

# AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

## Regional Responses to Iran's Nuclear Programme

Shashank Joshi and Michael Stephens



Royal United Services Institute

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Adrian Johnson, Director of Publications, Royal United Services Institute, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2ET, United Kingdom, or via e-mail to [adrianj@rusi.org](mailto:adrianj@rusi.org)

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## Executive Summary

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This Whitehall Report, based on extensive interviews with policy elites in the Middle East, assesses regional perspectives towards ongoing nuclear diplomacy with Iran, as well as potential responses to a breakdown of negotiations and subsequent nuclearisation.

The November 2013 interim agreement signed in Geneva between the EU/E3+3 and Iran is a significant breakthrough. But it is not universally seen as a guarantee against Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons, and there remains a real possibility that the process could soon break down, leaving Iran free to resume its efforts to acquire the key elements of a nuclear capability. Some states – Saudi Arabia and Israel above all – are concerned that the interim agreement is a sign of US weakness, prematurely relaxing pressure against Iran without any significant roll-back in its nuclear programme. Others, by contrast, view the interim agreement as a welcome step, opening the way to a comprehensive deal that could increase the constraints that a future Iranian government would face, as well as reducing the chances of a wider conflict and opening the possibility of a wider regional détente.

Even if Iran does acquire a nuclear-weapons capability, **Saudi Arabia** is unlikely to acquire a nuclear capability of its own. But the interim deal – along with disagreements over Syria – has left Riyadh feeling acutely aware of its differences with the US, and more willing to pursue a more active regional policy. Even a successful nuclear deal could leave Saudi Arabia feeling more vulnerable, especially if the lifting of sanctions on Iran makes that country more politically confident and regionally assertive.

The **smaller Gulf states** have an even more limited range of security options, and their primary response to a nuclearising Iran would be to seek stronger existing security arrangements with the US and its allies. Moves towards a strengthening of the Gulf Cooperation Council, in contrast, would be resisted by some of the states, especially if this were seen as involving sovereignty-sharing with Saudi Arabia.

For **Egypt and Jordan**, the primary response to Iranian nuclearisation would be to seek a reaffirmation of existing security partnerships. Egypt – even under the army-backed regime – and Jordan view this threat in less direct and urgent terms than other US allies, and are only likely to change course on the basis of clear Iranian moves towards weaponisation.

In response to Iranian nuclearisation, **Turkey** might increase the political salience of US nuclear weapons already on its soil and do more to signal that it possesses dual-capable aircraft. It is unlikely to rush to generate an indigenous nuclear capability, preferring instead to reinforce its pre-existing

relationships with NATO and the US, as it has done during the course of the Syrian crisis.

Out of all the regional states, **Israel** has the lowest threshold for assessing if and when Iran is deemed to have weaponised. It will be particularly concerned to ensure that the next stage of the negotiations provide sufficient guarantees that Iranian denuclearisation will be long-lasting and verifiable. Israel is concerned that the 'comprehensive agreement' phase of the Geneva deal, after which Iran is treated as any other member of the NPT, may not be long enough.

### **Implications**

- This diversity of national threat perceptions in relation to Iran in general, and its nuclear programme specifically, needs to be taken into account when developing Western policy.
- Even if Iran does succeed in acquiring a nuclear-weapons capability, it remains unlikely that regional states would do the same, despite rhetoric to that end.
- A breakdown of the deal would be greeted with relief by some, but would also lead to increased demands for credible security assurances from Western partners; yet even successful diplomacy will produce similar demands if it raises the prospects of US–Iranian détente.
- In the event of Iranian nuclearisation, the US would need to take steps to show that existing guarantees are seen as credible and, equally importantly, to clarify the conditions under which it is committed to acting on them. Any extension of current security guarantees would be domestically difficult for the US, however, and would require a better grasp of the scenarios against which allies, notably the Gulf states, require protection. While there is some Emirati and Saudi interest in US nuclear deployment in the region, including tactical nuclear weapons, this remains unlikely and undesirable.
- Most regional elites agree that there would be conventional means by which malign Iranian activity could be deterred and contained, even after nuclearisation. But they are concerned that a failure to prevent Iranian nuclearisation would weaken US credibility more generally, especially when viewed together with America's failure to confront Iran over Syria.

**After the publication of this report, RUSI will continue to host an e-forum for regional responses to ongoing developments and to the issues raised in this Whitehall Report: [www.rusi.org/irannuclear](http://www.rusi.org/irannuclear)**



## Introduction

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**I**N NOVEMBER 2013, the EU/E3+3 (the European Union along with the UK, France and Germany plus the US, Russia and China) and Iran arrived at their greatest breakthrough in a decade in their dispute over the latter's expanding nuclear programme, with an interim agreement signed in Geneva. Regional powers – most of which have viewed Iran's strategic and nuclear ambitions with varying degrees of suspicion – were ambivalent, most welcoming the deal in public, many expressing their unease in private, and one (Israel) doing so in public. For some of these countries – Saudi Arabia and Israel above all – the Geneva agreement does not represent a guarantee against Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons, signalling instead not only the premature relaxation of pressure on Iran, but also a disturbing indication of US weakness. For others, the agreement may lead a path out of the nuclear dispute but only into a more uncertain security environment characterised by real or perceived US–Iranian rapprochement, and intensifying competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Neither these regional anxieties nor the Iranian nuclear crisis are new, but the context in which they now unfold increasingly is. This Whitehall Report is based on fieldwork in the Middle East, including over forty interviews with political, diplomatic and military elites, including serving decision-makers – collectively termed 'policy elites' – in eight countries. It assesses regional responses to the broad process of Iranian nuclearisation as it unfolds under historically exceptional circumstances. It does not assume that Iran will develop nuclear weapons, but explores how regional powers might respond should it do so. Nor does it assume that regional powers will view ostensible diplomatic successes, like the Geneva agreement, in the same manner as E3+3 nations. This introduction sets out the political, strategic and nuclear context to this study. It explains how Iran and its nuclear programme fit into the region, how regional flux is intensifying that relationship, the importance of examining this issue from the perspective of regional powers rather than Western capitals, and how Western and other participants might, and should, respond.

### **The Context: A New Middle East**

Since 2011, the Middle East has experienced perhaps its most tumultuous period since the Iranian revolution of 1979. The three pillars of the post-colonial Arab order – Egypt, Iraq and Syria – have been brought low by revolution and civil war, and new actors, such as Qatar, have played central roles.<sup>1</sup>

The United States' long-term commitment to the region is increasingly called into question, not least by its Gulf allies who fret and seek to shape or limit the new order. The Arab Awakening has weakened state capacity and, as a

result, opened up new political space for previously disempowered actors, including violent and non-violent Islamist groups with varying degrees of commitment to democratic norms and practices – *in extremis*, local affiliates and allies of Al-Qa’ida. Previously settled areas have become sites of regional contest – notably, Syria.

Collectively, a trend towards greater intra-Islamic sectarianism at all levels is also evident.<sup>2</sup> The civil war in Syria, state repression and escalating terrorism in Iraq, and political unrest in some parts of the Gulf, especially Bahrain, are increasingly cast and interpreted as component parts of a wider Shia–Sunni struggle, fuelled by sectarian foreign policies and sustained by local enmities.

All in all, the Middle East, and particularly the Levant, may currently be experiencing its greatest domestic political instability since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>3</sup> This decrease in political stability at the domestic level has important implications for strategic stability at the international level: that is to say, the extent to which all international actors accept the status quo. The Middle East is experiencing its most acute strategic instability for twenty years, since the Iran–Iraq and Gulf Wars came to a close, and may yet surpass the level of generalised international disorder seen then.

#### **Iran’s Role in the New Middle East**

Amidst this regional flux, Iran is seen as either an active participant or an important bystander: in Yemen as a supporter of separatist militants; in Syria as a primary benefactor of the embattled regime of President Bashar Al-Assad and a direct combatant in the civil war; in Lebanon as an ally of Hizbullah, itself increasingly committed to the fight in Syria; and in the wider Gulf as an opponent of US military presence and Arab monarchies. General James Mattis, former commander of the United States Central Command, told the US Congress in March 2013 that:<sup>4</sup>

The on-going events of the Arab Awakening, blatant brutality by the Iranian-backed Syrian regime ... coupled with Iran’s flagrant violation of United Nations security council resolutions, bellicose rhetoric and pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability, and the persistent threat from both Shia (Iranian supported) and Sunni (Al Qaeda and its affiliates) violent extremists demand international attention.

Mattis added that Iranian or Iran-supported networks ‘pursue a range of destabilizing activities that include but are not limited to the transfer of illicit arms, as well as the provision of financial, lethal, and material aid support to a range of malign actors seeking to undermine regional security’. He categorised the threats as being fivefold: ‘the potential nuclear threat; counter maritime threat; theatre ballistic missile threat; the Iranian Threat Network to include the Qods Force and its regional surrogates and proxies;

and cyber-attack capabilities'.<sup>5</sup> Many regional states' own threat perceptions, and particularly those of the leading Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, overlap to a striking degree with this American assessment – indeed, they actively shape and define that assessment – albeit, as this study's various chapters demonstrate, in different proportions. This should not be taken to mean that Iran does not have its own reciprocal threat perceptions (for instance, Iran's own embassy in Beirut was bombed in November 2013, likely by forces opposed to its involvement in the Syrian civil war) or that these regional powers are not equally active in the region; but the focus of this study is on responses to *Iran*, even if it is ultimately the *interaction* of these states' behaviours that will shape outcomes. Of course, Iran's own counter-responses to the options described in this report could easily cause escalatory spirals that produce unwanted conflicts. The following chapters therefore have additional value for decision-makers in Iran and its adversaries: Iran might better understand how its own behaviour will shape the environment in which regional powers respond to its nuclear choices; other states might better see how their actions will interact with those of others (for instance, whether Israel's response to Iranian nuclearisation would change the context in which Egypt then responds); and both groups might then be able to chart the unintended consequences of their collective choices.

Iran's regional role and the fear it evokes in rival powers is a longstanding feature of the Middle East, pre-dating not only the Arab Awakening but also the Iranian revolution of 1979.<sup>6</sup> The nuclear dispute has been overlaid atop these rivalries. Iran's nuclear programme itself dates to the rule of the Shah in the 1950s, and suspicions of its possible military dimensions almost as far.<sup>7</sup> Those suspicions intensified throughout the 1990s, but it was the revelation of nuclear sites, undeclared to the IAEA, in 2002 that marks the beginning of the Iranian nuclear crisis in its present form.<sup>8</sup> The revelation came towards the end of the tenure of Iran's reformist President Mohammed Khatami, and by 2005 both the Iraq War and the election of hard-line Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had contributed to a hardening of relations between Iran on the one hand and the Arab monarchies and Western powers on the other. In 2009, the revelation of another secret enrichment site, buried under a mountain at Fordow, near the holy city of Qom, reinforced many of the latter group's fears. In 2011, the IAEA's most accusatory report to date exacerbated them further, documenting a wide range of mostly historical, though some more recent, 'Possible Military Dimensions' (PMDs) of Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>9</sup> The Geneva agreement, signed in November 2013, freezes lower-grade Iranian enrichment, rolls back higher-grade enrichment (below 20 per cent) and prevents Iran from adding to most of its nuclear facilities. However, it also leaves more than 19,000 installed centrifuges and over 10,000 kg of enriched uranium in place, and leaves PMDs to be addressed at a later stage of negotiations. It represents a pause in the dispute, albeit a promising one, rather than its resolution.

The fieldwork for this study predates both the Geneva agreement and the election of President Hassan Rouhani, and the possible attendant shift in Iranian domestic and foreign policies.<sup>10</sup> However, some implications of his election can be drawn on the basis of conversations with regional political elites about the import of Iranian domestic politics. An extended discussion of the energised diplomacy between Iran and the EU/E3+3, and between Iran and the US, is presented in the concluding chapter. Neither Rouhani's diplomacy nor the November 2013 interim nuclear deal undercut the rationale of this study. It is possible that diplomacy will regress or collapse – after all, previous nuclear agreements (such as Iran's suspension of uranium enrichment in 2003) have fallen apart. Moreover, the Geneva agreement is viewed in far more sceptical terms by important regional states: indeed, in many cases it has re-invigorated these states' own debates over their options in relation to the US and Iran – provoking renewed Saudi Arabian threats to seek nuclear capability, for instance. The Geneva agreement might very well lead to a broader settlement of the nuclear dispute, but for now it does not obviate the study of regional concerns and possible responses to that programme, particularly as many regional powers will now hedge with new vigour against Iran reneging on any diplomacy, and against what they fear will be US–Iran détente.

This Whitehall Report also attempts to situate the nuclear issue in a broader context. Overall, the relationship between the nuclear dispute and pre-existing threat perceptions of Iran is complicated and varied. For some, like Saudi Arabia, the two form a seamless threat; for others, like Turkey, the issues are relatively disconnected. For each country examined in this volume, the aim is to situate their perceptions of and policies towards Iran's nuclear programme in the context of their broader security relationship with Iran.

Throughout this study, anticipated and assumed responses to Iran's nuclear programme are highly sensitive to how individual states are positioned within this political and security environment, and how that environment changes. The nuclear dispute is a component part of regional security competition, and changes in the terms or intensity of that competition – for example, a mitigation of the Syrian civil war or US–Iranian rapprochement – might radically alter the actors' various incentive structures. One thread running throughout this report is the role played by the US as security guarantor, to varying degrees, to virtually every regional power, prompting questions around what the regional perceptions of this role, are and how they might affect regional responses to Iranian nuclearisation. The analysis aims at stress-testing the region and its policy-makers for a variety of possible scenarios rather than just taking a snapshot of policies as they stand today.

### **Iran's Nuclear Futures**

In addition to these various scenarios for political and strategic stability, the nuclear crisis itself has multiple potential pathways. These might be placed

under three umbrella categories: settlement, confrontation (the status quo), and weaponisation. War is a fourth possibility, but it must eventually give way to one of these preceding three scenarios.

Moreover, these pathways are neither sequential nor final: as already noted, a diplomatic settlement might collapse back into stagnation. This is indeed what occurred with nuclear agreements made between Iran and European powers in the early 2000s, when the former, guided by then-nuclear negotiator and now-President Hassan Rouhani, suspended uranium enrichment and agreed to more stringent IAEA inspections, only to renege on both counts after several years of fruitless diplomacy.

Interim confidence-building measures have focused on limitations of Iran's higher-grade and therefore more immediately threatening uranium enrichment and stockpiles. This might be a bridge to a more comprehensive settlement, or merely a quickly reversed pause in hostilities. Regional views of the ongoing nuclear diplomacy can differ substantially from that of the predominantly Western powers undertaking that diplomacy, both in terms of the desirable parameters of a deal and faith in its resilience. The security architecture of the Middle East will be shaped by which of these scenarios prevails, and how Iran's regional competitors interpret that.

Naturally, responses to these scenarios cannot be forecast with precision or certainty. In part, this is because there exists every incentive for states to exaggerate their potential responses – to threaten more assertive responses than would actually be the case or, in other words, to bluff – in order either to deter those outcomes from ever coming to fruition or to secure external support. While it is important to listen to regional views, it is necessary to do so with a dose of scepticism. Part of the challenge of this study is to distinguish rhetoric from reality, by assessing the plausibility and likelihood of various threatened responses, such as Saudi Arabia's reported commitment to acquire nuclear weapons if Iran does so.

In addition to bluffing, there is a second issue: the policy process that determines responses is frequently ad hoc and reactive rather than pre-planned and automatic. Just as the EU/E3+3 negotiating with Iran would have had little sense of how their responses would evolve from their initial positions in 2002 when the crisis began – and indeed have changed their positions considerably in the interim – so, too, regional powers do not have a fully mapped set of policy options that cover all contingencies in the coming years. This analysis suggests that regional powers' policy options are very far from mapped at all. This flexibility need not be a bad thing, as it enables these states to respond to a fluid diplomacy that is largely outside of their control. Even so, it is important to ask how the national policy debates are bounded, and where regional policy elites anticipate the crisis heading in the coming years.

With these challenges in mind, the central purpose of this study is to understand better how regional states might respond in the event that Iran's nuclear programme advances *up to and including* the point at which it acquires deliverable nuclear weapons.

Current efforts to explore this question publicly run into a number of problems. The first, described by James Dobbins and others, is that 'Western policymakers shy away from addressing this prospect [of Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons], lest they seem to be acquiescing to something they deem unacceptable and want to prevent'.<sup>11</sup> President Obama declared in March 2012 that 'Iran's leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon'.<sup>12</sup> That message has been repeated many times since, including in various declarations of the US Congress, which would have to lift nuclear-related sanctions on Iran as part of any comprehensive settlement that builds on the Geneva agreement. Policy elites in Israel and the Gulf remain far less confident in that commitment than American policy-makers would like. They have repeatedly expressed scepticism at prospects for diplomacy, reiterating this view even after the Geneva agreement. However, they largely refrain – with the exception of Saudi Arabia – from overtly debating their likely responses should they be proved correct and should Western policy fail. The consequence of this reticence is to produce a more constricted international debate over what a nuclear-armed Iran might mean for regional powers and their allies.

When such a debate has taken place, it sometimes does so in the context of a highly polarised and partisan environment over policy towards Iran. The effect of these political divisions is to emphasise the destabilising aspects of a nuclear-armed Iran, both in terms of Iran's own postulated behaviour and with respect to the likelihood of a proliferation cascade and resultant arms race.

In July 2013, for instance, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that 'all the problems that we have [in the Middle East] will be dwarfed by this messianic, apocalyptic, extreme regime that would have atomic bombs. It would make a terrible, catastrophic change for the world and for the United States'.<sup>13</sup> American columnist Charles Krauthammer has argued that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an 'aspiring genocidist, on the verge of acquiring weapons of the apocalypse, believes that the end is not only near' and would have 'less inhibition about starting Armageddon than a normal person. Indeed, with millennial bliss pending, he would have positive incentive to ... hasten the end'.<sup>14</sup> Some of these views are echoed in the region, though rarely in private discussions with policy elites; the divergence between public rhetoric and private assessments of the precise nature and scale of the threat from Iran, and its nuclear aspect, complicates analysis of the response.

The more sober strands of debate about what Iran's potential nuclearisation might mean for the region form part of a longstanding and valuable academic discussion between proliferation optimists and pessimists. However, even reasoned pessimism about proliferation obscures another debate over subsequent policy options: after all, if Iran's adversaries are guaranteed to acquire nuclear weapons of their own, then it follows that there is less need to evaluate efforts to provide outside conventional and nuclear reassurance to those states should prevention fail.

