



Iran-U.S.: After the Iranian Bomb

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By Bruce Riedel

Executive Summary: Meir Dagan, a former director of Israel's secret service, the Mossad, and someone who ought to know, says Iran is still years from acquiring a nuclear weapon. He is quoted as saying, "Not before 2015." Like all Israelis, he says Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability will significantly affect the politics of the Middle East. Dagan has also said force should be used only as a last resort because the price of war with Iran is a heavy one. What he doesn't say is that when Iran gets the bomb, Israel's four decades old monopoly on nuclear weapons capability in the Middle East will be over. The military balance of power in the region, however, will not be transformed as Israel will continue to have military superiority over any and all of its enemies, backed by the support of the world's only super power, the United States. Iran is backed only by Syria, and that relationship is in deep trouble because Syrian dictator Bashar Assad is in deep trouble. Iran is not an existential threat to either America or Israel.

Much will depend on the circumstances under which Iran acquires the bomb. If Iran is first attacked by Israel or the United States in an attempt to prevent acquisition, Iran is likely to be even more determined to get the bomb and may be more inclined to use it to retaliate. If Iran surprises the world with an unexpected nuclear test, as India did in 1998, it will shock the international community and perhaps lead to more sanctions on Iran. If Iran simply acquires the capability and begins to build a nuclear arsenal without a test or any public acknowledgement that it has crossed the nuclear threshold, as Israel is believed to have done in the 1960s, the impact will be in slow motion.

Impact on Iranian Strategic Thinking

Assuming Iran is not attacked by either the United States or Israel in the next few years, its possession of nuclear weapons will be a major achievement for the Islamic Republic's leadership. Iran will be more or less invulnerable to the danger of invasion. States with nuclear weapons can feel relatively far more confident that they will not be invaded. The Iraqi and North Korean cases have underscored nuclear deterrence in the last decade. The United States invaded Iraq in 2003 allegedly to prevent it from developing a nuclear arsenal; North Korea has developed one and no one seriously advocates invading the north to disarm it.

For the current generation of Iranian leaders who fought in the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s – the formative experience of their generation – a nuclear deterrent means they will never be invaded again by an enemy. Some 300,000 Iranians died in the "imposed war" as Iranians call it, and another half million suffered injury. The international community did not condemn Iraq for attacking Iran when it started or for using chemical weapons, facts that have never been lost on Iranians. For the leadership of the Islamic Republic, a future free from the fear of outside attack would be a major political triumph.

It is not just the generation of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that has memories of invasion. The last Shah, Mohamed Reza Pahlavi, had vivid memories of how his father was ousted after a joint Soviet-British invasion in 1941, and he initiated the Iranian nuclear program to ensure it could never happen to him. Today's Iranians have lived with

threats from Israeli and American sources for years that a strike on their country is coming.

Iran's self confidence will be significantly enhanced by possession of the bomb. As a consequence we can expect a more assertive and risk prone Iran. Nuclear weapons states are usually more willing to take risks. The Pakistani case is a good example of how the bomb can make a country more aggressive. Less than a year after testing nuclear weapons Pakistan embarked on a high risk military adventure against India in the Kargil mini war in Kashmir. Pakistan's leaders believed the bomb gave them a "new clear vision" that allowed their country to provoke its much larger neighbor without fear of major retaliation. They were largely correct. India fought back with great restraint. Pakistan went on to take further highly provocative actions against India confident that its nuclear umbrella allowed it to do so without fear of retribution. It is an alarming precedent.

Iran's assertiveness will be apparent across the region. In Iraq it will be more determined to see its Shia allies dominate the country and minimize American influence. In the Persian Gulf it will seek to intimidate the small Gulf emirates, especially Abu Dhabi and Bahrain. Iranian support, already significant, for Hizballah and Hamas will be enhanced by the knowledge that their patron has the bomb. In Afghanistan and central Asia Iran will be a more assertive player for influence.

Some argue that Iran is a "crazy" state that will not behave according to the rules of other states once it gets nuclear weapons. It will provide nuclear weapons to terrorists it does not fully control and will be ready to engage in nuclear warfare even with other nuclear weapons states that can retaliate against Iran.

