A New Middle East: Thoughts on a Deterrence Regime against a Nuclear Iran

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Israel's primary concern regarding the interim deal signed between the world powers and Iran is that it has damaged the international sanctions against the Iranian oil industry and economy, and as such, has undermined the main leverage vis-à-vis Tehran. In fact, this agreement impedes its original goal: to enable negotiations on a final agreement that will dismantle key elements of the Iranian nuclear program. Therefore, if it is extended or if it leads to a "bad deal" that allows Iran to advance its capabilities under the cover of an international agreement, it could ultimately enable Iran to produce nuclear weapons at a time of its choosing.

A Nuclear Iran: An Intellectual Challenge

Imagine how the Middle East would look if Iran in fact succeeded in achieving a military nuclear capability. This challenge, which has preoccupied many researchers and analysts alike, is usually addressed in the framework of traditional concepts that developed during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, the ability of this traditional world of concepts to describe the reality of a nuclear Iran is limited, first of all due to the assumption that deterrence regimes exist primarily between two main actors: the defending party, which seeks to deter, and the attacking party, which serves as a target for attempts at deterrence. This assumption does not suit the reality of a Middle East with a nuclear Iran. Even today, the Iranians view the United States as a major player in the Middle East, and certainly in the Iran-Israel dynamic. It is likely that in the event of a conflict, Iran's

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considerations would be greatly influenced by US policy and American threats, which would seek to deter an Iranian attack on Israel. Israel could also be expected to relay deterrent messages to Tehran in order to prevent a direct Iranian strike, or a strike by one or more of the terrorist organizations on Israel's borders that are supported by Iran – Hizbollah in Lebanon or Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist organizations in Gaza and Sinai. This scenario actually involves a deterrence system with three different countries presumably endowed with nuclear capabilities. The offensive capabilities of terrorist organizations will also be part of this system.

It can be argued that this scenario would be a classic situation of "extended deterrence," in which a world power seeks to defend its ally by deterring its enemy from attacking the ally. In this type of deterrence regime, the "main game" is between the world power and the attacking party, and the third party – which the defending party seeks to protect – plays a marginal role. But theory, though all very well and good, does not necessarily match reality. The independent capabilities attributed to Israel, which are no less than those of Iran, can be expected to create a situation in which the central dynamics play out simultaneously in attempts at extended American deterrence and in bilateral deterrence between Israel and Iran. Furthermore, Israeli policy will not necessarily be coordinated on a high level with US policy. A lack of full coordination and suspicion during times of crisis characterized the relationship between Washington and Jerusalem during the war in Lebanon against Hizbollah in the 1980s and in the 1991 Gulf War against Saddam Hussein. The relations today evince similar distances in the context of the international campaign against the Iranian military nuclear program. In the event of a conflict with a nuclear Iran, a combination of two simultaneous but independent deterrence regimes would likely surface. Such a scenario would make the strategic situation more complicated than a situation of extended deterrence.

Moreover, if Iran achieved nuclear capability, the situation in the region would exceed the model of extended deterrence. Over the past year President Obama has repeatedly warned that nuclear weapons in Tehran's hands could create an incentive for other countries in the region to develop military nuclear capabilities. The Saudis have stated publicly that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, they will be forced to obtain similar capabilities. According to Dennis Ross, President Obama's former advisor on Iran, the Saudis have conveyed the same message in closed talks with US representatives.[1] Since

Saudi Arabia has a close connection with the regime in Pakistan and a nascent nuclear infrastructure, the main risk is that it will purchase Pakistani nuclear weapons or that it will be covered by the Pakistani nuclear umbrella, and within a short time the Middle East will become a region that has three countries believed to possess nuclear capabilities. In this scenario, there will be simultaneous deterrence regimes between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel, and Iran and Israel. Joining this would be the impact of US deterrence policy during a crisis. This dynamic is complicated, and the traditional bilateral analysis, including use of the extended deterrence model, is not sufficient to explain it. There are both threats and opportunities inherent in this multilateral deterrence regime, which have not yet been discussed in depth.