To the extent that Iranian nuclearisation and likely regional responses have been evaluated, this evaluation has been largely Western-centric. The view from the region has received less emphasis. Yet it is *regional* threat perceptions that drive much Western policy: observe, for instance, the way in which Israeli exhortations have played a central role in recent US policy debates, and the manner in which British debates about Iran are intertwined with the UK's historic and enduring military partnerships with the monarchies of the Gulf.<sup>15</sup> Although the regional impact of Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons would certainly ripple outwards to Europe, South Asia and beyond, the research for this report was bounded by Egypt in the west, Turkey in the north, and the Gulf in the east.

### **Outline**

This Whitehall Report comprises five core chapters. Chapters I and II cover the GCC states, the first chapter focusing on the most powerful of these, Saudi Arabia, and the second on the smaller powers: the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman. Chapter III broadens the discussion, looking beyond the Gulf to Jordan and Egypt, whose geographic, economic, political, cultural and strategic relationships with Iran differ considerably from those of the Gulf nations. Chapter IV looks at Turkey, one of the most deeply involved in the Middle East of all the non-Arab states, and a host to American nuclear bombs as part of its membership of NATO. Chapter V considers Israel, the only state in the region to possess its own nuclear weapons, Iran's foremost regional adversary, and the most vocal opponent of Iran's nuclear programme. The concluding chapter ties together various themes and examines the policy implications of the findings, also looking at the issue from the position of the United States' broader diplomatic and military posture in the Middle East. Each of these chapters is accompanied by a brief response or reflection from a regional expert, presenting an alternative perspective on the same issues.

This study's animating questions, put to interviewees across the region, flow from the overview in this introduction: they examine how these states view Iran's nuclear programme and the scenario of a nuclear-armed Iran, and how those perceptions have changed over the past several years, following the onset of the Arab Awakening. They also ask how regional states foresee the

Iranian nuclear programme evolving over the coming years, and what the key fault-lines in relation to this prognosis are; how regional powers – and rivals – see one another’s responses to the Iranian nuclear programme; and how regional states assess nuclear-weapons capability short of weaponisation, a scenario that is particularly important in light of the Geneva agreement’s conditional recognition of Iran’s right to enrich uranium.

Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, further questions entail what policies regional powers would wish to see from their traditional security partners, what such reassurance is likely to look like, what regional powers think it should look like, and what the broader implications of this are – for instance, on NATO’s debates over the presence of non-strategic nuclear weapons on European soil. In seeking such assurance, this analysis also examines how regional powers balance their wariness of entanglement in American or Israeli wars with the fear of abandonment by their principal security partners, and what military and technological demands such assurance policies might generate – for instance, for regional powers’ embryonic missile defence systems. These are just some of the questions that guided the interviews on which this study is based and that form the thread through the following chapters.

**After the publication of this report, RUSI will continue to host an e-forum for regional responses to ongoing developments and to the issues raised in this Whitehall Report: [www.rusi.org/irannuclear](http://www.rusi.org/irannuclear)**

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## I. Saudi Arabia

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THE VIEW from Riyadh since the upheavals in the Arab world began in 2011 is of an ever-more troubled region that possibly stands at a point of inflection. An increasingly activist Saudi Arabia does not share the view that Iran has lost the Arab Spring.<sup>1</sup> It sees Bahrain, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria as sites of growing Iranian influence, forming a noose around the Kingdom that could be tightened at any time to foment instability. Meanwhile, it sees the United States as weakly committed to curbing Iranian influence, and therefore as an unreliable guarantor of Saudi Arabian security. Saudi Arabia's publicly evident frustration with US policy across the Middle East in late 2013 and the Geneva agreement signed between Iran and the EU/E3+3 in November 2013 reflects these twin concerns. It is in this context that Saudi Arabia understands Iran's nuclear programme and its own future options. Nevertheless, the authors argue that the Kingdom, unlikely to acquire nuclear weapons of its own despite widespread fears of a Saudi–Pakistani agreement, will be forced to rely on external security guarantees for the foreseeable future, even as it diversifies its security relationships. It will thus continue to avoid direct confrontation with Iran, even as it adopts a more active regional role.

Saudi Arabian policy elites understand that Iran's present capacity to direct military damage to the Kingdom – whether through missile strikes or asymmetric naval forces – is presently limited. Yet they, like their counterparts in Israel, view the issue primarily in terms of the 'stability-instability paradox': the notion that nuclear weapons, by making escalation to large-scale war prohibitively risky to all sides, incentivise lower-level aggression of the sort that Saudi Arabia has attributed to Iran for over three decades.<sup>2</sup> Saudi Arabia's chief concern is not that Iran would launch unprovoked nuclear strikes, but rather that Iran's capacity to target the Kingdom's regional interests and domestic politics through the use of proxies would be enhanced by the protection against conventional retaliation that Iran's nuclear capabilities could provide.

In June 2011, during a closed session with NATO officials at Britain's RAF Molesworth, Saudi Arabia's prominent former intelligence chief Prince Turki bin Faisal alluded to this perception of conventional military weakness but sub-conventional strength, claiming that Iran is 'a paper tiger with steel claws'; he repeated this exact phrase to *Der Spiegel* in June 2013.<sup>3</sup> In addition to proxy groups operating within and against Saudi Arabia directly, Riyadh also fears the effect on the region as a whole: nuclear weapons would facilitate Iran's broader hegemonic ambitions and tip the balance of regional leadership decisively in Tehran's favour.<sup>4</sup> What matters is not just Iranian power, but also *perceptions* of that power. After all, the very acquisition of a bomb by the Islamic Republic would itself demonstrate the ability of

Iran's 'resistance' model to triumph in the face of extraordinary, decade-long pressure from Saudi Arabia's Western allies, emboldening Iran's allies and cowing its smaller adversaries into accommodating Iran at the expense of Saudi interests.

### **Saudi Ambivalence**

Despite continuing media and analytical fixation with King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's 2008 exhortation to 'cut off the head of the snake' (that is, Iran), many Saudi policy elites are deeply ambivalent over military action: they express concern over the regional consequences of a strike, view themselves as a primary target for Iranian retaliation, and have a poor understanding of what force could and could not achieve.<sup>5</sup> Yet this ambivalence often expresses itself as confusion: Saudi Arabia boycotted the 2013 UN General Assembly in New York, signalling that it was concerned over both the US decision in September 2013 to cancel planned strikes on Syria in favour of US–Russian diplomacy, and the intensified US engagement with Iran. Saudi Arabia wants economic sanctions to be preserved until Iran capitulates on the terms of its opponents, specifically abandoning uranium enrichment and submitting to intrusive inspections regimes. In this respect, its preferred strategy is pure coercion, backstopped by an imperfect military option. However, whereas many Israeli policy elites express confidence that Iran can be coerced into surrender, Saudi policy elites are far more sceptical; thus their own position is to accept – even, on occasion, demand – a war that they fear more than Israel.

However, unlike Israel, Riyadh ultimately possesses little ability to sabotage Western engagement with Iran on the *nuclear* issue. It would be able to target certain non-nuclear areas of engagement, for example by upgrading assistance to rebel forces in Syria, thereby reducing their incentive to attend the US-backed Geneva II peace conference on Syria, a policy which it is currently pursuing with limited success. Yet it cannot credibly threaten to strike Iran itself should diplomatic outcomes not be to its liking. This is why, whereas Israeli leaders condemned the November 2013 Geneva agreement as a 'historic mistake', Saudi Arabia's cabinet acknowledged, reluctantly, that 'if there is good will, then this agreement could represent a preliminary step towards a comprehensive solution to the Iranian nuclear programme'.<sup>6</sup> The implicit suggestion is that such goodwill is absent, and therefore the interim deal is bound to fail. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's fears are more complex than those of Israel, because Riyadh is afraid not just that the interim deal might collapse, but also that it might be *too successful*, giving rise to US–Iranian rapprochement on non-nuclear issues. The manner in which the Geneva agreement was facilitated by months-long US–Iranian talks in Oman, initially kept secret from allies, reinforced this concern.<sup>7</sup> In some ways, Saudi Arabia sees its security affected both by a nuclear-armed Iran and a non-nuclear Iran increasingly reconciled with the US – which may be one reason why

Saudi threats to obtain nuclear weapons increased in the run-up to the Geneva diplomacy, despite the agreement putting Iran further from a nuclear weapon.<sup>8</sup>

Should Western powers seek to accommodate and contain Iran rather than confront it on these maximalist terms, some in Riyadh suggest that they would seek to bandwagon with Iran at the bilateral level, much as they did in the 1990s, at the same time as bolstering US security guarantees.<sup>9</sup> This bandwagoning could take many forms. An invitation to Mecca for the Hajj pilgrimage, such as that already (and unsuccessfully) extended to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani,<sup>10</sup> to discuss bilateral relations and ease tensions would allow the Saudis to engage with Iran on their own soil and appear as equal partners in a discussion, in contrast to an EU/E3+3 process from which they are excluded. In December 2013, Prince Turki argued that nuclear talks ought to include Gulf states, and be broadened to include questions of regional security.<sup>11</sup> However, Saudi Arabia's view of regional trends and its response to the Geneva agreement both suggest that ongoing Saudi–Iranian regional competition will likely continue if not increase, and it is difficult to see a dialogue amounting to much without a wider *détente*, as part of which each side would expect substantially changed behaviour from the other.

### **A Saudi Nuclear Response**

If diplomacy fails and Iranian nuclearisation advances, Saudi Arabia is extremely unlikely to take this accommodating route. Iran would not need to possess a fabricated nuclear weapon for decision-makers in Saudi Arabia to consider an indigenous nuclear-weapons capability. This is due to a number of different factors, first among which is the lack of such a nuclear capacity within Saudi Arabia and the lags involved in developing this (Saudi Arabia's ability to *import* nuclear weapons or nuclear-weapons technology, particularly from Pakistan, is explored below).<sup>12</sup> Saudi Arabia is generally considered to lack the natural resources and scientific expertise necessary to develop an advanced nuclear-weapons programme without external assistance.<sup>13</sup> As such, some Saudi Arabian officials suggest that the Kingdom ought to have 'begun its preparations for a nuclear programme yesterday'.<sup>14</sup> Saudi policy elites do not therefore see indigenous nuclearisation as the preferred option.

Saudi Arabia is also limited in its choice of delivery systems for nuclear weapons. Although possessing sufficient range to hit any Iranian target, Saudi Arabia's fifty DF-3 missiles are ageing and not necessarily nuclear-capable.<sup>15</sup> There has been speculation as to whether the Saudis have sought to upgrade to the more sophisticated DF-5 or the solid-fuel DF-21.<sup>16</sup> However, if they do not already possess these, it is unclear whether Riyadh could acquire nuclear-capable variants or modify them to that end *after* any Iranian nuclearisation, when international attention would be on Saudi

Arabia, waiting for its response. In this, as with other areas of potential Saudi nuclearisation, the hurdles would be daunting. It is well documented that the Saudi DF-3 purchase orchestrated by then-Ambassador to the United States Bandar bin Sultan infuriated the US.<sup>17</sup> If Saudi Arabia were to retrofit its DF-3s to allow them to carry a nuclear warhead or purchase new missiles such as the DF-21, the Kingdom would require Chinese co-operation, which should not be taken for granted, not least because, under the US Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act of 1994, China would risk violating its nuclear co-operation agreements with the US and could even face US sanctions.<sup>18</sup> While China has pushed the legal and normative boundaries of nuclear co-operation in its support to Pakistan's nuclear programme, the strategic stakes there are far greater than in its relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh's reported role in funding the Pakistani nuclear programme is said to give it the ability to procure fissile material;<sup>19</sup> the technology and equipment to produce fissile material, including centrifuges; the technology for weapons design; a nuclear weapon itself; the use of Pakistani nuclear weapons stationed on Saudi soil; or some combination thereof.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have a long history of security co-operation: Pakistani pilots have flown operational missions for Saudi Arabia,<sup>21</sup> tens of thousands of Pakistani troops were stationed on Saudi Arabian soil throughout the 1980s,<sup>22</sup> and Pakistan has provided assistance and personnel to Bahrain – a de facto protectorate of Saudi Arabia – and to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members.<sup>23</sup> There is little publicly available evidence for a nuclear relationship between the two countries; however, officials who would have been privy to such evidence in their formal roles suggest that it is a valid inference. Bruce Riedel, a former senior CIA analyst and presidential adviser, claims that the two states 'today have an unacknowledged nuclear partnership to provide the kingdom with a nuclear deterrent on short notice if ever needed'.<sup>24</sup>

The circumstantial evidence pointing to such a relationship has been examined in detail elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> However, three points are worth noting here.

First, Saudi policy elites observe that Pakistani assistance might include the deployment of Pakistani nuclear weapons on Saudi soil, whether under 'dual-key' arrangements or complete Pakistani custody.<sup>26</sup>

Second, although it is reasonable to assume that they have been discussing the issue with their Pakistani counterparts for over a decade, Saudi policy elites are still prone to underestimate the overwhelming diplomatic obstacles to such nuclear transfers facing *both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan*. Although Saudi Arabia could reward Pakistan financially, it could not sustainably shield Islamabad from the severe diplomatic consequences of such a transfer.

Third, Saudi policy elites have struggled to reconcile the tension between the twin imperatives of nuclear hedging on the one hand, and external security guarantees on the other – the former being antithetical to US non-proliferation objectives, and the latter requiring close US co-operation.

Many American and Saudi Arabian strategists have emphasised that Saudi Arabia would prioritise a consolidation of its relationship with the US over pursuit of an independent nuclear option.<sup>27</sup> Naser Al-Tamimi concludes that ‘at least for now, the Saudis have no alternative but to rely on a U.S. defence umbrella’; yet the caveat ‘for now’ – echoed by many Saudi Arabian policy elites – is deeply problematic. The US and its allies would find it difficult to extend guarantees to Saudi Arabia were it seen to be violating its commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), or to be at risk of doing so.<sup>28</sup>

Current US policy is premised on averting unilateral Saudi steps, and preventing Saudi Arabia, which is currently considering the construction of sixteen nuclear power plants, from moving down the path to weaponisation. The US will assist Riyadh in the provision of technology and fuel, but negotiations as to what form this co-operation will take are still nascent. The Saudis have indicated that they are not interested in following the Emirati so-called ‘gold standard’, according to which all fuel for the country’s reactors is processed abroad.<sup>29</sup> The Americans, for their part, are cautious too. As Thomas Countryman, assistant US secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation, underscored in a recent interview regarding a potential Saudi–US nuclear pact: ‘I don’t know anybody who believes that it would be a wise idea for Saudi Arabia to develop nuclear weapons. And I’m confident that any civil nuclear cooperation we agree would not in any way contribute [to] or encourage such a goal’.<sup>30</sup>

This raises the question of how viable such a policy would be in the aftermath of Iranian nuclearisation. Amongst other points of leverage, the US is the major supplier of weaponry to the Kingdom. France, Russia and China should not be dismissed as alternative arms providers. However, between 2005 and 2009, 40 per cent of Saudi Arabia’s arms imports were of American provenance, while 42 per cent came from Britain, which, in the Middle East, is likely to follow the contours of US policy.<sup>31</sup> In December 2011, the US finalised a deal to sell advanced military equipment worth \$30 billion to Saudi Arabia.<sup>32</sup> Between 1990 and 2011, US arms sales to Saudi Arabia in constant prices totalled \$14.7 billion, far higher than the \$4.6 billion paid to the second-highest supplier in that period, the UK.<sup>33</sup> Arms sales do not automatically produce commensurate political leverage, but they are reflective of Saudi Arabia’s dependence on the US for its long-term, qualitative military strength. Such strength might be seen as all the more

important to the Kingdom if Iran's regional status were elevated by nuclear weapons.

### **Security Guarantees**

The United States will need to look carefully at how Saudi Arabia's fears, and indeed its frustration with US policy, could be assuaged in the event of a nuclear Iran. The Saudi–US relationship is already increasingly becoming marked by outbursts of frustration and recalcitrance from the Saudi side, the latest being the country's unprecedented refusal in October 2013 to take up a UN Security Council seat to which it had been elected and subsequent threats by Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief of a 'historic shift' away from Washington.<sup>34</sup> Yet in light of present US–Saudi differences, particularly over Syria and Iran, it is important to remember that episodes of Saudi mistrust of the US commitment have occurred before, and the relationship has rebounded.<sup>35</sup> In 1979, for instance, after the fall of the Shah of Iran, the Carter administration delivered F-15 fighter aircraft to Saudi Arabia, but undercut this gesture by a presidential statement that the aircraft were not armed.<sup>36</sup> It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that, just as it did three decades ago, the US is likely to remain the most important security provider to Saudi Arabia, which does not have the ability to detach itself from the US. As such, reassurance, even after Iranian nuclearisation, is not necessarily as difficult as it may seem.

Yet there remain important questions about the specific *form* that US reassurance might take. Unlike the UAE or other GCC members, it is highly unlikely that Saudi Arabia, for historical reasons stretching back to the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, would accept the presence of permanent American troops or missiles on its soil. It could, however, lead efforts towards a greater US presence on GCC soil. Such a presence could be doubly beneficial for Riyadh: it would increase the US stake in regional stability, but it would also ease the smaller Gulf states' fears of Saudi hegemony, perhaps making them less likely to appease a nuclear Iran. Nawaf Obaid, a former Saudi royal adviser, interprets the two prominent Saudi Arabian gestures of dissent in 2013 – refusing to address the UN General Assembly and rejecting the Security Council seat to which Riyadh had been elected – as precursors to 'a shift away from western dependency and toward more local (and successful) interventionism' in the form of 'a collective security framework initially consisting of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and the GCC nations'.<sup>37</sup> Yet Saudi observers may overstate their ability to fashion such a framework. Earlier efforts to integrate Jordan and Morocco into the GCC came to naught, and there are wider Gulf fears of Saudi Arabian dominance (which are explored in the next chapter). However, the US can play an important role in mediating at least somewhat greater GCC unity.



Some have suggested that the US ought to go further and offer 'NATO-like treaties' – that is, a form of collective security – with Saudi Arabia and others.<sup>38</sup> Insofar as this would result in a clarification of US guarantees, Riyadh would welcome this – but would have a very different idea of what would constitute the threshold for US involvement, particularly in contingencies involving alleged Iranian interference within the Kingdom.<sup>39</sup> Such drastic treaty commitments would also be very difficult for the US legislature and public opinion to accept, even if a future administration were so inclined. However, an increase in joint exercises might allow the Saudis to feel they have a stake in the operational aspects of the security relationship. To the extent that the Saudi leadership considers public opinion, this would also allow the opportunity for a better 'sell' to the general public, who would be none too enthused by the prospect of outsourcing all of their capability to the United States. Saudi policy elites express considerable interest in more advanced guarantees still, such as the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on Saudi soil – but, as explained in the final chapter of this Whitehall Report, these do not currently represent realistic options for the US.