The history of the Islamic Republic suggests otherwise. Since its founding in 1979, the Islamic Republic has behaved like a difficult and disagreeable state, but it has also been careful to avoid taking actions that would lead to catastrophic consequences. Its leaders have avoided reckless moves that would endanger the survival of the

revolution and the republic. For example, in the defining event of modern U.S.-Iran relations—the seizure of the U.S. Embassy and hostage crisis of 1979-1981—Iran took actions that were in clear violation of international law, but when it perceived an action would provoke a massive violent American response it desisted from that course. In the summer of 1980 Iranian leaders repeatedly threatened to put the American hostages on trial for espionage. President Carter made clear that any trials would produce a military response, and Iran retreated. In 1988, during the undeclared naval war in the Persian Gulf between the United States and Iran over reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, Iran attacked U.S. Navy ships but was careful to keep the conflict from escalating into a full scale war. When the U.S. Vincennes inadvertently shot down an Iran Air civilian airliner, Ayatollah Khomeini sensed the conflict was getting out of control and agreed to a cease fire in the war with Iraq.

Throughout the Iran-Iraq war, Tehran also chose to avoid actions that would cross WMD thresholds. It was Iraq that first used chemical weapons on the battlefield, not Iran, and it was Iraq that first used missiles against Iranian cities. In the mid-1990s when the United States determined Iran was behind the terrorist attack on the U.S. Air Force barracks at Khobar, Saudi Arabia, and warned Iran that any further attacks would prompt a military retaliation, Iran desisted from attacks on American military facilities in the Gulf and elsewhere. Today, Iran is careful to limit its support to anti-American insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan to low intensity conflict and asymmetric warfare to preclude a major American military response. The Iranian decision in 2004 to cease development of the weaponization of their nuclear program arguably could also reflect their calculus of the risks involved in provoking the United States in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq.

Iran will behave like a normal nuclear weapons state. It will not be a crazy or suicidal state. It will try to use its nuclear status to intimidate non-nuclear weapons states but will avoid conflict that could escalate into a nuclear exchange with another

nuclear power. It is highly unlikely that Iran will initiate nuclear war with Israel or give control of nuclear weapons to proxies it does not fully control. Iran's leaders, instead, will continue to depend on the increasingly powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to safe guard the revolution, national security, and themselves. The IRGC's suppression of internal dissent since the disputed 2009 elections shows it is determined to do so.

The argument, thus, is that Iran will be subject to the same deterrence system that other nuclear weapons states have accommodated to since 1945. Iran is likely to be a more dangerous and provocative player with the bomb in its possession, but it will not be a reckless state attacking other nuclear weapons states. And, as the influence of the IRGC continues to grow, it will play an increasingly significant role in regime decision making. It will be eager to protect the revolution and not risk its survival in a nuclear exchange. Similarly, Iran will continue to support terrorism, but it is not likely to mortgage its future to terrorists.

Israeli Anxieties

Israel is the state that feels most threatened by Iran's nuclear ambitions for good reasons. The founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, was the first to call for Israel to be "wiped off the map" of the Middle East, and he sent the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon in 1982 to create Hizballah. Khomeini said the goal of Iran in the Iran-Iraq war was to seize Baghdad as the first step to taking Jerusalem. He was also pragmatic enough, however, to buy arms from Israel during the war with Iraq.

Israel has had nuclear weapons since the late 1960s and has jealously guarded its monopoly on them in the region from Paris to Pakistan. It has used force in the past against developing nuclear threats. Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007 were the targets of highly effective Israeli air strikes against developing nuclear weapons programs. Israel has seriously considered conducting such a strike against Iran and may well do so. Estimates of the size of the Israeli

arsenal by international think tanks generally concur that Israel has about one hundred nuclear weapons, possibly two hundred.¹ Even under a crash program Iran won't achieve that size arsenal for many years, perhaps decades.

