as a means to achieve a hegemonic status in the region. To implement this, Iran will have to operationalize its nuclear capability into its day-to-day strategic posture. Such operationalization of nuclear assets will create a need for more elaborate models of C2. Other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, may view the weapons almost exclusively as deterrents, and hence to be stored away until extreme circumstances warrant their deployment. However, the attitude of one party toward its nuclear assets will affect that of its potential adversaries. Those states that may initially not opt for operationalization of the weapons may be forced to adopt a more operational (and hence more demanding in command, control, and communication, or C3, procedures) attitude as a response to the behavior of their neighbors.

In the light of recent events, special attention should be paid to the implications of a nuclear Muslim Brotherhood-ruled Egypt. If the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) rules Egypt, it will move to acquire military nuclear capabilities. This would be especially true if Iran, and perhaps other states following Iran, appear to be aspiring to a nuclear weapons capability, including Saudi Arabia, or a post-Saudi regime in Arabia, or perhaps Turkey. The Muslim Brotherhood will view this as the implementation of an explicit divine instruction for Muslims to possess all the means required to deter their enemies. In

addition, it will consider the possession of such capabilities as the guarantor of its survival in power, deterring external forces from seeking to topple it. Committed to the liquidation of Israel, it will see the possession of nuclear weapons as putting it in a position to abrogate the peace treaty with the Jewish state and to threaten the latter with conventional military action, under the protection of a nuclear “equalizer” that might be perceived to negate any Israeli deterrence in this regard, or even use nuclear weapons if they come to be perceived as valid instruments in the surge towards victory over “infidel” forces of one kind or another. In this sense, an ideologically religious, fundamentalist Egypt would bear some striking similarities to an ideologically radical Iran with nuclear weapons, where vast geographic, demographic and natural resource reserves could lead a strongly willed anti-status-quo leadership to launch nuclear weapons in the belief that it could still prevail in a nuclear exchange, while absorbing relatively high attrition rates, which other, less populated or smaller states in the region could not. Religious fervor and commitment, while not necessarily being irrational per se, could in this sense contribute to nuclear blows by miscalculation, rather than by premeditated design.

Command and Control paradigms that will emerge in the region will probably be closer to the early – and unstable - structures of the veteran nuclear powers, with adaptations for regional cultural, political, and religious idiosyncrasies, and will not necessarily reflect the accumulated lessons of those powers. Furthermore, the suspicion toward the West in the region is likely to bring its actors to reject solutions that are based on “off the shelf” Western technology, and to try to develop local solutions, which will be, initially at least, less sophisticated.

In contrast to the Western system of delegation of authority and decentralization of information on a need-to-know basis, we will probably encounter in the Middle East a more individualized chain of command consisting of fewer, but highly loyal and trusted, individuals, with less compartmentalization between them. It is highly unlikely that any of the regimes in the region will adopt procedures for verification of the orders of the head of government (by deputies or ministers). In regimes such as the Iranian or future Jihadi-Salafi ones in which the leader is perceived as inspired by Allah (the Sunni concept of *Amir al-Muminin* – Commander of the Believers, or the Iranian doctrine of *Vali-Faqih* – Supreme Leader), restriction of his discretion by a lesser individual would be tantamount to imposing restrictions on the will of Allah. Even the argument that the verification is not meant for regular situations but for contingencies during which the leader may be incapacitated, for any reason, would be difficult to support in these regimes.

Research and development (R&D) establishments in the Middle East are also liable to play a role in the decision-making processes even after completing development of the weapons, similar to that of A. Q. Khan in Pakistan. Since these are usually linked to military organizations, they may emerge as “back doors” to the C3 system for the weapons they devised. Thus, these organizations may become “loose cannons” in scenarios of breakdown of the states. Nuclear weapons may filter down to nonstate entities in such a scenario in two ways: to any of a plethora of quasi-states with differing levels of control (Kurdistan, Palestinian Authority), terrorist organizations (al-Qaeda,

Hamas, Islamic Jihad), and rival ethnic groups for whom the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a hostile state would be an incentive to acquire at least a limited WMD capability; and to “proxy” or “surrogate” terrorist groups (such as Hizbullah). The Cold War experience that nuclear powers did not transfer nuclear weapons or technology to their allies or proxies would not apply. The break in the dam-gates of proliferation would make it easier for those entities to acquire the weapons, and the states may have an interest in providing them to keep control over their own proxies.

Conclusion

A nuclear Middle East will be very different from the Cold War in a wide range of aspects. True, we may safely assume that the leaders and peoples of the region have no desire to be the targets of nuclear weapons. However, the inherent instability of the region and its regimes, the difficulty in managing multilateral nuclear tensions, the weight of religious, emotional, and internal pressures, and the proclivity of many of the regimes in the region toward military adventurism and brinkmanship do not bode well for the future of this region once it enters the nuclear age. Nuclear war need not erupt as a result of a conscious decision by a leadership to use nuclear weapons. It is more likely to result from escalation scenarios, misinterpretation of intentions of the other side due to poor intelligence and lack of communication between antagonists, inadvertent use, poor command and control constraints, and underestimation of the other party’s response to nuclear brinkmanship. Such behavior in a polynuclear environment would be tantamount to lighting a match in a gas depot.