### **Reconstructing the Region to Avoid War**

Since the Arab Awakening began, Saudi Arabia has increasingly begun to look around for other friends in its neighbourhood, at the same time as it seeks to reconstruct that neighbourhood – as much as possible – in its own image. The paradox is that a nuclear Iran would make Saudi Arabia more dependent on the US in the short term, but also prone to pursue regional restructuring in a way that would run up against US policies. In Syria, for instance, the US favours regime change but through a political solution, whereas Saudi Arabia demands the use of purely coercive means. Saudi Arabia increasingly sees the US as weak and indecisive on matters of regional security. Some Saudi policy elites even acknowledge that the Kingdom has become an avowedly 'revisionist power'. From Riyadh's perspective, a nuclear Iran would reinforce this: Iraq, Lebanon and even a post-Assad Syria would represent significant bastions of Iranian influence, and vigilance – if not intervention – will be required in Bahrain to avert Shia political dominance.

In this respect, the Saudi gamble is that it could rely on conventional and – improbably – nuclear guarantees from the US as shields behind which to continue this diversification in partners and regional revisionism, without facing significant pressure to conform to American policy preferences. This calculation is not fanciful – the US will require Saudi assistance for a host of regional priorities, from energy security to influencing Syria – but it may be overconfident. Saudi–Iranian rivalry can play out in other spheres, but for Riyadh the avoidance of a direct war in the Gulf is a priority, and therefore there are natural limits to growing Saudi unilateralism. The Kingdom does not seek *direct* confrontation with Iran itself, and will avoid taking the costly, risky and uncertain path towards becoming a nuclear-armed state unless it deems

external security guarantees to have collapsed entirely. The irony is that whereas US–Iranian diplomacy is a prerequisite to rolling back Iran’s nuclear programme, as the Geneva agreement has demonstrated, such diplomatic activity reinforces the same Saudi fear of abandonment and vulnerability that amplifies its fear of a nuclear Iran in the first place. This implies that even a lasting settlement to the Iranian nuclear dispute will require many of the same, albeit modified, US-led reassurance measures that would be necessary had nuclear diplomacy failed – or if it does so in the future.

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## A Response from Saudi Arabia

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**Saud Mousaed Al Tamamy**

THERE IS a widespread belief that Iran needs to acquire a reliable system of deterrence for three reasons. The first is geostrategic reality. Iran is surrounded by recognisably nuclear-capable powers, including India, Pakistan, Russia and Israel. Furthermore, some of those countries sharing a border with Iran, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, are particularly unstable. Furthermore, Iran has been invaded in living memory by two of its neighbours, Russia and Iraq.

The second is regime security. From the Iranian perspective, the Iraqi regime was overthrown by the US because it did not possess the deterrent capability to prevent the invasion, while the third member of George W Bush's declared 'axis of evil', North Korea, has remained safe because of its nuclear capability. The result is the conclusion on the part of the Islamic Republic that there is no way to deter the US other than by having nuclear weapons. Deterrence is therefore the only option available to Iran.

The third reason is Iran's quest for regional hegemony, which has two overlapping aspects. The first is ideological, and it relates to Tehran's quest to spread its model of governance regionally and globally. The second is the country's strategic imperative – regardless of the regime in power in Tehran – to dominate the Gulf, and its longstanding ambition to dominate the Fertile Crescent across North Africa and the Middle East.

From a Saudi perspective, however, it is more likely that Iran is seeking to establish nuclear capabilities without actually producing the bomb, a situation that could be called 'obtaining nuclear military capabilities'. This situation enables Tehran to avoid being labelled as a nuclear state or violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

### **The Consequences of Iran's Entry into the Nuclear Club**

Iranian nuclear capability, even in this recessed and NPT-compatible form, would be viewed by Saudi Arabia as an existential threat. Iran would become the undisputed hegemonic power in the Gulf and the entire Middle East, and its proxies would be empowered. The fact that Riyadh would have far less influence on Middle Eastern security issues would pose serious strategic threats to its stability and welfare. Another fear involves the potential for Iraq, one of the Kingdom's neighbours, to become a platform for the Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia.

The other consequence is symbolic. Tehran's success in acquiring nuclear capability could develop Iran's desired status as a role model for the Muslim world, underpinned by the country's claim to Islamic leadership. In the same vein, its efforts to delegitimise its Saudi competitor would be enhanced.

#### **Four Failed Saudi Options**

The set of options once available to Saudi Arabia are now thought to be insufficient to provide security to the Kingdom or to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power. It has become clear that the first option, to create a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons, is not possible, with Israel rejecting the idea due to Iran's lack of transparency. The second option is for Saudi Arabia to support US-led, surgical military strikes targeting Iranian nuclear sites. However, this would have only limited effect as Iranian facilities are scattered and well hidden. Furthermore, Iran could rebuild its nuclear programme relatively quickly, and probably with greater determination. The third option is containment; however, this would require a far more willing international community, and it is highly doubtful whether countries such as Russia, China and India would participate. Containment is thus likely to fail. The fourth option is to rely on a US security umbrella comprised of conventional forces. However, the American failure to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability would markedly reduce Saudi confidence in Washington. Furthermore, the stationing of foreign troops on Saudi soil as a means to protect the country *vis-à-vis* another regional power would erode the country's self-perception as the cradle of Arabism and Islam, and as a regional superpower.

#### **Possible Options for Saudi Arabia**

##### *Diplomacy*

Saudi Arabia accepts a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear programme in principle. The November 2013 Geneva agreement between Iran and the EU/E3+3 is an elementary first step in preventing Tehran from producing a nuclear weapon. US officials have said that the deal prohibits Iranian enrichment of uranium beyond the level of 5 per cent, and stops Iran from continuing work on its heavy-water reactor at Arak. Granting Iran the right to enrich uranium within its borders does not create an ideal situation for the Kingdom, but it is not also necessarily against Saudi Arabia's interests, so long as two conditions are maintained. The first is putting in place tight and effective inspection measures to ensure that Iran does not exceed the agreed level of enrichment (5 per cent); the second is granting Saudi Arabia the same right for its emerging nuclear programme.

The deal, however, does not eliminate Saudi concerns regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions for four reasons. First, it is not yet permanent and there is no guarantee that it will be. Second, it is very obvious that there is more than one interpretation of the deal. Whether Iran is allowed, in reality, to continue constructing its plutonium-producing reactor at Arak, and whether Tehran will be forced to comply with the agreement concerning uranium-enrichment levels are still contested issues. The deal struck between Iran and the EU/E3+3 might yet turn into another version of the Syrian 'Geneva I' agreements: a highly contested agreement that leads to a situation of political stagnation rather than to a diplomatic solution.

Third, although the deal is intended as a step towards preventing Tehran from producing a nuclear weapon, it does not completely exclude this option so long as Iran has the right to continue its nuclear programme, including the right to enrich uranium. Fourth, the deal addresses only one element of Saudi–Iranian rivalry. It does not address the other aspects, including, crucially, Iran's hegemonic agenda. There is a widespread belief amongst Saudi academics and experts that Iran made significant concessions on the nuclear fronts in return for a legitimisation of its role in the whole region. Furthermore, the deal is likely to lead to a normalisation of Iranian–Western (including Iranian–US) relations. Drawing the whole picture together, the deal is unlikely, in its current form, to make the Kingdom feel more secure.

#### *Deterrence*

The Geneva agreement envisions allowing Iran to possess a 'mutually defined enrichment programme', wording that represents a conditional recognition of Iran's claimed right to enrich. If a comprehensive agreement includes Iranian enrichment to lower levels, Saudi Arabia would most likely demand exactly the same scope for its own emerging nuclear programme. Also, if the interim or a future deal confers upon Tehran a special status in the Gulf and in the wider Fertile Crescent, then it is most likely that the Kingdom would not accept it, and may pursue a regional revisionist policy to assuage its own security fears.

If the EU/E3+3 fails to prevent Iran either from producing a nuclear weapon or from enriching uranium beyond the level of 5 per cent, Saudi Arabia would be compelled to acquire, independently of the US, a reliable system of deterrence to counterbalance the threat this would pose. The dramatic shift of balance of power towards Iran and the uncertain global environment that would follow the country's acquisition of such a capability would provide the Kingdom with the

‘political will’ to go ahead with such a decision. For Saudi Arabia, ‘going nuclear’ would require building nuclear reactors, acquiring nuclear fuel, mastering enrichment technologies and designing delivery systems. Furthermore, it would also require it to confront regional and international pressures against doing so. It would be a long and painful journey, but it should be remembered that countries such as China, India and Pakistan did not become nuclear powers simply because they obtained the means, knowledge and infrastructure to be so, but because they also had the political will – a decisive factor that would be available to Saudi Arabia should the international community accept Iran as a nuclear power with nuclear military capability.

#### *Coexisting with a Nuclear Iran*

Saudi Arabia, realising the diplomatic and economic risks of acquiring its own nuclear capabilities, could choose not to match nuclear Iran and to follow what might be called the ‘Korean model’. While still seeking to contain nuclear North Korea, South Korea has not chosen to acquire military nuclear capabilities. Instead, Seoul undertakes a mixture of economic, diplomatic and military activities to contain its northern rival and to minimise the threat posed by its nuclear and non-nuclear military capabilities. This includes its development of a superior conventional military capability and an advanced, peaceful nuclear programme, as well as its pursuit of a modern political and economic system. The Korean model also entails maintaining extensive defence ties with the US and preserving relatively strong military ties with Japan, even if bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo are sometimes difficult, at the same time as reaching out to North Korea’s main diplomatic supporter, China.

If Saudi Arabia were to adopt a version of the so-called Korean model, Riyadh would then need to establish a new military doctrine that incorporates working closely with other GCC members and Pakistan, co-operating closely with Turkey and Egypt, and supporting the militaries of Afghanistan, Yemen and possibly Iraq. An effective and widespread domestic conscription system might also be required. Improving defence ties with traditional Western allies (the US and European powers) as well as with reaching out to Moscow, Beijing, New Delhi and Baghdad would also be necessary. An advanced, peaceful nuclear programme built on the right to enrich uranium for civil purposes would also be initiated.

The Kingdom’s adoption of the Korean model in the Middle East would require more than this, however. For such a model to be effective and



fruitful, a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian issue must be achieved in order to deny Iran any possibility of using its new source of influence, and to quell extremism in the region. Furthermore, Western powers should provide maximum economic, technological and diplomatic support to the Kingdom, as they did in supporting the front-line states during the Cold War era. At the same time, Iran's economic and diplomatic reach should be restricted. This dual diplomatic strategy, if undertaken by the West, would help to boost Riyadh's influence to its maximum, and prevent Iran from projecting itself as a role model for the region and beyond.

*Dr Saud Mousaed Al Tamamy is an assistant professor of political theory at King Saud University (KSU), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, with research interests in political theory and international and strategic issues. He was awarded his PhD from the University of Exeter in 2009, and his PhD thesis will shortly be published under the title Averroes, Kant and the Origins of the Enlightenment: Reason and Revelation in Arab Thought (I.B.Tauris). He has also contributed a chapter to the book Saudi Foreign Policy 1960–2010 with a chapter entitled 'Saudi Foreign Policy towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict.'*



## II. The Gulf States

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ON THE nuclear question, the Saudis find themselves in a somewhat different debate to that of their Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbours, which face a similar dependence on the United States but enjoy even less ability to shape their environment. To put this into perspective, consider that the number of nationals in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman totals less than the population of Riyadh, and their combined surface area is of comparable size to Saudi Arabia's Riyadh Province. Although the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar have begun markedly to increase their defence budgets, their combined defence expenditure is still less than Saudi Arabia's *relative increase* in defence expenditure over the past nine years.<sup>1</sup> Saudi military spending is generally also far higher as a proportion of its GDP (8.9 per cent), though Oman is at 8.4 per cent and the UAE at 6.9 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore to understand how the Gulf states, both individually and collectively, respond to Iran is also to understand how they view their relationship with Saudi Arabia – a subject on which there is no uniformity. Each state views the Iranian threat through its own lens, which heavily colours what it seeks from both the West and from the Saudi-led GCC. Segments of Bahrain's leadership, for example, have sought closer integration with Saudi Arabia in the form of a Gulf union, which they have offered to initiate bilaterally, as they battle to contain a Shia-led opposition movement that has sought democratic reform.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Oman is highly resistant to any integration of its security under Saudi leadership. In the words of one Omani thinker, 'Saudi ignored our security proposals, Oman will seek its own interest ... [Oman] does not believe in the GCC project'.<sup>4</sup> In December 2013, Oman's foreign minister insisted that his country would 'simply withdraw' from any future Gulf union.<sup>5</sup> This independence was demonstrably shown by Oman's leader Sultan Qaboos, who played host to several rounds of secret discussions between top-level US and Iranian officials stretching back to December 2011, a process that has amplified Saudi and Emirati fears of a US–Iranian rapprochement.<sup>6</sup> The remaining states of Kuwait, the UAE and, particularly, Qatar all have their own frictions with Riyadh that wax and wane depending on the issue at hand, but have struggled to come together on critical issues of collective political and economic union.<sup>7</sup>

What is striking about the debate regarding Iran in Gulf states other than Saudi Arabia (and reflective of their relative lack of capacity to develop a functioning security collective) is the preference to focus on Iran less as a strategic regional player and more as an actor that can disrupt the specific national interests of their respective states. As such, the occasionally apocalyptic thinking evident in Saudi and Israeli views is largely replaced with a focus on more immediate security concerns. Iran's occupation of the three islands of the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa forms a core part

of Emirati perceptions of Iran.<sup>8</sup> For Qatar, ties with Iran are framed within their relations over the large, shared South Pars/North Dome gas field, which provides it with over 50 per cent of its GDP.<sup>9</sup> In Bahrain, Iran's perceived – though typically exaggerated – ability to activate networks of Shia dissidents and militants has been highly prevalent in security calculations. Meanwhile, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar are all concerned with the potential for radiation leaks from the Iranian reactor in Bushehr following a military strike or a catastrophic event such as an earthquake.<sup>10</sup> The sense of localism with respect to the Iranian threat is palpable. An Iranian bomb is viewed primarily as an enabler for Iran to play an ever-more assertive role in domestic affairs within the Gulf, as well as contributing to a more volatile and competitive regional environment in which smaller states would face greater insecurity from spillover effects.

It is precisely at the sub-conventional level that Gulf fears are presently concentrated, with concern that Iran could exploit Shia citizens – who, in most Gulf states, occupy the margins of economic and political life – to exert pressure on regimes and, *in extremis*, cause severe political instability.<sup>11</sup> This fear is most acute in Bahrain – and to a much lesser extent in Kuwait – where the Shia citizenry has longstanding ties to the ruling elite, but where there has nevertheless been growing sectarian tension in recent years.<sup>12</sup> This underpins Gulf fears of not just a nuclear Iran, but also of any deal between Iran and the West that would see a gradual erosion of the existing US military commitment to the region or leave a large proportion of Iran's nuclear infrastructure in place. In numerous discussions, and perhaps with the exception of Omani elites, Gulf policy elites expressed concern that they will be left alone to face an emboldened Iran, fresh from its diplomatic 'victory' against the West and seeking to expand its influence across the region as a whole.

### **Fears of Abandonment**

The smaller Gulf states are so demographically and geographically disadvantaged that, from their perspective, there is little they can do as individual entities to meet the threat posed by Iran, with or without nuclear weapons. It should be noted that, with the exception of the UAE, which has begun a programme of constructing civilian nuclear power plants, there is no capacity for the Gulf states to consider starting nuclear programmes of their own in response to Iran's nuclear ambitions.<sup>13</sup> Even the Emiratis have limited their programme to civilian needs, by giving up their right to enrich uranium on their own soil, instead sourcing it from companies in Russia, Canada, France, the UK and the US.<sup>14</sup>

Calling for a greater Western military presence in the region or increasing the already sizable annual purchases of arms – at \$59.971 billion in 2012, of which Saudi Arabia accounts for just over half<sup>15</sup> – is seen as a short-term

solution. The GCC, excluding Saudi Arabia, spends more on arms than Iran – but Gulf analysts are keenly aware of their own disunity, the weaknesses in their collective security arrangements, and the risk that Iran could provoke bilateral disputes to drive wedges between them and render this aggregate advantage moot. Iran is currently the third-largest military spender in the Gulf, behind Saudi Arabia and the UAE, although if Iranian rhetoric is to be believed, Iranian defence expenditure in 2012 was due to rise by 127 per cent.<sup>16</sup> With the exception of Qatar, the Arab Awakening has acutely heightened this sense of vulnerability amongst the smaller Gulf states.

Only one country, the UAE, has the capacity to stand independently against the Iranians conventionally without fear of being overwhelmed by aerial bombardment. The Emirati air force, consisting of well-trained pilots and seventy-nine F-16 Block 60 fighters (with an additional twenty-five recently ordered) and fifty Dassault Mirage 2000 fighters, vastly outnumbers Iran's twenty-eight MiG-29 Fulcrums and would considerably out-perform ageing Iranian F-14s, Phantoms and Mirage F-1s.<sup>17</sup> General David Petraeus, then-commander of US Central Command, observed in 2009 that 'the Emirati Air Force itself could take out the entire Iranian Air Force'.<sup>18</sup> Yet despite its massive air superiority, the UAE is also the most vulnerable of the Gulf states to Iranian missile attack, with Dubai probably within range of Iran's short-range Zelzal-2 and Fateh A-110A and A-110B missiles.<sup>19</sup> If Iran can base missiles off its islands in the Gulf, it will be able to target all of the UAE's petroleum and desalination facilities, which provide roughly a quarter of the country's GDP.<sup>20</sup> Thus, despite its qualitative edge in air capabilities, the UAE's threat perception in relation to Iran is still exceptionally high.

