A Regional Arms Race?
Testing the Nuclear Domino Theory in the Middle East
Rizwan Ladha

In November 2011, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released a much-anticipated report on the Iranian nuclear program, highlighting the fact that Iran has made significant progress on research and development toward a possible nuclear weapons program. Nonetheless, the report concluded that Iran’s leaders had yet to make the decision to actively pursue the bomb.

Despite this assessment, however, many world leaders and decision makers have come to the independent conclusion that Iran is not just developing the capability, but in fact has made the political decision, to build a nuclear arsenal. This judgment is reflected in numerous statements by heads of state in the Middle East and in the United States. For example, in a March 2010 press conference, U.S. President Obama declared: “The long-term consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran are unacceptable.” In November 2010, a leaked diplomatic cable revealed that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had privately and repeatedly urged the United States to “cut off the head of the snake” by launching a military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Similarly, in 2010, the Egyptian Ambassador to the United Nations declared: “If the Iranian program proves to be a military program . . . [it will] be a threat to . . . Egypt and to all the countries in the Arab world.” Certainly, Israel’s leaders also have been unequivocal in their rhetoric, declaring that Iran without question is pursuing nuclear weapons and that action must be taken immediately to stop Tehran from doing so.

While these assessments certainly indicate a genuine fear over the true intentions of the Iranian nuclear program, they do little to provide assurances that Iran would be the only state in the region, aside from Israel, to have nuclear weapons in the next ten to twenty years. Like the “falling domino” theory of the Cold War, which was articulated by then-U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in April 1954 and which suggested that Communism would sweep across and beyond the Soviet sphere of influence, many have expressed the possibility that a nuclear-armed

Rizwan Ladha will be a PhD Candidate at The Fletcher School beginning September 2012, studying nuclear nonproliferation and security. He has past experience at Harvard’s Project on Managing the Atom and Ploughshares Fund in Washington DC. During summer 2012, he will intern at Pacific Northwest National Lab in Seattle. He earned his graduate degree from The Fletcher School and his undergraduate degree from Georgia Tech. The views expressed here are solely his.
Iran will spark a nuclear arms race in the region. This idea is popularly known as the “nuclear domino” theory.

The notion, however, must be questioned: Will an Iranian nuclear capability indeed ignite a regional arms escalation, with other Middle Eastern states racing to build their own arsenals? In order to answer this question, this paper will first explain the basic premise of the Iranian “nuclear domino” theory. Second, it will articulate the motivations behind a national nuclear weapons program. Third, this paper will examine the motivations, resources and capabilities of key states in the region. Finally, this paper will put to the test the nuclear “domino theory” in order to determine whether an Iranian nuclear bomb will indeed spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

THE NUCLEAR DOMINO THEORY EXPLAINED

A multitude of experts and policymakers have discussed extensively what the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran would be for the Middle East. For example, Gerald Steinberg argues that “if Iran acquires nuclear weapons . . . then Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Algeria, Libya, and Saudi Arabia will seek them, too.” Similarly, Jeffrey Goldberg has predicted that an Iranian nuclear bomb would incite Saudi Arabia and Turkey to seek nuclear weapons themselves. Policymakers tend to agree: NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer predicted in January 2009 that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons would provoke a “nuclear domino effect” in the region. Most recently, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned in an interview that if Iran successfully develops a nuclear weapon, Saudi Arabia and Egypt would seek the same capability as well.

These assessments are compelling, but it must be noted that Israel has been a nuclear-armed state for over forty years and has been at odds with the Arab world, not to mention Iran, for just as long. Yet it remains the only nuclear weapons country in the region. Of course, this phenomenon can be partly explained by Israel’s proclivity for preemptive unilateral military strikes on nascent nuclear programs in its neighborhood, notably on Iraq in 1981 and on Syria in 2007. Yet this historical record does not fully account for Israel’s regional nuclear primacy, and the assessments detailed above do not satisfactorily explain why countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey would develop nuclear weapons only now and out of concern over an Iranian nuclear bomb. A more comprehensive understanding is needed.

DRIVERS BEHIND A NUCLEAR WEAPONS PROGRAM

Certainly, security concerns have been a primary motivation for states that seek to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. However, in his three-pronged theory to explain a state’s desire to pursue nuclear weapons, Scott Sagan stresses that in addition to power concerns there are two key motivations: international prestige and domestic politics. The prestige argument is that, like national airlines and Olympic teams, nuclear weapons can symbolize a country’s greatness, and therefore its power, to the international community. After all, it is no coincidence that the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council are all nuclear weapons states. The domestic politics factor argues that internal factions competing for power within a country can influence the outcome of a national decision-making process on whether or not to pursue the bomb. For example, contrary to popular belief, India did not have a united national response to China’s first nuclear test in 1964. Rather, internal bureaucracies were divided over whether India should build a nuclear deterrent on the one hand, or renounce nuclear weapons and join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on the other.

