

Does the key to a WMD-free Middle East lie in a nuclear Iran?

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10 June 2013

A tipping point foretold

Iranians will vote for a new president on June 14th. If the next incumbent is a follower of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, as is widely expected in the managed democracy that is Iran's, then hopes of a breakthrough in the 'E3+3' nuclear non-proliferation talks are slim.¹ Khamenei is the sole decision-maker when it comes to the strategic calculation about whether to really deal in these negotiations. The combination of diplomacy and tough sanctions imposed by the West has not altered his calculus. The Ayatollah has no interest in giving up his regime's pursuit of nuclear capability, or the stronger regional and international position that he expects comes with it, or the ability to play the anti-American card to rally the troops at home. Seen through this prism, it is reasonable to expect that the regime in Tehran will just continue its catch-me-if-you-can game with the international community until it has reached the nuclear threshold.

In spite of his dramatic depiction at the 2012 UN General Assembly of just how close Iran is to producing the bomb, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has denied reports from within his own intelligence community that Iran has already crossed the red line he has drawn. Obviously, he is not ready to put Israelis' comfortable lifestyle at risk in a protracted armed conflict with a regional heavyweight. Netanyahu would rather rely on the US to destroy Iran's nuclear programme and provide a security shield strong enough to counter any response from the Islamic Republic. Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear sites would only delay Iran's nuclear programme, whereas they could create enormous security risks for Israeli citizens if, indeed, Tehran responds in the formidable fashion it has said it would. For his part, President Obama has – wisely – not defined his own red line on this issue. Yet, this (unstated) red line is widely understood to mean any concrete evidence of a decision by the Iranian leadership to enter the final phase towards production of the bomb.

The current security situation in the Middle East does not substantially change this equation. Even if Iran were to start losing the proxy war that Hezbollah is fighting for it in Syria in

¹ The E3+3 is led by the EU and is composed of France, Germany, the UK plus the US, China and Russia.

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support of President Bashar al-Assad, the clerical regime in Tehran would not put its survival at risk by allowing itself to be sucked deeper into the war. The same goes for other regional powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and, most notably, Israel. The latter has only used force to prevent Hezbollah from obtaining “game-changing” military equipment in Syria. It will not fight Iran directly over Syria. Despite the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Syria and mounting evidence of the use of chemical weapons by forces loyal to President Assad, the US too, has been reluctant to wade into the conflict. Instead, Washington has blurred its red line with respect to the use of chemical weapons and used the organisation of a second peace conference in Geneva as a fig leaf for not intervening more forcibly.

Given the regional security setting and Israeli and American lines that are effectively more pink than red, it is not unreasonable to project a scenario in which the wait-and-see stance of the main international stakeholders allows Iran to inch towards the nuclear threshold, i.e. a level of know-how and technical preparedness to choose the moment when it will enter the final phase of bomb production. In this race of the slowest, the US president can delay a decision to take military action. Without US backing, Israel will think twice about launching strikes against Iran. While Israel and the US waver and diplomacy is on hold, the Supreme Leader of Iran is being given ample policy space to decide when exactly to sprint across the stated and unstated red lines. Crucially, it may take longer for hard evidence of that decision to reach Washington or Tel-Aviv than it takes to actually produce the bomb.²

Dealing with a new normal

It has been suggested³ that an Iran enriched with the bomb might recalibrate the nuclear balance of power in the Middle East, in particular the power represented by Israel’s undeclared nuclear arsenal. However, a nuclear-armed Iran would trigger a wave of proliferation in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, Iran’s Sunni adversary, has already expressed its intention to acquire nuclear weapons from Pakistan the moment Iran gets the bomb. Turkey might go the same way. Arguably, in a region that will continue to be one of the world’s most volatile powder kegs due to over-population, falling water levels and an increasingly stark Sunni vs. Shia divide, stability would be better served if neither Israel nor Iran possessed *any* nuclear weapon.

If, however, Iran manages to cross the nuclear threshold, then the EU should prevent the US from attacking Iran and lead an international effort to push and pull the entire region towards nuclear non-proliferation. Without a doubt, this is a tall order. Yet, President Obama may find it easier to keep Netanyahu on a tight rein and the international community together by deciding to temporarily live with a nuclear Iran, rather than to commit men and money to yet another intractable conflict in the Middle East. Indeed, should one really expect a rationally operating Iranian regime, freshly endowed with a few nuclear weapons, to put its newly acquired status at risk by attacking Israel or sharing nuclear assets with terrorist organisations that it may not fully control? Arguably, the myth of nuclear deterrence is premised on testing the bomb, *not* on using it.

² According to Olli Heinonen, former Deputy Director General of the IAEA and head of its Department of Safeguards, it would take Iran just one month to produce the bomb. File on 4, “Iran’s nuclear standoff”, BBC Radio 4, 28 May 2013 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b01sm74t/File_on_4_Irans_Nuclear_Standoff/).

³ By, notably, Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb - Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability”, Foreign Affairs, July/August 2012 (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137731/kenneth-n-waltz/why-iran-should-get-the-bomb>).

While the idea of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East may sound even more utopian, it is neither new nor far-fetched. It has been under discussion since 1974, when Iran itself (together with Egypt) filed a proposal at the UN General Assembly. The League of Arab States has been a strong advocate of the creation of an even more comprehensive Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-free zone, voicing disappointment at every setback toward its realisation. Israel, however, sees such initiatives as merely an opportunity for its opponents to decry its undeclared nuclear assets and has been reluctant to take part in any substantive negotiations that might jeopardise the future of its nuclear capability. For decades, no real progress has been made on either dossier.

Assuming that the Arab states in the region stick to their original desire to create a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, and that the US and its partners would be able to force those states back onto that path if they were to depart from it, it seems that the biggest challenges to reaching such a comprehensive deal would lie along the Israeli-Iranian axis.

Convincing Israel that dismantling its nuclear arsenal would best serve its national security interests would be one of the most challenging parts of a process that could not be conducted without the US playing along. Nevertheless, there are convincing arguments to tempt Israel to pick up on the idea. Not only would Israeli support for a plan to turn the Middle East into a WMD-free zone serve as a confidence-building measure towards its Muslim neighbours, it would also offer a perspective of long-lasting peace in the region.

Paradoxically, the key to a solution on the Iranian nuclear issue might just lie in discussions on a WMD-free Middle East, but only *after* Iran has obtained nuclear military capability. At that point, and in the context of an arms race in the Middle East, Iran may be persuaded by the EU that it has more to gain from negotiations on regional non-proliferation than from prolonged isolation and the prospect of war with the US. Beyond recognising Iran's right to enrich uranium in the low levels needed for nuclear power plants, followed by technological assistance and cooperation on nuclear safety matters, the international community could contrive to bring an end to economic sanctions and a renewal of trade and diplomatic ties to seduce the Islamic Republic to negotiate in earnest.

A political settlement that would bring about the abolition of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East could represent the most effective means of solving the Iranian nuclear issue that neither a policy of containment of Iran nor military intervention could offer.

To be sure, in order to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons in the first place, the E3+3 process needs to be exhausted. Given the ineffectiveness of the coercive diplomacy currently employed by the international community it makes sense for the EU, which leads the international diplomatic talks with Iran, to widen its focus and consider ways to incentivise Tehran to come to a nuclear agreement.⁴

⁴ For suggestions, see S. Blockmans and S. Waizer, "E3+3 coercive diplomacy towards Iran: Do the sanctions add up?", CEPS Policy Brief No. 292, 6 June 2013.