### **Free-Riding and the Military Option**

The Gulf states' positions towards the Iranian nuclear dispute are also characterised by serious tensions: most express great scepticism regarding both the EU/E3+3 talks and the ability of economic sanctions to compel Iranian surrender. However, the Gulf states have tentatively accepted the November 2013 Geneva agreement, as none of these smaller nations wish to be seen as responsible for undermining diplomacy, whether they agree with the terms or not. Furthermore, the Gulf nations also insist that their territory should not be used for any military action against Iranian nuclear sites on the basis that they, almost entirely one-city entities with zero strategic depth, cannot afford to become embroiled in a conflict that might invite Iranian retaliation against civilian infrastructure, which could be catastrophically damaging to their continued existence as functioning polities.<sup>21</sup> In the words of one Bahraini official, 'a country such as ours is a mouse in a region surrounded by elephants. For the mouse, the key thing is to stop the elephants from stamping'.<sup>22</sup> Qatar, for instance, has been explicit in its refusal to allow its bases to be used for the purposes of attacking Iran: 'We will not accept, and this is very clear, any act of aggression against Iran [being launched] from

Qatar,' stated former Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani in 2012.<sup>23</sup> A senior Emirati policy source reiterated that deputy ruler of the UAE Mohammed bin Zayed 'does not want to bomb Iran ... war is a disaster for the UAE'.<sup>24</sup>

In this respect, GCC members are not so much inconsistent (with rulers having exhorted strong action against Iran by the US in the past) as free-riding. The implication is that many would favour a strike if it originated elsewhere, and gave Iran no reason to target the Gulf in retaliation. In the authors' discussions with Gulf policy elites, it emerged that few had given great thought to the consequences of a strike on Iran's nuclear programme in terms of what it would mean for Iran's nuclear programme itself, and most had very little understanding of the specific details of nuclear negotiations beyond their maximalist positions (demanding that Iran give up all enrichment, for example) even as the Western position softened, culminating in the conditional recognition of Iran's right to enrich uranium in the November 2013 Geneva agreement. Abu Dhabi and Manama in particular chafe at this softening in the West's posture, believing that the terms offered in Geneva afford Iran an opportunity to reassert its regional interests at their expense. However, if it gives rise to a comprehensive agreement that demonstrably shrinks Iran's enrichment capacity and curbs its potential plutonium-production capability, they will likely view the deal as an improvement on the status quo, even as they seek to hedge against US–Iran ties on non-nuclear issues.

### **Reassurance**

Like Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states are disappointed with their security partners' inability or unwillingness to resolve critical issues, including the Syrian civil war, and view this as part of a broader trend of American retrenchment from the region after the last decade's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this context, Iranian nuclearisation would further erode Gulf trust in American reliability.

Yet their instinctive response is to seek a deepening of Western military involvement, leveraging their commercial position (as major investors and arms purchasers) and their status as oil producers and base providers to achieve this. In October 2013, for instance, well after US–Iranian diplomacy had gained in momentum, the details of a \$4 billion arms sale by the US to the UAE were made public.<sup>25</sup> Two months later, after the deal had been concluded, US defence officials spoke of 'significant interest' from Gulf states in purchasing one of the US's two most-advanced aircraft, the F-35 multirole fighter.<sup>26</sup> These are not the actions of states that foresee imminent US abandonment or are eager to cut themselves loose. For Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and for some in Abu Dhabi, this is particularly important, because American retrenchment is seen to leave them vulnerable not only to Iranian interference but also to Saudi Arabian hegemony. Even Bahrain – with many

in its ruling elite much closer to Riyadh than those in any other Gulf state – sees the US as the ultimate balancing force and guarantor of security. As King Hamad of Bahrain noted to US diplomats in 2005, if ‘Iran did get a nuclear weapons capability he wanted the U.S. to step in as a “nuclear guarantor”’.<sup>27</sup> Such statements are at odds with – and likely more accurate than – threats such as that issued by Bahrain’s Crown Prince in 2013 that his Kingdom and others were being driven into the arms of Russia.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, despite Gulf states’ frequent and intensifying complaints over US reliability, they possess few other options. Alternative security providers like France and Britain are deepening their involvement in the Gulf.<sup>29</sup> However, given the limited and diminishing scale of their militaries, amongst other constraints, they are not meaningful substitutes for the full spectrum of bases, arms and guarantees that the US can bring, nor are they entirely independent of US policy. The existing apparatus of US guarantees – particularly bases – allows for the US presence to be scaled upwards quickly, building on existing logistical networks. This is obviously most true in Qatar and the UAE, whose ground and airbase facilities contain extensive command-and-control facilities, and in the maritime sphere in Bahrain, which hosts the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet. Unsurprisingly, all three of these countries indicate that they would welcome a larger US presence, even before any Iranian nuclearisation.<sup>30</sup>

It is highly likely that these existing base providers would become hubs for an enlarged or modified US regional presence following Iranian nuclearisation and – in this capacity as well as in their more general status as US allies – would play host to an increasing array of both domestically owned and US missile-defence platforms. In some respects, Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons would only accelerate rather than transform US reassurance. The US has already sought to organise the GCC states under an umbrella of security with a heavy emphasis on their collective ability to connect their missile-defence systems and enhance their interoperability. This initiative has facilitated the sale of THAAD and Patriot systems to the UAE and other GCC states,<sup>31</sup> the launch of an X-band radar in Qatar, and the development of region-wide command, control and communications (C3) capabilities.<sup>32</sup>

The US is now encouraging the GCC states to work together directly in a multilateral system and on work led by the US Missile Defense Agency to create a fully integrated defensive system. However, military integration is one of the most sensitive topics for the Gulf states and these efforts are therefore somewhat opaque.<sup>33</sup> Encouraging Gulf nations to put aside their differences and share early-warning radar data, and then integrate the capabilities of their unilateral missile-interceptor systems to extend defences over the entire region is the next step, but it is not clear when, or indeed whether, this will occur.

Indeed, further GCC integration, particularly in the military sphere, sparks fears of Saudi dominance. In the aftermath of Iranian nuclearisation, this would be especially problematic if Saudi Arabia were to respond by sending overt or opaque signals of nuclear intent, whether these were sincere or merely an effort to induce greater US assistance. Addressing this concern is primarily an issue for the GCC states themselves, although the US could intensify its advice and training as a longer-term response to Iranian nuclearisation.

A nuclear Gulf would also place much greater demands on conflict and crisis management. In this respect, those Gulf states with a less hostile outlook towards Tehran (Doha and Muscat in particular) could keep communications channels open. Qatar, for example, views its relationship with Iran as 'functional on all levels except for Syria'.<sup>34</sup> The presence of differing stances among GCC actors could contribute to calm on another level: Iran is less likely to feel a wall closing in on it if dialogue continued at least with some states, lessening the prospect of misunderstanding. The smaller Gulf states have always tried to maintain a modicum of flexibility in their dealings with Iran. Bahrain aside, their considerable hesitancy to rush towards what would have been a Saudi-dominated GCC union indicates that they would likely respond to a nuclear Iran through intensified bilateral engagement rather than pure confrontation.

The UAE may prove an exception to the rule here, in that there is a marked difference between Abu Dhabi and Dubai in their approaches to Iran and their perceptions of the GCC. Dubai has always sought to maintain a flexible working relationship with the Iranians, and would continue to do so even with a nuclear Iran – much to the chagrin of the ruling Al-Nahyan family in Abu Dhabi, which seeks a far more aggressive policy leveraged on the back of US pressure.<sup>35</sup> Whilst Abu Dhabi has the ultimate say in Emirati foreign affairs, Dubai will not allow its extensive trade relationship with Iran, which has shrunk by almost a third since 2011,<sup>36</sup> to be completely severed by Abu Dhabi's hawkish stance.<sup>37</sup> A nuclear Iran may well place significant strain on the UAE internally, with Dubai looking out for itself and failing to follow Abu Dhabi's policy edicts. This could be exacerbated by changes in the balance of financial power within the UAE as a result of future financial crises, potentially having a modest but non-trivial impact on how the UAE as a whole responds to a nuclear Iran and to its Western allies.

### **Diversification**

A nuclear Iran might also speed up the Gulf states' efforts to involve as many international actors as possible in the working mechanisms of Gulf stability, at least at the level of security guarantees. Traditional Asian security providers include Pakistan, which has long played a role in the GCC – albeit on a scale far more limited than that of Western security providers. Over the longer term, Gulf states could deepen their relationships with China and India, countries with which the Gulf has increasingly burgeoning relations



due to hydrocarbon and labour exchanges, and which possess clout in the international system.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, as popular demand for democratic changes mounts in the Gulf, the silence of these Asian countries on Gulf domestic affairs, particularly the GCC's intervention in Bahrain, has made them appear far more agreeable partners to Gulf leaders than the West, with its pressure to implement reforms.<sup>39</sup>

At this stage, security diversification is hard to imagine: China and India's development and military prowess are limited. For instance, the most that China has actively contributed to Gulf security in recent times has been to assist with Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 maritime security operations against piracy; it has not been involved with CTF-152 Gulf operations at all.<sup>40</sup> It is difficult, based on current trends, to see any Asian military role that would supplant or even meaningfully complement the current dominant position of the US.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, whilst India and China have signed a number of bilateral security agreements with the Gulf states, there is as yet little in the way of frameworks that encompass their relationship with the GCC as a bloc.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, the Gulf possesses the tools necessary to draw these growing powers into its orbit and is already doing so. One need only look at the swing towards the East that has taken place in trade relations in recent years to see that the GCC may have a growing economic incentive to look away from its traditional partners in the West. Asia has become the GCC's most important trading partner, accounting for over 57 per cent of its total trade. In the last five years, trade between the GCC and Asia almost doubled, from \$480 billion in 2008 to \$814 billion in 2012.<sup>43</sup> Just twenty years ago, the US and EU accounted for 40 per cent of GCC trade. Today, that figure is at just over 20 per cent, with the US now a distant sixth in the trade ranking.<sup>44</sup> The effect of a nuclear Iran might be to incentivise further such diversification, although it should be remembered that both India and China have their own, important relationships with Iran that also include a key energy dimension. It would be decades before these economic relations could grow into credible and meaningful security dimensions.

### **Conclusion**

The prospect of a nuclear Iran is highly concerning for the fabulously wealthy small Gulf nations, which are ever-desirous of a stable environment to ensure yet more prosperity. Oman has sought, and indeed exploited, its own pathway toward a functional bilateral relationship with Iran; both the UAE and Bahrain are more comfortable in the shadow of Saudi policy; while Kuwait and Qatar have sought policies that can contain Iran without angering it, and engage Saudi Arabia without become absorbed into its strategic orbit. Yet all the smaller Gulf states fear that a nuclear Iran would make these various balancing acts all the more difficult, emboldening Tehran whilst

making Riyadh more activist. A certain degree of bandwagoning with Iran would be likely, and this would reflect and exacerbate intra-Gulf tensions (Qatar versus Saudi Arabia, for example) as well as intra-Emirati tensions (Abu Dhabi versus Dubai).

The result might be a period of mutual tension between these states and their Western allies, although this would be far from unmanageable. In 2009, for instance, then-Senator and now-US Secretary of State John Kerry warned that 'Qatar can't continue to be an American ally on Monday that sends money to Hamas on Tuesday'.<sup>45</sup> Yet Qatar has continued to maintain this balancing act, engaging productively with both Hamas and the US, not to mention Iran.<sup>46</sup> The Gulf states understand that their concerns are ultimately a sideshow in a much larger game that plays out between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel, and Iran and the West. Unlike Saudi Arabia or Israel, they have few pretensions to changing the course of nuclear diplomacy by threatening unilateral courses of action. In light of this disadvantaged position, their efforts remain focused on intensive internal and external balancing: purchasing Western weaponry and inviting Western forces onto their soil whilst, in most cases, maintaining overtly stable relations with the Iranian regime. However much these states articulate a fear of US abandonment, their actions suggest otherwise. Their options for external security guarantees are limited to a small number of Western states; a nuclear Iran would in itself represent the failure of those Western states, but it would also increase the Gulf's reliance on them.

A nuclear Iran may change the environment, but it is unlikely to transform this broad approach. Over the longer term, Gulf states may search for alternative security providers, most likely from Asia. However, Gulf security policy is conceived and made on much shorter timelines than this. For the foreseeable future, the Gulf states' limited range of security options means that their response to a nuclear Iran would primarily be to adjust existing security arrangements, rather than fashion entirely new ones.

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## A Response from Oman

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**Mohammed Mahfoodh Al Ardhi**

**A**T A fundamental level there is agreement among the countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that the dispute over Iran's nuclear ambitions represents the most serious ongoing threat to the security of the region as a whole, including Iran itself. In other significant respects there is diversity of opinion, reflecting important differences in the strategic circumstances and historical experiences of each Gulf state. The authors are right to eschew the idea of a single Gulf Arab viewpoint.

Bahrain, in particular, has encountered significant moments of tension with Iran, especially during periods of domestic unrest. Qatar, on the other hand, has developed a pragmatic relationship based on the desire to maintain stability and exploit common offshore gas reserves. Oman and Iran are linked by centuries of trade and migration as well as a shared responsibility for the Strait of Hormuz. As the authors point out, this plurality of relations can be an advantage, even though it sometimes precludes the adoption of common policies. For example, Oman's decision to maintain diplomatic relations with Iran during the Iran–Iraq War meant that it was able to play a role in facilitating dialogue both during and after the conflict. In relation to the nuclear issue, Oman helped to pave the way for the recent breakthrough in Geneva, negotiating the release of American citizens detained in Iran, encouraging discreet contacts between Washington and Tehran, and providing a neutral location for government-to-government talks.

The way that these different perspectives affect interpretations of Iranian behaviour is a crucial aspect of this debate. Countries concerned about the influence of Iran on their internal affairs are more likely to take Tehran's revolutionary rhetoric at face value. Those that have managed to develop 'functional' working relations with Iran find it easier to see behind the veil of ideology and recognise the pursuit of national interests at work. Responses to Iran's nuclear programme differ according to whether the Islamic Republic is assumed to be an implacable and disruptive ideological force or a state motivated by normal considerations of security and prestige.

There are, in fact, good grounds for concluding that Iran has followed the path taken by many other revolutionary regimes in the past and exchanged an early desire to export its model for the more

conservative goals of regime consolidation and survival. This is obviously reflected in the new pragmatism of President Rouhani, but the signs have been there for some time in Iran's evolving bilateral relations and its measured approach to post-Saddam Iraq. Iran's nuclear programme therefore needs to be seen in the context of its efforts to find a place for itself in the world consistent with its desire for security and its sense of national greatness. In this its motives are not very different from those of any other emerging power or even those of Iran under the Shah.

From the standpoint of its own interests, an Iranian decision to acquire nuclear weapons would be a major miscalculation, raising tension and delaying the normalisation of its foreign relations by several years. Although it would not fundamentally change how different Gulf states view Iran, it would alter the balance of debate between them. Those inclined to see the Islamic Republic as a threat would take it as confirmation of aggressive intent and seek to strengthen measures of containment and deterrence in response. External security guarantees might not be sufficient to dissuade Saudi Arabia and possibly even the United Arab Emirates from acquiring their own nuclear weapons. Nuclearisation of the Gulf would inevitably bring a whole new set of security challenges to do with command and control, especially considering the extremely short early-warning times that would be available to defence planners.

There would be a desire for closer co-operation between the Gulf states, including at a military level, in order to improve crisis-management capabilities. Yet it would be equally important to prevent a polarisation of the region into rival camps in a way that increased the potential for misunderstanding and the risk of conflict. Those countries more likely to interpret Iranian behaviour within the framework of national interests would want to establish confidence-building arrangements and maintain relations on a pragmatic basis, although their freedom to do so might become increasingly constrained as international pressure to isolate Iran grew in the medium term.

There has been a lack of attention to Iran's role as a 'strategic regional player'. The long-term security interests of the region mean that sooner or later a way will need to be found to accommodate Iran's national aspirations in a manner that benefits all. The best way to discourage it from acquiring nuclear weapons would be to explore that option now. This requires a more open and inclusive regional order, a willingness to turn away from zero-sum thinking and look to Iran as a potential

problem solver in dealing with issues like Syria, and a conscious effort to deepen regional economic integration by harnessing Iran's enormous potential to the commercial dynamism of its Gulf neighbours.

This is an ambitious agenda to take forward, especially given what the authors say about the relative size and power of the smaller Gulf states. However, it is worth remembering that after the Second World War the Benelux countries played a disproportionately influential role in building a peaceful and united Europe based on trade and commerce. Small states with big ideas can make a difference.

*Mohammed Mahfoodh Al Ardhi is a graduate from the RAF College, Cranwell with a Bachelor of Science in Military Science. Al Ardhi rose to become head of the Omani Air Force, a position he held for ten years. Following his military service, Al Ardhi earned a Master of Public Administration from the John F Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He was appointed vice-chairman of the National Bank of Oman (NBO) in 2010, and serves on the International Advisory Board of the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC and is a trustee for the Eisenhower Fellowship in Philadelphia. Al Ardhi is the author of two books: Arabs Down Under and Pearls from Arabia.*





### III. Egypt and Jordan

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EGYPT AND Jordan both occupy a curious strategic position: they are central to the modern Middle East – one bridging the Maghreb and the Levant, the other the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula – but are disconnected from the Gulf itself. They have been deeply affected by the waves of political mobilisation that have taken place since 2011 as part of the Arab Awakening. Egypt has endured revolution, regime collapse and partial regime reconstitution with the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government. Jordan has faced some of the worst spillover from neighbouring Syria's civil war, while King Abdullah II has cycled through five different prime ministers and six governments in just two-and-a-half years, and has hosted a steadily growing American military presence.<sup>1</sup>

Egypt and Jordan remain broadly within what might be described as the strategic orbit of the Saudi-led Gulf bloc. Both nations' strategic elites view Iranian policy in sceptical terms, both have made formal peace agreements with Israel, but neither sees Iran's nuclear programme in terms as threatening or urgent as their more powerful allies. Their political and economic weakness, their alignment to Western patrons, and their particular understanding of the nuclear threat all suggest that their primary response to a nuclearising Iran would be to seek a strengthening of existing conventional security partnerships, and to do so only on the basis of overt Iranian moves towards weaponisation.