Writing 10 years after Sagan, Joseph Cirincione builds on this basic model and adds two tactical factors: technology and economics. He argues that if a nation has the latent technological capability to produce nuclear weapons, political leaders are largely unable to resist doing so. Further, although nuclear weapons programs certainly are resource-intensive and very costly, proponents of developing a nuclear weapons capability can and do argue that they are still more cost-effective than building up conventional capabilities.
These five factors, according to Sagan and Cirincione, interact with each other to inform policymakers as they deliberate the option to build the bomb. That is, although they can serve to motivate countries to pursue nuclear weapons programs, these factors can also play a role in persuading nations not to do so. Cirincione explains:

... states decide not to build nuclear weapons—or, in some cases, to give up weapons they have acquired or programs that they have started—because they decide that the security benefits are greater without nuclear weapons, that prestige is enhanced by non-nuclear-weapons status, because domestic politics convinces leaders not to pursue these programs, or because the technological and economic barriers are too significant to overcome.\textsuperscript{13}

The historical record supports this claim. To give just one example, South Africa, once a nuclear power with an arsenal of roughly ten warheads, decided to discontinue and dismantle its program after Apartheid because it sought the prestige of being a respected member of the international community. Other countries’ experiences, including those of Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Belarus, Japan and more, further corroborate this argument.

\textbf{Iran’s Drivers}

With regard to Iran specifically, if Tehran is actually pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, as many actors contend, then most if not all of these five driving forces can be found in the Iranian experience. Certainly, Iran must contend with Israel, a nuclear-armed and ideologically polarized neighbor in its immediate vicinity. Additionally, Iran has witnessed a strong U.S. military presence to its south and its west—in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively—for the past 10 years. Further, after being labeled a member of the “Axis of Evil” triumvirate by George W. Bush in January 2002, Iran watched as the Saddam Hussein regime in non-nuclear Iraq was invaded and then systematically dismantled, while nuclear-armed North Korea tested nuclear weapons and attacked South Korean military ships with complete impunity. These developments may have demonstrated to leaders in Iran that their nation would be safer and less likely to be invaded if in possession of nuclear weapons.

In addition, from what is known about internal Iranian dynamics, there certainly is pressure within the bureaucracy to pursue the bomb, although the evidence that Iran actually has made the unified political decision to do so is inconclusive.\textsuperscript{14} From a prestige perspective, it is no secret that Iran is actively seeking to become a regional hegemon, and although Iranian officials have publicly denounced the linkage between nuclear weapons and prestige,\textsuperscript{15} acquisition of nuclear weapons will help secure and reinforce that objective. Iran certainly has the technological capability to develop a full indigenous nuclear fuel cycle, as evidenced by the size and depth of its program thus far. Finally, Iran has invested significant resources—time, manpower and money—to acquire this capability,\textsuperscript{16} arguably at a significant national cost.

\textbf{MOTIVATIONS AND CAPABILITIES OF KEY REGIONAL ACTORS}

Thus, should Iran actually make the decision to acquire nuclear weapons—if it has not already done so—how might the drivers identified above resonate with other regional actors? Specifically, how would Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey be motivated to react to an Iranian bomb, and what capabilities do they possess?

\textbf{Saudi Arabia}

Overwhelming regional security concerns drive the Saudi position on Iran’s nuclear program. In June 2011, Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal declared that an Iranian nuclear bomb would “compel Saudi Arabia... to pursue policies which could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences.” An official close to the prince later clarified his remarks, saying: “If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, that will be unacceptable to us and we will have to follow suit.”\textsuperscript{17} These statements echoed the private remarks of Saudi King Abdullah, who claimed in 2008 that if Iran
developed nuclear weapons, “everyone in the region would do the same, including Saudi Arabia.”

In fact, as far back as 2003, Saudi Arabia launched an internal strategic review to determine the feasibility of developing nuclear weapons. To date, an extended deterrence guarantee by the United States to Saudi Arabia has provided reassurances that Washington would come to the aid of Riyadh, should the latter be attacked with weapons of mass destruction. The strength of that guarantee may be strained, however. It was also revealed in 2003 that Saudi Arabia might have signed a secret agreement with Pakistan, whereby Islamabad would provide Saudi Arabia with nuclear weapons technology in exchange for cheap Saudi oil. This suggests that under duress, Saudi Arabia might decide to buy, rather than build, a nuclear weapon.