A Nuclear Iran: Threats and Opportunities

In classic deterrence, the main challenge for the defending party is to convey a clear and consistent message to the attacking party about the forbidden action and the price for carrying it out. In multilateral deterrence, on the other hand, the challenge for the defending party is to convey this message simultaneously to a number of countries with different, and sometimes contradictory, world views and interests. This is particularly important because any message will be examined by the other actors in the arena. Any Saudi statement, for example, will be interpreted at the same time in Washington, Tehran, and Jerusalem, although not necessarily in the same way. Each party will seek to threaten with the intention of deterring the other three parties, but without causing them an excess of insecurity, which is liable to push them into a preemptive strike in order to damage the enemy's capabilities. Thus, for example, a conciliatory message from one country could be interpreted by a second country as weakness or by a third country as manipulation intended to camouflage a plan to attack. As a result of crossed wires and mixed signals, the risk of escalation will increase, even though none of the parties is interested in escalation.

This challenge becomes more complicated in the Middle East, where there is poor communication between states, and especially between Israel and Iran, which do not have diplomatic relations. In a nuclear Middle East, the lack of direct and effective channels of communication between countries could encourage them to receive mistaken assessments of enemy

intentions, read the situation incorrectly, and attack the enemy out of fear that the enemy will attack first.

Another problem is connected to the relativity of the threat. In the bilateral model of deterrence, the credibility of the defending party's deterrent messages depends on its ability to cause intolerable damage to the attacking party. In multilateral deterrence regimes, however, the threat is not absolute, but is measured against the other threats in the arena. Tehran would compare the Israeli threat with the Saudi threat and the American threat. This equation could have a decisive impact, for example, in the event of a conventional conflict between the United States and Iran. The challenge for Israel would be to present a threat of significant damage, in addition to the damage that could be inflicted by the impressive US military capabilities, in order to influence the decisions in Tehran and prevent it from dragging Israel into the conflict. Saudi Arabia could encounter a similar challenge in the event of a conflict between Iran and Israel.

Along with threats that undermine strategic stability, this complex environment could provide a number of opportunities that, if used correctly, would make it possible to reduce the instability somewhat. The different countries' fear of a common enemy could encourage them to cooperate and increase their independent deterrence capability. Thus, for example, Israel and Saudi Arabia could cooperate against Iran, with each capitalizing on its respective advantages. Israel has a modern army and stronger and more precise firepower than Saudi Arabia, while Saudi Arabia has a geographic and political advantage in a military operation against Iran. If the two countries decided to join together, they could present a significant threat to Iran, greater than the threat that either could present by itself.

Another opportunity is to cooperate in developing "deterrence by denial," primarily active protection capabilities. In the context of deterrence, these capabilities are supposed to reduce the benefit to the attacking party and as such, to influence its considerations. It receives legitimacy and broad international support because it enables coping with threats using methods that are defensive and not offensive. Active protection capabilities are not only a deterrent tool; they also make it possible to address the threat and reduce the pressure on decision makers in formulating a response when deterrence fails. They can thus help keep escalation limited and controlled and prevent all-out war between nuclear states, which could be a regional disaster. The Arrow system, for instance, could be a critical restraining factor

in the event of escalation between Jerusalem and Tehran if Iran possesses nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

To this day, there has been only a partial analysis of the equation of deterrence for a scenario in which Iran achieves nuclear capability. This is because a deterrence regime in a Middle East with a nuclear Iran does not completely suit the concepts of the Cold War, even in their widest sense. This conclusion emphasizes the need to be wary of the possibility of maintaining the stability of nuclear deterrence regimes in such an unstable environment. The large number of players makes the regime less stable compared to a bilateral regime, and the study of the phenomenon is still in its infancy. If the interim deal between Iran and the world powers leads to an agreement that prevents Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, then this discussion will remain theoretical. However, given President Obama's worrisome assessment that the chances for having this kind of agreement are 50 percent, there is a need for greater research on the strategic situation that a nuclear Iran would create in the region, and thus a need to establish the relevance of the existing deterrence literature for confronting this situation.

Note

1   Chemi Shalev, "Dennis Ross: Saudi King Vowed to Obtain Nuclear Bomb after Iran," *Haaretz*, May 30, 2012.