#### **Egypt**

##### *Ties between Egypt and Iran*

Egypt presents a more ambiguous case than that of Saudi Arabia, for example, in part because its relationship with Iran is connected to its own domestic political vicissitudes. Ties between Egypt and Iran were severed in 1980 following the Iranian revolution of the previous year, Egypt's granting of sanctuary to the deposed Shah, and Iranian opposition to Egypt's peace with Israel in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> President Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011) aligned Egyptian foreign policy closely with that of Saudi Arabia and the United States, with Washington and Cairo both opposed to Iran's support for more radical Palestinian political factions in competition with Egyptian-backed 'moderates'.<sup>3</sup> Mubarak once told George Mitchell, then-US envoy to the Middle East, that Iranians were 'liars' and that negotiations should take place only on the understanding that 'you don't believe a word they say'.<sup>4</sup> In 2009, the US embassy in Cairo observed that 'Mubarak has a visceral hatred for the Islamic Republic ... denouncing [Iran] for seeking to destabilize Egypt and the region', and judged that 'there is no doubt that Egypt sees Iran as its greatest long-term threat'.<sup>5</sup>

Following the Egyptian revolution that toppled Mubarak in 2011, Iran appointed its first ambassador to Cairo in three decades.<sup>6</sup> In February 2012, Egypt allowed two Iranian naval vessels to pass through the Suez Canal en route to Syria for the first time since ties were severed.<sup>7</sup> The political ascendance of Islamists – above all, the Muslim Brotherhood – within Egypt between 2011 and 2013 led many to suggest that Egypt's traditional hostility to Iran was likely to become diluted.

Yet Muslim Brotherhood members hold a diverse range of views on Iran, conditioned both by sympathy for Iran's Islamist (albeit clerical) political system and sectarian hostility to a Shia regime. Mehdi Khalaji, an Iranian-trained theologian, suggests that 'the Muslim Brotherhood is Iran's main potential political ally in a new Egypt', and that 'Iran is pushing for the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, President Morsi defied Western entreaties by visiting Tehran in August 2012 for the 16th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, and repeatedly sought to involve Iran in efforts towards a peace settlement over Syria. Yet his government also supported opponents of the Iran-backed regime of President Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, going as far as to call for a no-fly zone over Syria in June 2013 and allowing Egyptian citizens to travel to join the Syrian rebels.<sup>9</sup> In other words, even the most dramatic change in Egyptian politics in six decades did not result in a wholesale transformation of Egyptian policy towards Iran.

Morsi's overthrow in mid-2013, the installation of an army-backed interim government, and the return of many Mubarak-era elites to key positions in the security and intelligence services all suggest that Egyptian foreign policy will show strong continuity over the medium term. Yet whoever leads Egypt in the coming years – and it is likely that the army will remain an influential actor in the background – is likely to respond to Iranian nuclear advances with greater moderation and caution than either Saudi Arabia or Israel.

Former Egyptian diplomats interviewed for this Whitehall Report observed that, even if Iran were to overtly cross the threshold, there is a clear precedent for Egyptian restraint, namely the country's non-response to Israel's acquisition of nuclear weapons in the late 1960s, at a time when Israel was the principal concern of the Egyptian armed forces. Egypt neither borders Iran – as it does Israel – nor views the Iranian threat in such directly military terms. Nor does Iran animate Egyptian national consciousness in the same way that Israel did during the 1960s and 1970s. According to an October 2012 poll, 65 per cent of Egyptians support the renewal of relations between Egypt and Iran, and 61 per cent support 'the Iranian nuclear project' (compared with just 41 per cent in 2009).<sup>10</sup> Egypt's leadership would therefore suffer no greater domestic reputational cost by failing to respond in kind to Iranian weaponisation than it did by declining to respond in the case of Israel. However, Israel's own response to any Iranian weaponisation

– particularly an overt Israeli test or a declaration of Israel’s nuclear status – could also shift the calculus for Egypt in unpredictable ways, as could any Egyptian judgment that US credibility had been diminished as a result of its inability to prevent Iran from breaking out in the first place.

Across each phase of the Egyptian political transition in recent years – including Mubarak, the post-revolution junta, Morsi and the army-backed interim government – Egyptian officials and strategists have viewed Iran’s nuclear programme as a source of concern, but not of alarm. Unlike observers in the US, Israel and the Gulf, Egyptians have not appeared apprehensive about the growth of Iranian enrichment capability or the possible attainment of breakout capability. Retired Egyptian officials emphasise that Egypt would have little problem with Iran continuing to enrich uranium at lower levels as part of any settlement, and do not bring up the issue of growing stockpiles and enrichment capacity. These officials express much greater concern over Iranian missile capabilities, suggesting that any institutionalised Iranian nuclear capacity might be viewed in more threatening terms if there were to be sudden advances in Iranian missile range and accuracy.

#### *An Egyptian Bomb?*

Egypt is often cited as a state that would seek nuclear weapons of its own if Iran were to nuclearise.<sup>11</sup> In June 2013, the state-controlled Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* published an obliquely written article entitled ‘Should Egypt Go Nuclear?’<sup>12</sup> Egyptian policy elites, however, treat this question less seriously than, for example, their Saudi Arabian counterparts.

Perhaps the single most important constraint on the supply side of potential Egyptian proliferation is that Egypt has neither the indigenous ability to produce its own nuclear weapons nor the support of a willing external provider. Egypt did develop a nuclear infrastructure in the 1950s, and – until its peace agreement with Israel – did not allow inspections of its Inshas nuclear research centre by the IAEA. However, neither Mubarak nor his predecessor Sadat made an effort to develop the requisite nuclear-weapons technology.<sup>13</sup> Although there were persistent reports of clandestine nuclear ties between Egypt and Colonel Qadhafi’s Libya – said to date from the 1970s and to cover both nuclear and missile technology – these will have been disrupted by the change of regime in Libya in 2011 as well as by Libya’s earlier agreement to abandon its WMD programmes. In May 2009, an Egyptian diplomat privately told US counterparts that Egypt had been offered nuclear weapons and associated technology by Soviet scientists in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s break-up, but that it had rejected these overtures.<sup>14</sup>

Egypt possesses neither an indigenous enrichment programme nor a nuclear-power reactor, and other aspects of its civilian nuclear programme have progressed slowly and with difficulty.<sup>15</sup> An upgraded nuclear programme is

also likely to be prohibitively expensive. Ongoing political instability, with the attendant strain on Egypt's finances and managerial coherence, is likely to hinder any such effort. Although the overthrow of Morsi was immediately followed by Gulf pledges of financial support to the new regime, Egyptian growth rates are anaemic (forecast at 2.6 per cent for the year ending June 2014) and foreign exchange reserves are highly depleted.<sup>16</sup> In terms of the materials necessary for a nuclear programme, Robert Einhorn, formerly special adviser for nonproliferation and arms control at the US State Department, has argued that Egypt is unlikely to be able to procure the necessary equipment and technology without detection, and that, even if it managed to do so, it would be four to six years before it was able to produce fissile material.<sup>17</sup>

Assuming Cairo could surmount these barriers, Egypt's newer research reactor would be able to produce around 6.6 kg of plutonium per year – just under 1.5 kg short of the amount necessary for one bomb, according to the IAEA (but in excess of more conservative thresholds). However, this reactor is under IAEA safeguards, meaning that any diversion of nuclear material would be detected, unless Egypt expelled inspectors.<sup>18</sup> Egypt does possess a range of ballistic missiles and fighter jets that could serve as potential delivery systems, but these would have to be modified to carry nuclear payloads – again, at a steep cost.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, any of these steps would seriously tarnish a pillar of Egypt's foreign policy: strong, vocal support for the non-proliferation regime and a regional ban on nuclear weapons.

In addition to these resource constraints, in terms of its potential weaponisation Egypt faces a set of potential diplomatic costs similar to those faced by Saudi Arabia: notably, the potential loss of American financial and military aid, and US congressional hostility to the weaponisation of a historic adversary to Israel – without any of the same economic insulation – namely that produced by oil revenues – to cushion any decision to acquire weapons. Although the US responded to the coup of mid-2013 with only a very modest suspension of military aid, it would almost certainly view an act of proliferation in less lenient terms. Nor would Egypt be able to rely on Israel to lobby in its favour, as the army-backed regime was able to in the wake of the coup.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Egypt is even more dependent on US assistance than Saudi Arabia. From 2006 to 2010, 60 per cent of Egypt's major arms imports came from the US, including M1A1 tanks and M113 armoured vehicles (by comparison, Saudi Arabia received only 40 per cent of its arms from the US between 2005 and 2009).<sup>21</sup> The Egyptian military would be unlikely to favour a difficult and uncertain pursuit of nuclear weapons at the cost of its conventional military forces at a time when it faces renewed militancy in the Sinai Peninsula and a long period of domestic unrest across its cities – both of which have required the deployment of Egyptian military forces supplied by the US, including armour.<sup>22</sup> A November 2013 visit by Russia's foreign and

defence ministers to Cairo, and reports of large-scale Russian arms sales to Egypt, were likely more to do with Egypt's short-term irritation with the US suspension of military aid rather than a serious indicator of Egyptian willingness to abandon US supplies.<sup>23</sup> Russian officials have implied that any such deal might be worth up to \$4 billion (mostly comprising air-defence systems); but purchase on such a scale would likely need to be underwritten by Saudi Arabia, which is vehemently opposed to Russian policy in Syria, and would create problems of compatibility with Egypt's US-supplied equipment.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, a diversification in arms purchases should not be ruled out.

## **Jordan**

### *Ties between Jordan and Iran*

Jordan, though more politically stable than Egypt, is in a similar position. Jordanian political elites see Iran as a malign force in the region, though not as a major threat to the country's security. They view Iran's nuclear programme as a matter of concern, but are comfortable with Iranian enrichment capacity and other aspects of Iran's civil nuclear programme. Their concern over the nuclear dispute pertains more to the risk of a regional war rather than to specific Iranian acts of aggression against Jordan, yet even this dispute commands less attention from elites in Amman than the more proximate and intractable Israeli–Palestinian issue. Moreover, Jordan lacks the means either to pursue an indigenous nuclear option – this being viewed as utterly fanciful rather than, as in the Gulf or Egypt, remotely plausible – or even to support its own defence.

A decade ago, in 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah warned that the ascendance of Iran-backed Shia political forces in Iraq and Lebanon was fostering a 'crescent' that would be 'very destabilizing for the Gulf countries and for the whole region'. This warning later became known, in shorthand, as the 'Shia crescent', a common anti-Iranian trope that resonated widely as Iran's influence in Iraq consolidated in subsequent years.<sup>25</sup> A year after those seminal remarks, Abdullah argued that, 'If you have a stable, capable Iraq defending itself, and you have the Iranians and other outsiders losing any strategic capability inside Iraq, you've won'.<sup>26</sup> A leaked US diplomatic cable from 2009 reports that:<sup>27</sup>

The metaphor most commonly deployed by Jordanian officials when discussing Iran is of an octopus whose tentacles reach out insidiously to manipulate, foment, and undermine the best laid plans of the West and regional moderates. Iran's tentacles include its allies Qatar and Syria, Hizballah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, an Iraqi government sometimes seen as supplicant to Tehran, and Shia communities throughout the region.

In this sense, Jordan's fears of Iran's regional influence echo those expressed in Jerusalem, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Yet Jordan – despite having previously been concerned about being cut out of any direct US–Iranian dialogue – is less afraid than any of the other capitals to engage Iran directly. Iran's former foreign minister – now the head of the Atomic Energy Agency of Iran – visited Amman in May 2013, meeting both his Jordanian counterpart and King Abdullah. Other than a brief period of tension in 2012 over an alleged Iranian media campaign against Jordan (which resulted in the cancellation of a Jordanian state visit to Iran), Jordanian officials express relatively little concern about direct Iranian interference in the country itself.

That Jordan sees this in primarily broad regional terms is underscored by the fact that Jordanian forces were deployed to Bahrain in 2011, as part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) force, to quell a democratic uprising led by the country's Shia majority – despite the fact that Jordan is not even a member of the bloc (it was invited to join in 2011 but, predictably, its accession stalled). Even then, however, Jordanian officials were far less prone to couching their intervention in directly anti-Iranian terms than their Gulf counterparts. One Jordanian analyst asserted that one of the country's most serious concerns was not that of being targeted directly, but that missiles launched between Iran and Israel – including those armed with unconventional warheads – might inadvertently strike Jordanian territory. Jordanian analysts and officials emphasise their prioritisation of regional stability over the containment of Iran, a rank order opposite to that seen elsewhere. When the president of Jordan's Senate told a visiting US official to 'bomb Iran, or live with an Iranian bomb. Sanctions, carrots, incentives won't matter', he did not necessarily speak for the whole of Jordan's security establishment.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Jordan's Nuclear Programme*

If Iranian nuclear capability grows, it is necessary to consider Jordan's possible responses. In August 2013, Jordan announced that it was proceeding with the construction of a 5-megawatt nuclear research reactor, as a preliminary step towards the construction of further nuclear reactors. The project was assisted by a South Korean loan and scheduled for completion in 2016. Some observers interpreted this as an act of 'nuclear hedging' – a signal to Iran that its nuclear advances would face a countervailing response, and that Jordan could eventually seek nuclear weaponry of its own. Yet this is not how Jordanian elites view this project. They – unlike their Saudi Arabian or Emirati counterparts in terms of how they view their respective nuclear programmes – see Jordan's nuclear ambitions as indelibly civilian-oriented, and rooted in the country's severe energy shortages. Those shortages have worsened in recent years, which have seen the supply of Egyptian natural gas disrupted repeatedly – more than ten times – due to Egyptian political instability since the 2011 revolution.<sup>29</sup> Jordan imports 90 per cent of its energy, and rising world prices have meant that around 15 per cent

of Jordanian GDP is allocated to this. This is exacerbated by weaknesses in Jordan's refining capacity and political obstacles to cutting fuel subsidies.<sup>30</sup> As the deputy head of the IMF, Nemat Shafik, noted in March 2012, 'energy is the Achilles heel of the Jordanian economy, it's a huge vulnerability for Jordan'.<sup>31</sup>

Jordan's civil nuclear programme should be assessed in this context. Much like Turkey, Jordan's interest in civil nuclear technology inevitably affects its rhetoric and policy regarding Iran's nuclear programme, insofar as it has strongly defended its right to enrich its own uranium domestically (it has substantial domestic reserves of natural uranium) rather than purchase fuel from international suppliers.<sup>32</sup> The US had demanded that Jordan forego enrichment, before dropping this demand in January 2011.<sup>33</sup> Jordan therefore dissents from the multiple UN Security Council resolutions and the Israeli position in demanding that Iran cease all enrichment: not only does Jordan perceive a lower risk of Iranian breakout, it also has a fundamentally different view as to how restrictive or permissive the global non-proliferation regime should be when it comes to the fuel cycle.

#### *Jordan's Security Environment*

Jordan is perhaps the least well-placed of any of the states under consideration in this Whitehall Report to go its own way on security issues. It depends heavily on foreign partners to support both its economy and defence (Saudi Arabia and the US, respectively), and therefore tends to seek external guarantees during times of crisis.

Jordan's response to the Syrian crisis – which has resulted in extremely heavy refugee flows into the country – was initially adopted to avoid escalation on its border with Syria, lest it invite retaliation from Damascus, but later came to accommodate aspects of Saudi Arabian policy, with Jordan becoming a conduit for Saudi-funded arms into Syria.<sup>34</sup> Jordan agreed to this only when it had secured a larger British and American military presence on its soil, as an insurance policy against escalation. This included the location in Jordan of US-supplied Patriot missile-defence batteries of the sort placed in Turkey, as well as F-16 fighter jets.<sup>35</sup> Jordan's response to any major regional threat – whether Iranian moves in the direction of weaponisation, or a worsening of conditions in Iraq or Syria – is likely to mimic this approach, centring on consolidating and expanding its existing security guarantees, balancing US and Saudi Arabian policies, and seeking to protect itself against the repercussions of any resultant regional conflict.

#### **Conclusion**

In some ways, Jordan and Egypt both sit at the periphery of this study: neither borders Iran, and neither falls within the traditional 'security complex' of the Gulf. Yet both are affected by it. Both Amman and Cairo perceive a

malign Iranian role in the affairs of their neighbours, and have responded with concern to what they see as the growth of Iranian power over the last decade. Policy elites in both countries – particularly in Jordan, as a relatively small, poor and vulnerable state – see Iran’s regional actions as detrimental to regional stability.

Yet Iranian nuclear weapons are not perceived as the urgent, looming threat they represent for Saudi Arabia or Israel. While a nuclear Iran would be troubling for both states – particularly for Egypt, which has accorded non-proliferation a place of prominence in its broader foreign policy – this would not constitute a development of existential significance. In some ways, the bigger threat to these countries would be the effect of a nuclear Iran on regional competition in North Africa, Gaza, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, potentially resulting, for example, in greater Saudi Arabian support for anti-Iranian actors, and intensified Iranian support for countervailing forces.

Despite tensions between the US and the military-backed interim Egyptian government in autumn 2013 – resulting, for example, in the partial suspension of US military aid – neither Egypt nor Jordan would have many options for dealing with a nuclear-armed Iran other than to reinforce their existing ties with the US. It is also likely that Jordan and Egypt – notwithstanding further radical changes in the composition of the latter’s government – would co-ordinate policies more closely with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Unlike the smaller Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan are sufficiently distant to not fear Saudi Arabian influence. Riyadh cannot station troops or aircraft in Jordan, nor sell advanced military equipment to Egypt; it cannot substitute for the two states’ indispensable relationships with the US. At the same time, evolving threats in Syria and North Africa, as well as the importance of Israeli security to US calculations, mean that the US is unlikely to pull away from these relationships even if domestic conditions in Egypt and Jordan worsen.

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## A Response from Egypt

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**Mahmoud Karem**

THE CHAPTER offers valuable insights and some useful information, and I wish to commend the authors. There are, however, several points that need to be clarified and several others that I differ with.

The argument that Egypt views the Iranian nuclear programme in terms of 'concern' and not 'alarm' is semantic and actually undermines the core of how Egypt perceives the issue of introducing nuclear weapons to the Middle East. Egypt has consistently argued against nuclear and other WMD, and has introduced several UN initiatives in this regard. In 1974, Egypt, with Iran, introduced a UN General Assembly initiative to the UN First Committee on the Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Middle East, and the initiative has been re-adopted and built upon ever since.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 and the concept of exporting the principles of the revolution to neighbouring states in the region deeply affected Egypt. Iran's policy of flexing hegemony caused 'alarm', rather than mere 'concern'. It was but natural for Sunni, moderate Islamic Egypt to align itself with its long-time partner Saudi Arabia, especially as Iran started to increase its clandestine and insurrectionary leverage through war by proxy; consolidating its grip on Iraq; and establishing a cogent network of surrogate insurgents, particularly with Hizbullah in Lebanon. The quotation in the chapter attributed to former President Mubarak may be true, but was probably said after Egypt had made several conciliatory gestures towards Iran, to which the Iranian response was to increase its covert, anti-regime operations in Egypt through its diplomatic mission in Cairo. Iran went on to name one of Tehran's major streets after the killer of President Sadat, following Egypt's burial of Shah Pahlavi in Cairo in 1980, which Iran opposed, also calling for the removal of a small imperial Persian flag from the entrance of the tomb. Iran's later dedication to attaining a nuclear edge in the Middle East as well as missile superiority, developing and upgrading its capabilities from short- to medium-range systems, increased regional anxiety by tilting the military balance further in Iran's favour.