Saudi Arabia does maintain an interest in developing nuclear energy—which it theoretically could reroute toward a weapons program—but to date, Riyadh has demonstrated a desire to forgo domestic uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing capabilities, which are the two channels through which a country can produce a nuclear weapon. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia might be motivated to develop a nuclear program to gain regional prestige, and certainly has the economic resources to develop the requisite technologies to produce nuclear weapons. At the very least, it could build a nascent nuclear program under the ostensible justification of generating nuclear power to diversify its domestic energy mix, with the option to later weaponize.

Egypt

A country with a long and tumultuous history in the Middle East, Egypt has seen itself for generations as the cradle of civilization in the region and a vanguard of the Arab world. An Egyptian nuclear capability, therefore, would demonstrate not only its standing in the international community, but also its greatness as an Arab power in the Middle East. The country’s leaders have long recognized this: In 1955 Gamal Abdel Nasser established the Egyptian Atomic Energy Commission, charged with developing an indigenous nuclear infrastructure. Although the ultimate purpose or objective of that endeavor was unclear, it highlights Egypt’s demonstrated and long-standing interest in acquiring some form of domestic nuclear capability.

Nonetheless, since 1980 Egypt’s leaders have determined that it is largely in the country’s security interests to forgo the development of nuclear weapons, and Egypt has become one of the staunchest supporters of the international nonproliferation regime in the Middle East. Yet a constant Egyptian complaint in regional or international arms control discussions concerns the exclusivist nature of the NPT, since Israel has nuclear weapons and yet remains outside the framework of the treaty, all while suffering no repercussions for doing so. Furthermore, the potential for an Iranian nuclear bomb has caused misgivings amongst Egyptian government officials, as evidenced by recent diplomatic statements suggesting that if Iran develops a nuclear bomb, Egypt and other countries in the region may be forced to follow suit.

Egypt would likely feel tremendous internal pressure to respond to an Iranian nuclear bomb by building one of its own. Brian Katulis and Peter Juul write that Egypt’s bureaucratic structures may perceive the acquisition of nuclear weapons “as a means to enhance their own domestic power at the expense of rivals, and Iran’s acquisition of a bomb would give them [sic] a plausible security rationale to do so.” Technologically, Egypt currently has no latent nuclear capability, and since the departure of Hosni Mubarak in early 2011, the future of the country’s investments in nuclear energy is uncertain. However, Egypt has demonstrated in the past a strong interest in researching and developing nuclear technologies and in 2005 was found to be in violation of its agreements with the IAEA for doing so. Additionally, Egypt has refused to forgo enrichment and reprocessing capabilities, demonstrating the potential desire to develop a nuclear weapon should it feel threatened by Iran.

Turkey
With a long history of direct confrontation with Iran, as well as deep-seated border and territorial disputes with Tehran, Turkey may feel, after Israel, the most threatened by an Iranian nuclear bomb. Already within range of Iran’s ballistic missile capabilities, Turkey has in the past toyed with nuclear weapons research and development, including a possible one-time provision of technological assistance to Islamabad when Pakistan was in the nascent stages of its own nuclear program. Additionally, there has been sustained pressure within Turkish political circles to develop a national nuclear weapons program. Doing so would bring with it the prestige Turkey continues to seek not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe.

However, Turkey’s participation in the NPT framework and in NATO, as well as the maintenance of American nuclear weapons on Turkish soil, have so far kept Ankara in check by providing Turkey—like Saudi Arabia—with an extended deterrence commitment on the part of the United States and NATO should Turkey ever be attacked. Although it would become far more difficult for the current or any future U.S. administration to eventually remove those weapons from Turkey, keeping them close to Iran provides some assurance that if Tehran does acquire the bomb, Turkey will not feel the acute desire to do likewise in order to guarantee its survival and security.

Nonetheless, Turkey has invested for decades in a domestic nuclear program, and like Egypt has indicated in the past its intentions not to forgo enrichment and reprocessing technologies. However, at present it does not actually have these two particular capabilities, nor does it possess any functioning nuclear power reactors. Moreover, its past attempts at developing these capacities have fallen short, largely for political and economic reasons, and the current government’s desire to develop an indigenous nuclear power infrastructure has met with fierce and sustained domestic resistance. Without these critical capacities, therefore, Turkey will need to rely on the international community to provide it with the requisite nuclear fuel to either generate energy or build a bomb.