Israel has multiple delivery systems. It has the Jericho, an intermediate range ballistic missile that is capable of reaching any target in Iran. Its fleet of F-15 long range strike aircraft can deliver nuclear payloads. Some analysts have suggested that it can also deliver nuclear weapons from its German-made Dolphin submarines using cruise missiles.

Israel will also continue to have conventional military superiority over Iran and the rest of the region. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has a demonstrated qualitative edge over all of its potential adversaries in the region, including Iran. The Israeli air force has the capability to penetrate air defense systems with virtual impunity, as it demonstrated in 2007 when it destroyed Syria's nascent nuclear capability. The IDF's intelligence and electronic warfare capabilities are vastly superior to its potential rivals.

There are limits to Israel's conventional capabilities as demonstrated in the 2006 Lebanon war and the 2009 Gaza war. Some limits are self imposed, for example regarding ground operations to reoccupy territories that Israel does not want to try to govern again. But those limits should not obscure the underlying reality of Israel's conventional military superiority over its enemies.

Iran, on the other hand, has never fully rebuilt its conventional military from the damage suffered in the Iran-Iraq war. It still relies heavily for air power on equipment purchased by the Shah. Moreover, the new United Nations sanctions, UN Security Council resolution 1929, impose a very stringent arms ban on Iran. Virtually all significant weapons systems – tanks, aircraft, naval vessels, and missiles, for example – are banned from sale or transfer to Iran. Training and technical assistance

¹ See for example Avner Cohen, *The Worst Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb* (New York, Columbia, 2010).

for such systems is also banned. In other words, even if Iran wants to try to improve its conventional military capability in the next few years and has the money to do so, the UN arms ban will make that close to impossible. Iran does not have the capability to produce state of the art weapons on its own despite its occasional claims to be self sufficient. It certainly cannot build a modern air force to compete with the IDF on its own.

Finally Israel will continue to enjoy the support of the world's only super power for the foreseeable future. Assistance from the United States includes roughly \$3 billion in aid every year. That is the longest running financial assistance program in American history, dating back to the 1973 war. It is never challenged or cut by Congress and permits Israeli planners to do multi-year planning for defense acquisitions with great certitude about what they can afford to acquire.

U.S. assistance is far more than just financial aid. The Pentagon and Israel engage in constant exchanges of technical cooperation on virtually all elements of the modern battle field. Missile defense has been at the center of this exchange for more than twenty years. The United States and Israel also have a robust and dynamic intelligence relationship which helps ensure Israel's qualitative edge.

American support for Israel comes despite Israel's refusal to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Indeed, the United States since 1969 has implicitly supported Israel's nuclear deterrent by not pressing for NPT signature and providing Israel with high performance aircraft that are capable of delivering the bomb. Every American President since Richard Nixon has supported maintaining Israel's qualitative edge over its potential foes, including U.S. allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, preserving that qualitative edge enjoys broad bipartisan support in the Congress and the United States. Every President and Congress has been committed to doing so since the 1960s.

Iran, in contrast, has no major power providing it with financial help. UNSCR 1929 severed its arms relationships with Russia and China. Its only

military ally is Syria, not exactly a power house. And Syria is now in the midst of a profound domestic crisis. For thirty years Syria and the Assad family have been Iran's entre into the Arab world and the Levant. If Bashar al-Assad falls, Iran will be the biggest loser in the Arab spring no matter what happens in Egypt or Bahrain. Hizballah will be the second largest loser. Shaykh Naim Qassem, the Deputy Secretary General of Hizballah and one of its founders, wrote in 2007 that Syria is "the cornerstone" of Hizballah's survival in the region. While there are differences between Syria and Hizballah, the relationship is a "necessity" for Hizballah.²

A Nuclear Arms Race?

Many fear that once Iran crosses the nuclear threshold the rest of the Middle East will follow in a new nuclear arms race. In fact, the Middle East has been a hot bed of nuclear proliferation for the past five decades. Driven by security fears, regional ambitions, and nationalism, at least seven Middle East states—including Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Libya and Syria—have sought to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. Most recently, Syria's efforts with North Korean assistance to build a secret research reactor as a counter to Israel's nuclear capabilities were abruptly terminated by the Israeli air raid in September 2007.