The assertion that, even if Iran goes nuclear, Egyptians will rehash and resort to its historic policy of 'non-response' – as it did with Israel – may therefore not be accurate. This argument neglects the consistent policy of Egypt to bring Israel into the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

as a non-nuclear-weapon state and place all of its nuclear activities under the full range of IAEA safeguards. The same will happen with Iran in the event of any illegal diversion of nuclear materials to a weapons programme. Restoration of full diplomatic ties between Egypt and Iran, as argued in this Whitehall Report, is a different matter from Iran going nuclear and completely tipping the power calculus in the Middle East in its favour. The latter will always be viewed with concern by any government in Egypt.

Egypt is a fully fledged member of the NPT and placed all of its facilities, including its research reactor built jointly with Argentina, under the IAEA's safeguards. For Egypt, nuclear power is not about obtaining 'a bomb'; the country knows very well the legal obligations, consequences, limitations and difficulties of cheating in today's world. Instead, it is a matter of dire energy needs, as well as the primacy of rights and obligations enshrined in international instruments and treaties. Egypt is affected by the scarcity of gas supplies necessary for growing domestic consumption, and for honouring previous obligations and contracts to sell Egyptian gas to foreign importers including Israel, Spain and Jordan, among others, which can penalise Egypt if gas exports are halted. Egypt accepts the need to respect the right to peaceful enrichment – including within Iran – as long as there is rigorous inspection, with the IAEA playing an assertive and transparent role in order to reassure the international community both against hidden intentions and of the need for treaty compliance even in undeclared sites and activities.

The conclusion of the chapter asserts that the option for Jordan and Egypt in the wake of a nuclear Iran is to 'reinforce their existing ties with the US'. This may not be completely true; there are concerns in the Arab GCC nations today that the US may strike a deal with Iran at the expense of, or without proper consideration for, GCC security. In light of US missteps, some policy-makers are now requesting that their leaders look east towards Moscow, arguing that diversification of military armament and hardware could lead to political independence with a new multimillion-dollar arms deal with Russia funded by several Gulf states. Those who argue for this approach remind us all that in 1973 the Syrian and Egyptian armies fought a war with considerable success with Soviet weapons and hardware.

If Iran were to overtly cross the nuclear threshold, Egyptian restraint may be temporary, since Egypt may start its own nuclear programme or find itself fully supporting Saudi Arabia's attempts to seek parity with

Iran. The impact of Iran's potential nuclearisation on Egypt could not be confined to 'domestic reputational costs', as argued in the chapter, since the balance of power would then tilt drastically in Iran's favour.

In conclusion, this analytical criticism is not axiomatically rigid, nor is it premeditated in its conclusions against ushering in a new era of co-operation with Iran. Iran is an important regional actor. This author also supports a scheme of co-operative security measures with Iran, depending on its willingness to co-operate more with its GCC and other regional partners. This could include a regional nuclear-fuel-cycle regime, water desalination projects, and a regional research-and-development centre focused on training, capacity building and nuclear research. The region now needs the US to be assertive in launching a regional dialogue – modelled on the working group on Arms Control and Regional Security in the Middle East, or the Six-Party talks with North Korea – in which Israel, Iran, Egypt, GCC nations and others work together to chart their own security agenda and future. A nuclear Iran would foreclose these options.

*Ambassador Dr Mahmoud Karem is special adviser to the Foreign Minister of Egypt on Non Proliferation, and a former Egyptian diplomat.*



## IV. Turkey

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TURKEY IS something of an anomaly amongst the states under consideration in this Whitehall Report: it is the only non-Arab, Muslim-majority nation; the only state to overtly station nuclear weapons on its soil; and the only member of a credible collective security organisation – NATO.

These factors condition how Turkey views the prospect of Iranian nuclearisation and how it would respond. It is less concerned about direct Iranian interference in its own politics than in the region, largely because it has greater confidence in its ability to deter either a nuclear attack or conventional aggression backstopped by Iran's possession of nuclear forces. Despite moments of uncertainty within NATO, its history of reliance on and co-operation with the Alliance – including during the Syrian civil war – affords it deeper and more credible security guarantees than those enjoyed by any Arab state.

Taken together, these conditions suggest that Turkey would respond to Iranian nuclearisation in a measured way. It might increase the domestic and international salience of US nuclear weapons already on its soil and do more to signal that it possesses dual-capable aircraft. Yet it would primarily invoke its pre-existing relationships with NATO and the US rather than rushing to generate an indigenous nuclear capability.

### **Security Competition**

The broad trend in the Turkish–Iranian relationship is one of intensifying competition.<sup>1</sup> In Iraq, for instance, Turkey backed the losing bloc in the 2010 elections and Iran the eventual winner, Nouri Al-Maliki. Turkey currently shelters the fugitive Iraqi vice-president, Tariq Al-Hashemi, a Sunni who fled persecution by the Shia-dominated regime. In Palestine, Turkey has strengthened its relationship with Hamas, considered a terrorist organisation by Turkey's NATO allies, while Iran has boosted support to Hamas's smaller and more radical rivals in Gaza, such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Iran and Turkey have also clashed over Turkey's participation in hosting the radar for NATO's missile-defence system, fuelling belligerent rhetoric from both sides over the issue.

Most notably, the two countries have found themselves on opposite sides of the battle over Syria. Iran has financially, materially and diplomatically supported the Assad regime, whereas Turkey shelters, arms and assists parts of the political and armed opposition. Syria will be the most significant driver of Turkish threat perceptions over Iran in the short term. Turkey is especially concerned by the growing role of Iran's ally Hizbullah inside Syrian territory, as well as Iran's alleged outreach to Turkish minority communities. In August 2012, the Turkish foreign ministry noted 'groundless accusations

and exceptionally inappropriate threats against our country by some Iranian officials', including the indirect threats issued by Iran's army chief of staff in response to Turkey's role in Syria.<sup>2</sup> Since then, Turkey has only hardened its support for forcible regime change in Syria.<sup>3</sup>

### **Compartmentalising the Nuclear Question?**

Turkey's long-term relationship with Iran will be affected by trends in all of these theatres, and particularly by the extent to which Turkish or Iranian allies gain influence in Syria and Iraq. Yet Turkey's view of the specifically *nuclear* threat is, to some extent, insulated from the broader relationship. Turkish policy elites are concerned about a nuclear Iran in broad terms, unlike their counterparts in the Gulf. They would grow more concerned still were the relationship to fray further, for instance if Iranian-backed groups in Syria were to target Turkish interests or Turkish soil itself. Yet although the Turkey–Iran relationship is at its lowest ebb in decades, this has not resulted in notable changes to the former's stance on the nuclear dispute. This suggests a basic continuity.

Since the beginning of the Iranian nuclear dispute in its present form in 2002, Turkey has viewed, and spoken of, Iran's nuclear programme in less threatening terms than its NATO allies, particularly the US. In 2010, Turkey voted against the imposition of further sanctions on Iran at the UN, the efficacy of which it continues to doubt. That same year, Turkey worked with Brazil to offer Iran an alternative fuel-swap agreement, which met with frustration from US officials who were attempting to shore up those sanctions already in place. Turkish officials continue to blame the Obama administration for obstructing that deal, and, before the November 2013 Geneva agreement was reached, portrayed themselves as one of a dwindling number of neutral actors able to resume a mediating role with Iran outside the auspices of the EU/E3+3 process.<sup>4</sup>

As such, Turkey has compartmentalised or quarantined the nuclear issue: even as the Turkey–Iran relationship has worsened, Turkey's position on the nuclear dispute has not taken on a sense of alarmism or urgency. The key question is whether this stance would survive Iranian nuclearisation. Answering this requires an understanding of Turkey's present motives, and how these might shape Turkey's response to a nuclear Iran.

On the one hand, Turkey's antipathy to sanctions is influenced by the impact of sanctions on Turkish commercial interests in Iran,<sup>5</sup> with its exports to the country having plummeted, for instance,<sup>6</sup> and all Turkish banks except one having ceased processing payments for Iranian customers.<sup>7</sup> This is largely the result of bilateral sanctions – that is, those outside the purview of the UN and beyond the direct control of either Turkey or the UN Security Council. If Iranian nuclearisation were met with a tightening of sanctions – as



occurred with regard to India, Pakistan and North Korea after their nuclear tests – then Turkey might still protest against this, out of concern for its own economic interests. Turkey is one of the biggest economic beneficiaries of the sanctions relief granted to Iran as part of the Geneva agreement, which it strongly welcomed.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, in insisting that Iran has a right to enrich uranium under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Turkey is also defending its own right to future enrichment. This is more important to Turkey than almost any of the regional powers discussed in this Whitehall Report, but it also indicates that Turkey perceives a long-term Iranian enrichment programme to be less of a threat than the Gulf states, many of which see large-scale enrichment as tantamount to nuclear capability (see Chapter II). Although Ankara wants Tehran to ratify and adhere to the IAEA Additional Protocol (an upgraded safeguards regime) and face strict export controls, it is concerned that Western efforts to curb Iranian enrichment and reprocessing technology and activity might later also constrain Turkey. This has important implications for how Turkey might respond – or fail to respond – to a scenario in which the interim Geneva agreement falls apart or lapses, and Iran’s enrichment programme continues to expand.

#### **Turkey’s Responses to a Nuclear Iran**

However, Turkey’s more relaxed view of Iranian nuclear advances also means that Ankara might view outright and overt Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons as especially galling, and a diplomatic betrayal. Iran’s weaponisation might encourage Turkey to view it as untrustworthy, which in turn could deeply reinforce the Turkish perception of the threat posed by Iran as a result of intensified competition. The nuclear issue would no longer then be subject to ‘compartmentalisation’ and could put unsustainable strain on Turkey’s currently relaxed position with regard to sanctions, enrichment and a host of other matters. This is also likely to depend on the prevailing state of security competition between the two. If existing areas of dispute – notably Syria – continue to be contested as they are today, or perhaps even more so, then Turkey’s position is much more likely to harden and converge with that of its NATO allies, perhaps showing more flexibility in allowing explicit mention of Iran in the Alliance’s public statements, for instance. If security competition were to ease – and in this respect much would depend on Iran’s own behaviour after nuclearisation – then Turkey would still respond in many of the ways outlined later in this chapter, particularly with the aim of reinforcing security guarantees, but it would seek to do so in a way that did not burn bridges with Tehran.

These calculations might be affected by the *manner* of Iranian weaponisation: if Iran were to opt for a slower and more cautious route to a bomb – building up its enrichment and plutonium-separation capacity over a number of years,

and then gradually hindering inspectors – rather than breaking its safeguards agreements more drastically, this might have a less dramatic effect on Turkey's threat perceptions. Should Iran only hint at the existence of unassembled bombs, this would also be viewed differently to Iran's possession of deployed warheads on accurate, long-range missiles. The differences between these pathways would affect all states, of course, but Ankara may be especially sensitive in this regard, given its openness to seeing the nuclear dispute in less malign terms.

It is important to consider how Turkey might respond if Iranian nuclearisation were at the more overt end of this spectrum, however. Although the subject receives little public discussion, a handful of Turkish officials have indicated that they would seek nuclear weapons in response to Iranian weaponisation. Two former commanders of the Turkish air force, Generals Halis Burhan and Ergin Celasin, have declared that 'if Iran develops nuclear weapons, Turkey should do the same so as to be able to preserve the balance of power between the two countries and also in the region'.<sup>9</sup> Further, Jean-Loup Samaan suggests that 'although these views are not officially endorsed by Turkey's government, they reflect the state of the national security debate'.<sup>10</sup> Members of Turkey's strategic community have periodically echoed such comments, though they are seen to represent an extreme position within the debate.<sup>11</sup>

According to a 2012 public opinion poll, 53.9 per cent of those Turks surveyed believed that NATO's security umbrella was not sufficient to counter the threat of a nuclear Iran, and that Turkey should develop its own nuclear weapons; only 34.8 per cent disagreed.<sup>12</sup> Other polls show that nearly 90 per cent of Turks hold the view that Iran's nuclear programme is oriented towards acquiring nuclear weapons, with under 10 per cent perceiving peaceful purposes – a level of suspicion exceeded only in Palestine, curiously, and Saudi Arabia. The increase, between 2006 and 2012, in such popular suspicion amounts to 14 percentage points.<sup>13</sup> It appears, therefore, that the Turkish people are generally more wary of Iran's nuclear programme than the Turkish government, and it is reasonable to surmise that these attitudes would weigh upon the government in the event of further Iranian nuclearisation.

### **Sources of Turkish Restraint**

However, there are a number of reasons why Turkey is unlikely to take this path. First, these numbers may not be meaningful. The public is poorly informed about the US nuclear weapons based on Turkish soil under NATO auspices, and the armed forces are especially reticent in discussing policy options openly. More importantly, as a member of NATO, Turkey already enjoys longstanding nuclear protection, and would do so whether or not it hosted US nuclear weapons. This suggests that one of the first steps that

Ankara would need to take following Iranian nuclearisation would be public education to raise awareness of Turkey's existing nuclear guarantees. This could be reinforced by costly if temporary signs of US commitment, such as the visit of dual-capable US aircraft (an option explored further below).

Although Turkish–US ties have been strained over the past decade, following incidents like Turkey's rejection of US deployments on its soil during the 2003 Iraq War, these strains have not altered the fundamentals of Turkey's position within the Alliance. Turkey's hosting of the radar element of NATO's missile-defence shield, despite Iranian opposition during a period in which the Turkey–Iran relationship was on firmer footing, further indicates its perception of NATO as a suitable vehicle for its long-term security, even where this comes at a cost to the country's broader diplomacy.

Turkey's behaviour over the course of the Syrian crisis is instructive in this regard. Although articulating a policy of regime change, Turkey mostly shunned unilateral measures, refused to commit its own military forces to the attack it claimed to want, and instead sought to involve NATO, succeeding only in having German, Dutch and American Patriot ballistic-missile defences stationed on its soil.<sup>14</sup> Turkey treated NATO as the ultimate backstop to its security, a stance that would likely condition its response to Iranian nuclearisation.

Second, Turkey is able to demonstrate – to both its public and its adversaries – the tangible aspect of its external security guarantees, including nuclear guarantees. Turkey hosts two US air force bases, one of which – Izmir Air Station – contains the headquarters of NATO's Allied Air Component Command for Southern Europe. In addition, Turkey's 39th Air Base Wing is thought to host between sixty and seventy B61 gravity bombs at Incirlik Air Base near Adana, with ten to twenty of those designated for Turkey, and the remainder for the US.<sup>15</sup> The Turkish air force is reportedly unable to deliver these weapons itself, as it lacks suitable aircraft certified for nuclear missions, and the US does not station appropriate aircraft inside Turkey. However, these capability deficits could both be rectified in the aftermath of Iranian weaponisation, possibly as part of a deliberate effort to signal resolve and capability. Such steps would be preferable, from the point of view of Ankara and others, to a Turkish effort to develop an indigenous nuclear capability.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, hosting nuclear weapons or their delivery systems is not a prerequisite to successful extended deterrence (Japan and South Korea have managed without), but it might contribute to public confidence in this respect.

Turkish faith in these external guarantees cannot be taken for granted. For one thing, the Dutch parliament's decision to halt procurement of the F-35 programme means that, like Germany, it might have no designated successor to its F-16s, which are due to be withdrawn from service in 2025,

and therefore no future nuclear-delivery capability.<sup>17</sup> Turkey might not want to be the only remaining country, other than Italy, to host NATO nuclear weapons if Germany and the Netherlands no longer do so.<sup>18</sup> Of course, a nuclear Iran might upset these assumptions: Germany and the Netherlands may be less likely to end hosting (with or without delivery systems) and even if they do, Turkey may have few qualms about being isolated in this regard.

The uncertainty over NATO's tactical nuclear weapons reflects a broader and deeper uncertainty over the dependability of the Alliance as a whole. Turkey's 1952 accession to the Alliance was contested, and Turkey has routinely worried about whether it could rely on its allies in the context of a Middle Eastern, rather than a European, threat.<sup>19</sup> These anxieties grew after the US imposed an arms embargo on Turkey in 1975 in response to its invasion of Cyprus the previous year.<sup>20</sup> Turkish officials also routinely express disquiet concerning the level of support provided by NATO and the US during the Syrian civil war. However, as Sinan Ülgen writes, 'the only circumstance where [Turkish nuclear weapons] would acquire a degree of likelihood is a breakdown of Turkey's security relationship with the United States'.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, were Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon, the US–Turkey relationship would probably be at its most robust in exactly the circumstances in which the need for it would be at its greatest. Turkey would require at least short-term Alliance reassurance (as during the Syrian conflict), while the US would be all the more incentivised to preserve and deepen its security relationship with Turkey. This is not only because the European missile-defence system, and therefore Turkish co-operation in hosting the radar, would become important, but also because the US would be eager to prevent Turkey from engaging in nuclear hedging or bandwagoning by moving closer to Iran.

Third, even if it sought to do so, Turkey would struggle to produce nuclear weapons. It lacks fissile material and cannot mine or enrich uranium or reprocess spent fuel.<sup>22</sup> The absence of any enrichment capabilities and the difficulty of obtaining these in the aftermath of Iranian weaponisation (when any potential suppliers would be well aware of Turkey's heightened interest in producing fissile material) present the greatest obstacle to Turkish nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> As part of its active civil nuclear efforts, Turkey has sought to purchase nuclear reactors that could be used a part of a future effort to acquire fissile material. However, as Aaron Stein observes, for most of this period Turkey refused to offer government financing for such a capital-intensive project, and has agreed to conditions that would see the export of spent fuel by foreign suppliers – hardly behaviour consistent with a government eager to exploit nuclear technology for weaponry.<sup>24</sup>

These three factors ought to temper proliferation alarmism in the case of Turkey, but they should also alert policy-makers to the importance of

Alliance dynamics in averting second-order proliferation. Turkey is likely to employ more demanding criteria in judging Iran's level of nuclearisation, de-emphasising enrichment alone and instead focusing on developments that point more clearly to weapons intent. Turkey is likely first to seek recourse to established and trusted Alliance structures in responding to adverse developments, and only then examine what would be both costly and severely disruptive indigenous options.