The countries of the region will probably be more predisposed than the Cold War protagonists to brandish their nuclear weapons not only rhetorically but through nuclear alerts or nuclear tests in order to deter their enemies, leading to situations of multilateral nuclear escalation. Once one country has taken such measures, the other nuclear countries of the region would probably feel forced to adopt defensive measures, and multilateral escalation will result. However, such multilateral escalation will not be mitigated by Cold War-type hotlines and means of signaling, and none of the parties involved will have escalation dominance. This and the absence of a credible second-strike capability may well strengthen the tendency to opt for a first strike.

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Notes

- 1 Among them Kenneth Waltz: "Adversary states that acquire them are thereby made more cautious in their dealings with each other....The likelihood of war decreases as deterrent and defensive capabilities increase. Nuclear weapons, responsibly used, make wars hard to start. Nations that have nuclear weapons have strong incentives to use them responsibly. These statements hold for small as for big nuclear powers. Because they do, the measured spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared." Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Better," *Adelphi Papers*, No. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981). Thomas Schelling has also suggested that ultimately Cold War logic will prevail in a polynuclear situation as well. See also Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran, Israel, and Nuclear War," PowerPoint presentation, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), November 19, 2007.
- 2 See Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).
- 3 The administration issued six major policy documents from February 1 to May 29, 2010: (1) the Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR); (2) the Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report (BMDR), both issued on February 1; (3) the Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPR), issued on April 6; (4) the New START Treaty signed by the presidents of the United States and the Russian Federation (Prague, April 8); (5) the Washington Nuclear Summit Conference declaration, issued on April 12; (6) and the National Security Strategy for 2010, issued on May 29.
- 4 The Nuclear Posture Review states for the first time that the U.S. will respond to use of nuclear weapons against its allies "not necessarily with nuclear weapons."
- 5 See Bruce Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1993).
- 6 Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky 2001); Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).
- 7 For example, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Fareed Zakaria, *Newsweek*, October 3, 2009; *Washington Post*, February 22, 2010.
- 8 Fareed Zakaria, *Newsweek*, October 3, 2009.
- 9 James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "After Iran Gets the Bomb – Containment and Its Complications," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 2, April-May 2010, pp. 33-50.
- 10 Germany during the Third Reich is a case in point. Former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara noted regarding the Cuban missile crisis: "It was luck that prevented nuclear war. We came that close to nuclear war at the end. Rational individuals: Kennedy was rational; Khrushchev was rational; Castro was rational. Rational individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies. And that danger exists today." Robert McNamara, "The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara," transcript, http://www.erroldmorris.com/film/fow_transcript.html.
- 11 We may make a comparison, *mutatis mutandis*, with the assumption before 1939 that Hitler was a "rational man" with whom one could do business and his claim to be guided by his "providence" (*Vorsehung*), which brought him to override the decisions of his generals – and contributed greatly to his downfall.
- 12 The extent to which various ayatollahs associated with the IRGC have adopted a "Mahdivi" ideology is debated. There is no doubt, however, that the centrality of the Mahdi in the IRGC's ideology is much greater than in traditional Shiite doctrine or even in Khomeini's doctrine, which founded *Vilayat e Faqih* on the grounds of the occultation of the Imam.
- 13 Shmuel Bar, "Iranian Defense Doctrine and Decision Making," Institute for Policy and Strategy, October 2004, 51.
- 14 In April 2006 one of the prominent disciples of Ayatollah Misbah e Yazdi (the spiritual leader of many of the IRGC leaders), Hojat al-Islam Mohsen Gharavian, ruled that the use of nuclear weapons is legal in Islam as "One must say that when the entire world is armed with nuclear weapons, it is only natural that, as a counter-measure, it is necessary to be able to use these weapons. However, what is important is what goal they may be used for." Safa Haeri and Shahram Rafizadeh, "Iranian Cleric Okays Use of Nuclear Weapons," Iran Press Service, February 20, 2006, http://www.iran-press-service.com/ips/articles-2006/february-2006/iran_nuke_20206.shtml. Other clerics who have been rumored to approve

use of nuclear weapons include Misbah e Yazdi himself, Ayatollah Janati, Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi, Ayatollah Mohammad Fazel Lankarani, Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani, and Ayatollah Javad Tabrizi.

- 15 The Church of England published a report in 1982 entitled "The Church and the Bomb." A significant portion of it focused on the morality of nuclear deterrence, asking whether the prevention of the ultimate immorality of the actual use of nuclear weapons justifies the lesser immorality of the threat of using them in order to deter their use. The report determined that first use of nuclear weapons is, by definition, morally unacceptable, and that a strategy of deterrence based on the possession of nuclear weapons is totally immoral. However, the report avoided the question of whether, if nuclear conflict and mass destruction of human life were to be the probable alternative to a strategy of deterrence based on the possession of nuclear weapons, the latter may not be the lesser evil. David Martin and Peter Mullen (eds.), *Unholy Warfare: The Church and the Bomb* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 173-177, 181-182, 214.
- 16 Surat al-Anfal, verse 65: "O Prophet! Rouse the believers, to the fight. If there are twenty amongst you, patient and persevering, they will vanquish two hundred; if a hundred, they will vanquish a thousand of the unbelievers: for these are a people without understanding."



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