Even though a number of Arab states have announced plans to revive or initiate nuclear power programs, none of the established nuclear suppliers are prepared to export fuel cycle technology or facilities to the region.³ In these circumstances, the only near-term option for an Arab country is to seek to purchase nuclear material or weapons from another state. At least one state probably has already set the diplomatic base for doing so—Saudi Arabia with Pakistan—but it is far from clear that

² Naim Qassem, *Hizballah: The Story from Within* (Beirut, Saqi, 2007), p. 399.

³ Gary Samore and Bruce Riedel, "Managing Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East" in *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President* (Washington, Brookings, 2008), p. 96.

Pakistan has actually committed itself to providing Riyadh with a bomb. In any case, Saudi Arabia lacks the technical capability to develop its own nuclear weapons even if it has a promise from Pakistan for one in an emergency.

An American Umbrella

Although the underlying strategic balances in the region will not be transformed by Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, the political and psychological impact will be serious and destabilizing. The United States should take steps to minimize the disruption. The most important would be to announce that the United States would respond to a nuclear attack by Iran on Israel or our Arab allies in the region with a nuclear attack on Iran. The idea of a nuclear umbrella for the region has been raised on a number of occasions. Most recently, it was suggested by then Senator Hillary Clinton during the 2008 election campaign.

Its time has now come. Tehran seems determined to proceed with its nuclear program despite U.N. sanctions. Our allies and friends in the region need to be certain that America will not let them be intimidated by a nuclear capable Iran.

Some have suggested that an American umbrella lacks credibility because the United States has long said it will not allow Iran to acquire the bomb, i.e. that we have already had our bluff called by Iran. It is an argument that suggests a change in American declaratory policy toward the Iranian program is overdue. The United States should stop promising something it probably cannot deliver—an end to the Iranian nuclear program at an acceptable price.

But it is also a fallacious argument. The United States did not want Stalin or Mao to get the bomb. In the 1950s and 1960s many American politicians said America would not allow the Red Chinese to get the bomb. In the end, we did and our nuclear umbrellas over Western Europe and Japan worked to deter Soviet and Chinese nuclear intimidation.

The extension of a nuclear umbrella over Israel has been connected in the past to resolution of the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The idea was originally proposed by then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at the 2000 Camp David summit. Part of Barak's thinking was that Israelis would be more comfortable making major concessions to the Palestinians if they had new security assurances from the United States about the Iranian threat.⁴ Without doubt it would be better for the stability of the region if there is resolution of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, but the extension of a nuclear umbrella to Israel should not be contingent on a peace deal. It makes sense to enhance Israeli deterrence whether or not a resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians emerges in the foreseeable future.

Extending a nuclear umbrella to Arab allies should also be done independent of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict. The small emirates of the Gulf feel particularly exposed to Iranian intimidation simply because of their geography and vulnerability. The United States already has defense cooperation agreements with all six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. A nuclear umbrella would complement those agreements.

The acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability by Iran, especially if it comes with a surprise test of a bomb, will be a major turning point in the politics of the modern Middle East. Its impact will be destabilizing and unsettling. But it will not transform the fundamental nature of the military balance of power in the region. The international community through measures like UNSCR 1929 has already taken smart steps to prepare for the day after and to contain and constrain Iran's ability to conduct dangerous moves to intimidate its neighbors. The United States can take additional steps, particularly via a nuclear umbrella, to further contain and constrain Iran.

There is no need for hysteria and panic in considering the future of a Middle East with an Iranian nuclear bomb. We should continue to try to persuade Iran by diplomatic means not to cross the

⁴ Yossi Alpher, *The Best of Bitter Lemons* (Jerusalem, Bitter Lemons, 2007), p. 238.

nuclear threshold. At the same time, efforts to sabotage and disrupt Iran's program should get the resources they need. But at the end of the day, if diplomacy and covert action do not stop Iran, the region will not face the apocalypse.

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