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## A Response from Turkey

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**Aaron Stein**

**T**URKEY HAS been making preparations to defend against ballistic-missile and WMD-armed threats in the Middle East since the mid-1990s. Ankara's policy *vis-à-vis* Iran has remained consistent and Turkish policy-makers have given no indication that they intend to develop nuclear weapons. As the previous chapter indicated, Turkey would likely respond to a nuclear Iran by seeking 'recourse to established and trusted alliance structures', and 'only then [would it] examine what would be costly and severely disruptive indigenous options'. Turkey is already taking steps to develop indigenous capabilities in response to the threat of proliferation in the Middle East, but remains committed to lending whatever support it can to the diplomatic track to ensure that such a reality never comes to fruition.

Turkey and Iran have an incentive to co-operate on numerous issues, despite their disagreement about the latter's potential nuclearisation. As such, Ankara is likely to continue to embrace dialogue with the Islamic Republic, while also continuing its programme to develop conventional weapons with which to defend Turkey from ballistic-missile attack.

### **Turkey Prepares for Proliferation**

Turkish and Iranian economic co-operation has moved in parallel to Ankara's efforts to develop the necessary capabilities to defend itself from ballistic missiles and WMD. Turkey has paired these efforts with calls for the universalisation of non-proliferation norms and the establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction (MEWMDFZ).

Yet Ankara is careful to note that any such zone would not include Turkey. Turkish policy-makers quietly argue that the seventy or so American nuclear weapons deployed in Ankara are necessary for deterrence and help to ensure that the NATO burden-sharing principle remains firmly in place.

Nevertheless, Turkey continues to argue that the best way to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue is through sustained dialogue. Ankara argues that coercive diplomacy undermines Iranian moderates and helps to empower the hardliners. Thus, as an extension of Turkey's belief in the necessity of the diplomatic approach, Ankara has steadfastly refused

to support military strikes against Iran. Turkey argues that such action would only serve to strengthen elements within Iran that may covet nuclear weapons. Thus, while military action could slow the Iranian programme down, it would, in the long term, run counter to the goal of ensuring that the programme remains peaceful. In such a scenario, Ankara – which is well within range of Iranian missiles – would bear the brunt of the negative consequences associated with military action.

In supporting dialogue, therefore, Turkey's aim is to ensure that military strikes are averted, while also taking steps to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Yet, unlike Israel or other Gulf countries, Turkey has expressed confidence in the IAEA's ability to ensure non-diversion for a weapons programme.

#### **Preparing for the Worst**

Nevertheless, Turkey's armed forces and civilian leadership have embarked on a focused and sustained programme to develop both active and passive defences against missile attack. Turkey's most recent pursuit of a ballistic-missile-defence system coincided with the Obama administration's announced plans for the development of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) – a missile-defence system that relies on SM-3 missile interceptors deployed on Aegis missile destroyers in the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> However, in order to ensure complete territorial coverage, Turkey has opted to procure a Chinese ballistic-missile-defence system and to develop its own low- and medium-altitude air-defence systems.

Turkey has paired these plans with offensive systems that could target ballistic missiles before they are launched. In 2006, Turkey launched an indigenous effort to develop a cruise missile capable of targeting ground-based and deeply buried targets.<sup>2</sup> These systems are intended to act in concert with a slew of sensors that Ankara aims to deploy in or around 2023 to aid in targeting and early warning. These systems, while independent, are intended to complement NATO security guarantees.

Thus, the assertion above that 'Turkey would respond to Iranian nuclearisation in a measured way' and 'would primarily invoke its pre-existing relationships with NATO and the US rather than rushing to indigenous nuclear capability' is largely in line with Turkey's current approach to the Iranian nuclear issue. Yet what is missing in the chapter is a discussion of Ankara's concerted efforts to develop defences against ballistic-missile and WMD threats. Ankara is intent on pursuing – but not articulating – a comprehensive approach to the proliferation



issue that includes an emphasis on diplomacy, while also taking steps to have a robust defence in place should those efforts fail.

### **Continuity: Ankara and the 'What If' Scenario**

Turkey's approach to the Iran nuclear issue, therefore, is based on a multi-year policy aimed at defusing tensions and putting in place conventional assets to help defend Turkish territory. The decisions to pursue these policies were not a result of the disclosures made about the Iranian nuclear programme in 2003, but were put in place shortly after the Cold War, in response to the generic threat of regional proliferation.

Ankara's policy is framed by its sustained interest in maintaining relations with Iran. As early as 1980, Turkey made clear that it was prepared to shun US pressure and pursue its own energy interests with the Islamic Republic. This dynamic continues. Turkey is therefore likely to continue to try to compartmentalise its dealings with the Islamic Republic. On the security side, however, Turkey will continue to be pulled in two different directions: on the one hand, Ankara and Tehran have an incentive to co-operate against the Kurdish nationalists; yet, on the other, Turkey is wary of Iran's nuclear programme and its development of ballistic missiles.

Moving forward, Turkey is likely to continue with its missile programmes and, at some point in the future, will have a limited capability to attack ballistic missiles and command-and-control centres in the region. Yet these efforts will continue to be framed by Turkey's participation in NATO and rely heavily on the collective defence arrangement. Ankara, therefore, will continue to have an incentive to support the forward deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe.

Critically, these efforts do not include the pursuit of an independent nuclear-weapons programme. In fact, such a move would be wildly out of character, given Turkey's historical approach to the threats posed by WMD and ballistic missiles in the region. Ankara is likely to continue to pursue its own conventional capabilities, rely on NATO guarantees and embrace dialogue.

*Aaron Stein is an Associate Fellow at RUSI. He is also the nonproliferation programme manager at the Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies in Istanbul, where he works on security and proliferation issues in the Middle East. He is currently a PhD Candidate at King's College London, researching Iranian and Turkish nuclear decision-making. He*

*has written extensively on Turkish politics and regional proliferation, publishing in scholarly journals and print media, including Foreign Policy, Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, National Interest, and World Politics Review.*

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## V. Israel

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WEEKS BEFORE the latest round of EU/E3+3 diplomacy concluded, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had insisted that 'Israel is not obliged by this agreement'. Yet in the aftermath of the completion of the November 2013 Geneva agreement he declared that, 'today the world has become a much more dangerous place because the most dangerous regime in the world has taken a significant step toward attaining the most dangerous weapon in the world'. His intelligence minister compared the deal to those agreed with North Korea.<sup>1</sup> Some of this language is intended to influence the subsequent stages of diplomacy, but it also reflects a more severe threat perception. For Israeli leaders, Iranian nuclearisation is not a subject that will be taken off the agenda, even if the Geneva agreement successfully leads to a longer-term arrangement. It is therefore of continued importance to understand potential Israeli responses to renewed expansion in Iran's nuclear programme or outright weaponisation.

Israeli policy elites, more than those of any other country surveyed in this Whitehall Report, have always viewed Iranian nuclearisation in exceptionally threatening terms; indeed, many, though not all, see it as an existential threat. The Arab Awakening exacerbated these threat perceptions, with Egypt at its most unstable in decades and Iran more deeply involved in Syria than ever before, and with a vulnerable regime in Damascus liable to transfer strategic weaponry to Hizbullah in Lebanon. Although few Israeli policy elites fear an Iranian bolt from the blue, they near-uniformly foresee 'more aggressive terrorism, unconventional warfare, and rocket attacks against Israel by Iran's proxies and allies'.<sup>2</sup> Israeli officials are wary of discussing how Israel and its allies might counteract these threats *after* Iranian nuclearisation, preferring to dedicate their diplomatic bandwidth to a message of prevention. Both for this reason, and because Israel is the most independently capable of Iran's regional adversaries, its responses to Iranian nuclearisation are the most difficult to map out.

Of all the threats posed by a nuclear Iran, that which is channelled through Hizbullah – the best-armed of Israel's various non-state adversaries – is widely seen as the most potent. Israeli officials are especially concerned that Iran would feel less inhibited than at present in providing the group with longer-range and more sophisticated missiles in such numbers that Israel's Iron Dome missile-defence system might be overwhelmed, leaving population centres in the central regions of the country under severe threat of bombardment

by conventional weapons. In this sense, Israeli threat perceptions are more direct and conventional than those of any other state considered in this study. Israel's repeated air strikes in response to Syria's alleged attempted transfers of advanced weapons systems to Hezbollah are indicative of the threat this is seen to pose. Israeli officials are not persuaded that Hezbollah's political status within Lebanon serves to diminish the threat. The threat from Hamas and smaller Iranian-backed groups in Gaza, notably Palestinian Islamic Jihad, is seen as a lesser, if serious, concern. Overall, Israel's assessment, as conveyed in a leaked 2007 diplomatic cable from the US embassy in Tel Aviv, is that 'even if a nuclear-armed Iran did not immediately launch a strike on the Israeli heartland, the very fact that Iran possesses nuclear weapons would completely transform the Middle East strategic environment in ways that would make Israel's long-term survival as a democratic Jewish state increasingly problematic'.<sup>3</sup>

For Israel, the prospect of Iranian nuclear-shielded aggression extends beyond attacks on Israeli territory itself. Rather, it represents an *extra-regional* phenomenon in the form of intensified activity by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) – the Corps' Quds Force in particular – and elements of Hezbollah against Israeli and Jewish interests worldwide. Attacks on Israeli diplomats in Bangkok, Tbilisi and Delhi in February 2012 were widely seen, not least within Israel, as Iranian retaliation for assassinations of its own nuclear scientists in the preceding months and years that were widely attributed to Israel.<sup>4</sup> A later, successful attack on Israeli tourists in Bulgaria was attributed to Hezbollah. Iran and Hezbollah have not always co-ordinated such actions – and in some cases have failed to 'deconflict' their parallel planning<sup>5</sup> – but Israeli officials fear that, regardless of the degree of co-operation, a nuclear Iran would have greater freedom to extend such broad support to militant allies. In some such cases, Israel might be inhibited from escalating any crisis to a state-on-state conflict for fear of further escalation to the nuclear level, with an attendant degree of risk that would outweigh any benefits.

With these perceived threats in mind, this chapter turns to the question of how Israel might respond to the Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons.

### **Military Instruments**

Post-nuclearisation Israeli military action should not be ruled out entirely. Both the Soviet Union and the US threatened military action against China's nuclear programme, even after Beijing had conducted a nuclear test.<sup>6</sup> However, even repeated military strikes would be unlikely to completely and durably destroy Iran's nuclear-weapons capability.<sup>7</sup> A limited strike on only one part of Iran's nuclear programme – for instance, the Arak reactor (unlikely as this is to survive a comprehensive agreement) – might also enable Iran to suspend safeguards around other parts, while generating sympathy

and therefore diplomatic insulation from reprimand. For these reasons it is worth considering other Israeli responses.

As such, it must be asked how Israel would deal with the scenarios outlined above, including growing state sponsorship of sub-conventional attacks against Israel and its interests. It should also be noted that Israel's strategic predicament is likely to differ from that of other states facing nuclear-shielded terrorism or militancy.

Whereas India is hesitant to strike at Lashkar-e-Taiba for fear of unavoidably threatening core Pakistani territory and thereby inviting nuclear retaliation, Israel, by contrast, will continue to be able to strike at Hizbullah or Hamas on Lebanese or Palestinian soil, regardless of Iran's nuclear status. Attacking the territory of a third party is quite different to – and therefore 'safer' than – attacking Iranian soil; Israel simply does not believe that Iran would use nuclear weapons in response to an attack not directly targeting its own territory, and Iran cannot credibly threaten to do so. The scope and implications of Israel's military freedom of manoeuvre against Iranian allies and proxies is something that remains understudied, part of the reason being that for Israeli elites to acknowledge the resilience of their retaliatory capabilities would be to dilute their warnings about a nuclear Iran. Of course, Iran could respond to this by 'hosting' more non-state actors on its own soil, but this would not be without significant cost, and even Iran's own territory would not necessarily be a sanctuary against limited Israeli operations under the nuclear threshold (for example, special-forces raids of the sort that Israel has historically favoured and in which it possesses a high degree of proficiency).

### **Diplomatic Engagement**

In his 2013 speech to the UN General Assembly, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated:<sup>8</sup>

The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran and the emergence of other threats in our region have led many of our Arab neighbors to recognize, finally recognize, that Israel is not their enemy. And this affords us the opportunity to overcome the historic animosities and build new relationships, new friendships, new hopes.

Leveraging its sense of shared threats with some states in the Arab world, Israel already looks to be moving to create an informal bloc of regional states, including Saudi Arabia, others in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Jordan, as a counterweight to Iranian ambitions. In this scenario, Israel – alongside Saudi Arabia – would become the fulcrum of a regional balance of power, in which this demographically inferior collective would work together, sharing intelligence and co-ordinating policies, to prevent Iranian expansion

across the region. Israel finds common ground with the Gulf states on many issues, particularly with regards to blunting Hizbullah.<sup>9</sup> These states would also have a shared interest in limiting the vertical and horizontal proliferation of any Iranian nuclear-weapons programme, that is, the number of warheads Iran might accumulate.

It has been reported that Netanyahu has been supervising a series of 'intensive meetings' with representatives of these countries, with one 'high-ranking Gulf official' having made a secret visit to Israel.<sup>10</sup> These reports followed the leaking of Israeli Foreign Ministry budget reports that Israel planned to re-open a diplomatic office in a Gulf state (it formerly had a mission in Qatar).<sup>11</sup> Further investigation in the Gulf indicates that Israel has a diplomatic presence in a second Gulf state.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, it was also reported that Meir Dagan, then-head of Israel's intelligence service, the Mossad, conducted talks in Saudi Arabia regarding Iran and its nuclear programme.<sup>13</sup> In November 2013, the *Sunday Times* reported that Saudi Arabia had granted Israel over-flight rights as part of any strike on Iran and could provide further military assistance.<sup>14</sup> This reporting occurred during ongoing nuclear diplomacy and, although the authors do not assess it to be credible, the story's very appearance suggests that a degree of joint signalling might be occurring.

Whether engagement with the Gulf states can realistically enhance Israeli security *vis-à-vis* Iran is open to debate. A degree of intelligence-sharing, diplomatic action by the GCC to shield Israel in the Arab League, and the approval of over-flight rights if Israel chooses to use force against Iran are the most Israel could hope for. Until a resolution over the status of Palestine is achieved, the Arab states will limit the extent of their co-operation. Although Netanyahu has stated that he is prepared to make a 'historic compromise for genuine and enduring peace', few expect these compromises to be acceptable to the Arab nations.<sup>15</sup> Israel could seek to leverage negotiations with the Palestinians as an inducement for Arab states to co-operate on Iran. One former Mossad official has surmised that 'policy planners in the Israel[i] Prime Minister's Office evidently view the API [the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative] ... as a possible vehicle for promoting security discussions that focus on Iran and Syria and would involve Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states'.<sup>16</sup> Yet Israel would find itself constrained by the API's guidelines, on which there are notable sticking points – the status of East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital being the most difficult.

It should therefore be asked whether direct diplomatic engagement with a nuclear Iran might be an option for Israel instead. The two nations have co-operated in the past, even after the 1979 Iranian revolution.<sup>17</sup> In early 1980, for instance, Israel's then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin approved the shipment of weaponry and spare tyres for Iran's US-made fighter planes, an

act reciprocated by Iran's granting of permission for the emigration of Iranian Jews.<sup>18</sup> Yet this was driven by mutual fear of Saddam Hussein's revisionist Iraq, a common threat that no longer exists. Moreover, as Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace pointedly asks, 'how do you reach a rapprochement with a regime that needs you as an adversary for its own ideological legitimacy?'<sup>19</sup> Even moderate senior Iranian clerics, such as the late Hussain Ali Montazeri and his protégé Yusuf Sanei, who oppose both war with Israel and Iran's present system of clerical rule, believe strongly that Israel's occupation of Palestinian land is a crime that has to be ended.<sup>20</sup> Any channel for dialogue between Israel and Iran would have to be plausibly deniable on both sides, with great political risks to both. What is more likely is that communication would occur through third parties; the existence of such a channel would be particularly important if Iranian nuclearisation were to occur. As Jean-Loup Samaan notes, 'stability through nuclear deterrence is not a natural state and requires sophisticated policies from all stakeholders to mitigate the risks of miscalculation'.<sup>21</sup>

### **Leveraging Allies**

Israel would likely explore means by which it could place pressure on a nuclear Iran through continued multilateral sanctions and covert efforts. Yet a nuclear Iran would in itself vindicate every Israeli belief about the weakness of the EU/E3+3 bloc, US leadership and Western unreliability more broadly. Israel's leadership would therefore be disinclined to place its faith in allies at such a juncture, and it would be difficult to persuade Israel to co-ordinate its policies with what might be more measured Western efforts, with Western diplomats having previously considered alleged Israeli actions – above all, assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists – to be counterproductive in persuading Iran to take a particular course of action.<sup>22</sup> Much would depend on the Western response to Iran. Multilateral and bilateral sanctions would likely continue and indeed intensify following any nuclearisation: the situation would resemble the Korean Peninsula, where North Korean disarmament is still official US policy, unlike that in South Asia – the US having brought India into the non-proliferation regime and tacitly accepted Pakistani nuclear weapons. However, if Western states decided that the best approach to a nuclear Iran would be to cap, rather than roll back, its nuclear programme – for instance, focusing on curbing the range and sophistication of delivery systems but treating nuclear devices as irreversible – then this could create significant points of friction with Israel.

As a nuclear-armed state, it is unlikely that Israel would need or seek any overt guarantee from another power or multilateral institution to help enforce mutual deterrence with respect to Iran. US–Israeli co-operation over missile defence is already highly developed.<sup>23</sup> If the US were to increase its presence in bases around the Gulf, this would simultaneously enhance the US's ability to assist Israel in the case of Iranian or Iranian-backed aggression against it.

However, Israel would need to think about how best to engage the US. For instance, it must be considered whether Israel would oppose – as in the past – a greater flow of US arms to Gulf states. Furthermore, if Israel were to take military action against parts of a weaponised Iranian nuclear programme (for example, against facilities producing fissile materials, but not against storage sites for nuclear devices), it must be asked whether it would seek US assistance in doing so. If so, this would undercut part of the Israeli argument over the danger posed by Iranian weapons – after all, if Iran’s nuclear weapons could not deter Israeli military action, they could not be expected to give Iran any greater protection than it has at present. Moreover, it is important to consider whether the US would block any initiative in the UN Security Council to punish Israel for its actions. US behaviour towards North Korea shows that Washington is wary of using military force against nuclear-armed states, particularly when the risk of a subsequent conventional war is high.