**CONCLUSION: TESTING THE THEORY**

Given the interests and capabilities of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, what will be the future of the Middle East should Iran acquire a nuclear bomb? While attempting to predict the future with any degree of confidence would be an exercise in futility, not to mention potentially dangerous, some general insights emerge that may inform what path the region will take in the next five to 10 years.

First, it is clear that without the requisite technologies to create nuclear weapons—namely, uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing—any country would have an exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, time building the bomb. This simple fact highlights again the significant technological complexity of developing nuclear weapons, the enormous investment such programs require, and the magnitude of resources they demand from national governments. In fact, even if Iran might be two to three years away from successfully building a nuclear weapon, any other country in the region would need at least ten years to catch up.

Second, the combination of extended deterrence guarantees and participation in the international nonproliferation regime carries a weight that cannot be overstressed. Even if Saudi Arabia and Turkey one day develop full-cycle nuclear power programs with enrichment and reprocessing capabilities, they will be extremely reluctant to break out of the NPT framework, reject the security assurances of the United States and/or NATO, and develop nuclear counterweights to the Iranian bomb. The same can be said of Egypt.

Third, the historical record indicates that if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, other countries will most likely decide not to do so in response. After North Korea tested its first nuclear device in 2006 and its second in 2009, neither Japan nor South Korea—both countries with robust nuclear power programs and latent nuclear weapons capabilities—made the political decision to develop the bomb. Similarly, the worst that may happen in the Middle East is that regional neighbors would decide to invest further in domestic nuclear programs, conduct additional
nuclear-related research and development and continue training nuclear scientists and engineers, while they wait and see how the international community—and the UN Security Council in particular—respond to Iran.

Finally, countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey that may feel threatened by an Iranian nuclear bomb have nonetheless demonstrated that the Israeli bomb has not caused regional insecurity and upheaval. None of these countries has ever made the full-fledged commitment to develop nuclear weapons in explicit response to Israel’s acquisition in the 1960s. There is little reason, then, to conclude that the mere existence of the Iranian bomb would incite its neighbors to respond in kind.

There is one exception to this argument, however. The political and social dynamics of the Middle East of the past century have created a trifurcated geopolitical environment, in which Arab Sunnis, predominantly Persian Shias and Israeli Jews are in constant conflict with each other. Therefore, the precise combination of an Iranian bomb and an Israeli bomb may ultimately persuade one or a number of Arab countries that it is in the best security interests of the Sunni contingent to have its own nuclear capability, in order to stabilize the triangular balance of power in the region.

In conclusion, the nuclear domino theory does not hold up well under scrutiny. This conclusion should not, however, be conflated with a suggestion that regional players become complacent in their desire to prevent an Iranian nuclear capability. Indeed, a world with only nine nuclear weapons states would certainly be safer than a world in which there are ten. However, the international community’s automatic assumption that a nuclear-armed Iran will create a cascade of proliferation will, paradoxically, convince Tehran’s leaders that it is in the best interests of the country to go nuclear, which in turn will reinforce the initial assumption. The result, then, may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Given the interests and capabilities of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, what will be the future of the Middle East should Iran acquire a nuclear bomb?

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author’s own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

2 This report was largely in line with the 2007 United States National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), which determined, based on reliable intelligence and evidence, that although Iran was still “keeping open the option to develop” nuclear weapons, it had deliberately halted its pursuit of those weapons in 2003. See Greg Thielmann and Benjamin Loehrke, “Chain reaction: How the media has misread the IAEA’s report on Iran,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 23, 2011, <http://thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/chain-reaction-how-the-media-has-misread-the-iaeas-report-iran> (accessed February 3, 2012).


9 The dominant theory throughout the Cold War era was that nations set out to develop nuclear weapons in response to overwhelming security concerns. The rise of the Soviet Union as a nuclear power was a reaction to the threat posed by the United States, embodied in the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. France and the United Kingdom developed their own nuclear weapons in response to the Soviet Union. China launched its nuclear weapons program under threat of attack by the United States during the Korean War. Later, India, witnessing China’s first nuclear test, pursued its own nuclear weapons in response, and Pakistan in turn set out to develop its own weapons once India had acquired the bomb.


11 Ultimately, however, it was the combination of security concerns, prestige and domestic political pressure that pushed India’s leaders to decide to develop nuclear weapons.

13 Ibid, 48.
16 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Grossman.
29 Katulis and Juul.

33 Yaphe and Lutes, 26.


35 Ibid.


41 Katulis and Juul.


43 Khaitous.