Yet even after Iranian nuclearisation, Israeli perceptions of the utility of force are likely to differ from those of the US. Israel may not run the risk of a full-scale war to destroy weaponised Iranian nuclear capabilities, but it may employ robust, coercive measures – including limited military strikes and sabotage – to degrade those capabilities in ways that would be deemed excessively risky by the US. Managing the US–Israel relationship under these circumstances – in which security co-operation would assume even greater significance, but bilateral co-ordination would become more difficult – would be even more challenging than it has been for the past several years of nuclear diplomacy. Although the authors consider it unlikely that Israel would see benefit in diluting its nuclear posture of ‘opacity’ – perhaps in order to send stronger deterrent signals to Iran – this might also place strain upon the two allies’ relationship.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion**

That Israel is publicly hesitant to discuss ‘day after’ scenarios reflects its broader emphasis on the near-unquantifiable risk and unacceptability of a nuclear Iran. There are no ‘victories’ for Israel in this situation: the Geneva agreement represented the (conditional) acceptance of Iranian enrichment by the EU/E3+3 and, just as importantly, the acknowledgment that any restrictions placed on the Iranian nuclear programme as part of a comprehensive agreement would last for a fixed, mutually defined period after which Iran would be free to do as it saw fit. For Israel, a nuclear deal comprising anything other than Iranian surrender would represent only a transition to a long state of constant vigilance and pressure, liable to begin eroding at any moment. Going further, to consider a nuclear-armed Iran is to consider a catastrophic failure not just of the credibility of Israel’s key ally, the US, but also of Israel’s reputation for successful deterrence. In the past, Israeli analysts have spoken of ‘restoring’ deterrence through punitive means. Yet this concept is more complicated in the context of nuclearisation.



The authors assess it unlikely that Israel would use force whilst the Geneva agreement, or a robust long-term arrangement, is in place. However, when this expires and Iran is treated as any other member of the NPT, or if Iran is seen to violate any of its commitments under such existing or future agreements, Israel's calculations may be less predictable. Moreover, questions arise as to whether Israel would do something that no state in history has done: use force against completed – whether deployed or disassembled – nuclear weapons. In turn, this prompts questions whether the use of force against *parts* of a weaponised Iranian nuclear programme – such as fissile-material production sites – would induce a growth in that programme that might not otherwise have occurred; and whether Israel would continue its alleged campaign of assassination and sabotage even after Iran obtained a bomb – again, something that no nuclear state has encountered before. If a nuclear Iran were attacked with conventional weapons and failed to use its nuclear weapons in response, this might itself undermine the credibility of Iran's deterrent in precisely the area that it would supposedly have strengthened by going nuclear: Israel's retaliatory options. On the other hand, it would not be credible for Iran to use nuclear weapons in response to an Israeli strike that did not threaten the regime. It is unclear how Israel would assess the risks involved, but these risks certainly complicate the picture of Iranian 'immunity' that current scenarios of a nuclear Iran portray. Currently, however, Israeli policy elites have few answers to these questions, because intellectual and policy bandwidth has been dedicated to the more urgent task of signalling that Israel would not allow such scenarios to come about.

Israel would need a clear understanding with the US as to whether and how the latter's priorities for the region match up with its own. US arms supplies to regional allies in the Gulf, as well as to Jordan, Egypt and Turkey – as part of reassurance regarding the Iranian threat – might be seen to erode Israel's qualitative military edge in the region; yet following Iranian nuclearisation, Israel's interests might further converge with these countries', perhaps diminishing its historical concerns over US arms transfers to Arab states. Israel would also continue to press for the continuation of the economic and non-proliferation sanctions regime against Iran, which – it fears – might otherwise be allowed to erode over time, like those against India and Pakistan. If other states were to violate their own non-proliferation commitments – for example, if Saudi Arabia sent overt signals of nuclear hedging, such as the commencement of enrichment or reprocessing activities – it might become increasingly difficult to preserve international support for these sanctions. Israel would fiercely resist such a trend.

Yet Israel is also idiosyncratic among the regional powers considered in this study for at least two reasons. First, it possesses the widest array of military, intelligence, diplomatic and other instruments of power. It is able to pressure both a conventional and nuclear-armed Iran in ways that none of its regional

peers can hope to match. Second, it is not limited to seeking shade under the US nuclear umbrella. Its own nuclear deterrent ‘backstops’ its conventional military capabilities, which, as has been argued, would remain relevant even within a nuclear rivalry. This does not preclude Iranian brinkmanship or proxy warfare, but it does afford Israeli decision-makers an additional layer of confidence and security in future crises. Iranian calculations over Israel’s nuclear and conventional thresholds would be uncertain and complex, tempering the dynamic of the stability-instability paradox. While Israel is the most alarmist of all of the regional powers examined in this Whitehall Report, it is also the most powerful.

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## A Response from Israel

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**Michael Herzog**

FROM THE perspective of those in Israel's defence establishment and its decision-makers, Iran's nuclearisation tops the list of threats to their country's national security. Some, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, even define the threat as 'existential'. One should not underestimate this mindset in a nation whose collective consciousness has been shaped by historical persecution and a series of wars forced upon it by hostile neighbours.

Israelis do not regard the challenge as being exclusive to them, and believe that it falls to the 'free world', under US leadership, to resolve it. At the same time, however, they see the threat to Israel as being far greater than that posed to any other regional or international actor. This is due to the potential marriage between WMD (Israelis have no doubt that Iran seeks a nuclear weapon) and the Iranian regime's deeply felt ideological and theological hostility towards Israel. This hostility, coupled with its regional hegemonic ambitions, has already led Iran to target Israel through proxies – regionally and globally. There is a strong feeling that if the international community were to fail to put a stop to Iran's nuclear ambitions, the burden would fall on Israel. The perception of waning US regional influence since the Arab Awakening has reinforced this concern.

The question is whether a nuclear-armed Iran would actually use its capabilities against Israel. Most Israelis agree that this is not an issue that should be put to the test. In either case, Israel believes that a nuclear-armed Iran would dramatically alter Israel's strategic landscape by triggering a regional nuclear arms race, enhancing Iran's position as a mainstay of radicalism, and allowing Tehran, under the shield of nuclear deterrence, to escalate its destabilising power projection. Further into the future, proliferation among non-state actors is also considered a threat.

For Israelis, the policy debate over Iran is therefore an acute, real-life issue, not a theoretical one. The consequences of any action to prevent Iranian nuclearisation are weighed carefully against the cost of inaction. For Israel, all options really are on the table.

### **Israel's Response to a Nuclear-Armed Iran**

Iran's nuclearisation would constitute a major defeat for Israel's preventive policy and its 'Begin doctrine', which establishes the policy

of denial of nuclear capabilities to regional actors who might use them to threaten Israel. Moreover, it would underscore the emerging perception of the US as an unreliable ally.

Indeed, Israel is wholly focused on prevention and will not so much as hint at an alternative, lest it be perceived internationally to be resigned to the idea of a nuclear-armed Iran, thereby also weakening the resolve of others. As such, in Israel, unlike the West, there is no serious containment school, and any discussion of Israel's response *after the fact* is, necessarily, highly speculative.

In forecasting Israel's possible use of military instruments 'the day after' Iranian nuclearisation, it would be necessary to consider why Israel failed to deter Iran from this course, given its determined commitment to prevention. In particular, it should be asked whether Israel would be surprised by an Iranian nuclear breakout, deterred, or faced with a closed operational window or a broader negative cost-benefit calculus. It should also be considered whether Iran would achieve break out under the cover of a diplomatic deal with the international community – a scenario of great concern to Israel.

Whatever the circumstances, if Israel made a calculated decision not to strike Iran *before* it became a nuclear-armed state, it is no more likely to take such action *after* this occurred. Whilst overt military action to roll back Iranian nuclearisation cannot be entirely ruled out, the potential gains from such action for Israel would probably diminish compared to pre-nuclearisation. Facing a nuclear-armed Iran, Israel is more likely to employ clandestine and covert intelligence and military tools.

If Israel were unable – and other states were unwilling – to roll back Iranian nuclearisation, it would have to adopt a policy of deterrence and containment.

Deterrence would rely predominantly upon Israel's own strategic capabilities. Israel is unlikely to rely for its national security on a US deterrence umbrella. A regional nuclear arms race triggered by Iranian nuclearisation might force Israel to reconsider its long-held policy of ambiguity regarding its own strategic capabilities. Furthermore, Israel would probably not be deterred from striking Iran's proxies – first among them Hizbullah – should they, emboldened by Iran's nuclear posture, continue to provoke Israel and threaten its security.

Conversely, containment, including the continued imposition of international sanctions, would rely on the international community. Yet since Israel would have been vindicated in its belief in the inability of containment to check Iran's ambitions, more weight would fall on deterrence.

The chapter discusses a number of tools of potential benefit to Israel in the face of a nuclear-armed Iran. These include informal alliances with Arab states which share Israel's concerns, enhanced Israel-US co-operation, and the imposition of greater US and Western pressure on Iran. Yet in Israeli eyes, while realistic and desirable, these tools would have limited effect, since Arab states look set to restrain co-operation with Israel at least as long as there is no Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement in place, and the US would have lost credit for failing to stop Iran. Meanwhile, the chances of success in Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab peace-making would likely be diminished by Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, which would strengthen the 'resistance axis' in the region and intimidate moderates. Facing such an enormous challenge with limited tools, Israel could be tempted to visit the option of regime change, to the extent that this is possible.

It is hard to see direct diplomatic engagement developing between Israel and the current Iranian regime should Iran acquire the bomb. Indeed, given the high level of animosity, the chances of miscalculation between the parties would increase significantly, even if a channel of communication were established through a third party.

### **Conclusion**

A nuclear-armed Iran would require profound adjustments in Israel's national strategic doctrine. The new strategic landscape would present acute conundrums, enhancing Israel's need for peace with its neighbours, whilst also making this harder to achieve and increasing Israel's dependence on an American ally rendered less reliable, with no good alternatives.

*Brigadier General (IDF rtd) Michael Herzog is an International Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Senior Visiting Fellow at BICOM (Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre). He previously served as head of Strategic Planning in the IDF and chief of staff to Israel's minister of defence.*





## Policy Implications and Conclusion

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THIS CHAPTER concludes this Whitehall Report by drawing out the policy implications of the preceding national studies. It ties together various common themes, and looks at how Western allies of these regional powers – principally, the United States – can and should orient themselves. The authors argue that a nuclear Iran would require that existing security guarantees be clarified and strengthened rather than completely transformed. In most cases, reassurance will involve the continuation of steps that are already underway, such as the extension of missile defence.

### **Iran's Nuclear Programme after the Geneva Agreement**

The June 2013 election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani; the subsequent initiation of high-level diplomatic contact between Iran and the United States in September; the instigation of secret US–Iranian talks before Rouhani's election and their continuation thereafter; and the successful conclusion of the Geneva agreement between Iran and the EU/E3+3 in November, within a hundred days of Rouhani's ascent to the presidency, have all changed the character of the nuclear dispute.

The Geneva agreement reduces the likelihood that Iran will obtain a nuclear weapon in the near term: Iran continues to enrich uranium but it has frozen growth in most of its nuclear programme and rolled back the most dangerous elements, notably enrichment to higher levels. The EU/E3+3 has said it will accept Iranian enrichment under strict conditions as part of a final agreement, and that these restrictions will remain for a mutually agreed period whose termination will surely require that Iran resolve all outstanding allegations of work towards nuclear weapons.<sup>1</sup> If a long-term comprehensive agreement entirely resolves the nuclear dispute – that is, if the restrictions placed on Iran were so stringent and irreversible that there could be no actual or perceived prospect of it producing nuclear weapons – then the premises of this Whitehall Report would indeed be redundant. It might therefore seem that the very subject of this study – regional responses to Iranian nuclearisation, up to and including the possession of nuclear weapons – could soon become of less relevance to policy, in the face of the first reductions in Iran's nuclear capabilities in over a decade.

Yet the authors' research, along with the regional response to the diplomacy surrounding the Geneva agreement, suggests that a long-term deal so universally welcomed is still unlikely. Moreover, as explored below, should the nascent diplomacy of Geneva collapse or merely lapse after its allotted six months, the perceived risks could grow further, bringing renewed importance to the question of regional powers' options.

First, it remains possible that no long-term deal can be done within a year, the timeframe set out by the Geneva agreement. For instance, Iran arrived at a partial nuclear deal with three European states in 2003, only for that agreement to collapse within a few years.<sup>2</sup> The most recent diplomacy is more effective, because, unlike in 2003, the US is now at the table, and because of the damaging impact of economic sanctions on Iran in the intervening years. However, there are still many obstacles to a deal, including disagreements between the EU/E3+3 and Iran over the scope of any Iranian enrichment programme; the future of Iran's heavy-water reactor at Arak; the length of any comprehensive agreement during which Iran would be under extraordinary restrictions; and opposition from hardliners in both Washington and Tehran, including those within their respective legislatures.

If the diplomacy initiated in late 2013 collapses, like that between Europe and Iran during 2003–05, then the situation could be worse than before. Although Iran is freezing most of its programme, even incremental advances it might make during the interim period will be portrayed, by opponents of diplomacy, as having shortened its breakout time (the time it takes to enrich one bomb's worth of uranium to weapons-grade). Indeed, President Rouhani, who was Iran's nuclear negotiator during the enrichment freeze from 2003, has himself acknowledged that 'while we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in parts of the facility in [the uranium-conversion facility at] Isfahan. In fact, by creating a calm environment, we were able to complete the work'.<sup>3</sup> This would elicit calls for and threats of military action, particularly by Israel, potentially raising bilateral tensions further and complicating continued diplomacy. This is a particular risk if the US and Iran seek to renew the Geneva agreement for another six months, something that is permitted within its terms but will be seen by many in Congress as an attempt to turn an interim deal into a permanent one. If the agreement's failure was followed by renewed growth in Iran's nuclear capabilities, even absent any decision to develop a nuclear weapon, this would amplify many of the regional concerns outlined in the preceding chapters, particularly for those states with more acute perceptions of the threat posed by Iran.

Second, the criteria for long-term diplomatic 'success' and 'failure' will differ between those conducting the diplomacy and those responding to it. Israel and some Gulf states remain resolutely sceptical of the Geneva agreement. They want Iran to dismantle its enrichment capabilities and heavy-water reactor entirely, and therefore see the EU/E3+3 conditional acceptance of Iranian enrichment as a dangerous concession that will allow Iran to renege and quickly shorten its breakout time if it chooses to do so in the future.

Even if a comprehensive agreement is reached, these states may have a very different interpretation of the threat posed by Iran's nuclear programme. This will be affected by the scope of Iran's programme under such an agreement, including, for example: how far Iran will shrink its enrichment capabilities (at the time of the Geneva agreement, Iran possessed more than 19,000 installed centrifuges and over 10,000 kg of uranium enriched to below 5 per cent); whether Iran will be allowed to activate the Arak reactor; and how quickly and credibly Iran will co-operate with the IAEA to address allegations of work towards nuclear-weapons research. The larger the programme allowed and the slower or more hesitant the co-operation with the IAEA, the more likely that Israel and Saudi Arabia would view a comprehensive agreement as a pause in Iranian nuclearisation rather than a durable reversal, and a pause that would make it harder to renew the tightening of sanctions that looked likely in late 2013.

These states may judge that a deal has not precluded Iranian weaponisation, but instead merely legitimated and institutionalised an unacceptably high degree of latent nuclear-weapons capability, a term that they define differently to the EU/E3+3. In other words, the nuclear 'dispute' – a multilateral standoff between Iran and the West – might end, but regional anxiety over Iran's nuclear programme would not.

Iran's own example is instructive: it intensified its nuclear programme, including an alleged nuclear-weapons programme, over the same period in the 1990s and early 2000s that international scrutiny of its adversary Iraq's nuclear programme was at its height. Iraq's suspect nuclear activities had greatly diminished by the end of the 1990s but, by contrast, Iran's nuclear-weapons programme is alleged to have continued until 2003 and possibly thereafter.<sup>4</sup> Given that parts of any deal – such as Iranian co-operation with the IAEA to explore allegations of past nuclear-weapons research – could take years to complete, there might be numerous points at which perceptions of Iranian foot-dragging, breaches or clandestine nuclear work could cause regional powers to judge the settlement to be breaking down.<sup>5</sup> Any nuclear deal that Iran strikes with the EU/E3+3 might be viewed with almost as much scepticism as Iran (like some Western states) viewed the slow and troubled process of Iraqi disarmament in the 1990s. It is possible, even, that Iran – like Iraq in 2003 – might find itself in the worst of both worlds: co-operating with the IAEA, having abandoned any nuclear-weapons programme it once possessed, whilst being disbelieved by much of the region. Much would depend on the strength and credibility of inspections. It is difficult to imagine that the EU/E3+3 would agree to anything less than highly stringent verification.

Nevertheless, even under conditions of ostensibly successful diplomacy, regional responses to Iran's post-deal nuclear programme will have important

implications for regional security structures, non-proliferation objectives, and existing Western alliances and partnerships with regional states. Those responses will be even more important if diplomacy falters or reverses.

### **Policy Implications**

This section examines the policy implications that follow from the possible regional responses examined throughout this study. It focuses on the implications for Western states in general and the United States in particular, although there are important lessons for the regional powers themselves – for instance, any shift in Saudi Arabia’s nuclear status would be of great consequence for the GCC as a whole – and extra-regional, non-Western powers with stakes in the region, such as Russia, China and India.

#### *Diversity in Threat Perceptions*

The first point that emerges from the research undertaken for this study is that the diversity of threat perceptions in relation to Iran as a whole and its nuclear programme specifically means that a highly variegated approach is necessary.

Though all of the states discussed in this Whitehall Report perceive some degree of threat from Iran, some see that threat as direct and bilaterally focused (as in the case of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Israel), while others see it as indirect, diffuse and regionally focused (for instance, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait). For some of these states, particularly in the former group, the threat they perceive comprises not only physical terrorism but also ideological subversion directed at their political systems. For others, the issue has a strong conventional, military dimension: for example, Iranian military support for Hizbullah.

Third parties – including the United States – seeking to mitigate the conflicts that underlie the nuclear dispute must take this into account. What Bahrain wants from Iran (the curbing of subversive Iranian media broadcasts, for instance) is different to what Jordan wants (a moderation of Iran’s influence on neighbouring Iraq’s politics), which is in turn different to what Turkey wants (a cessation of Iranian support for the Syrian regime and co-operation in dealing with threatening Kurdish groups). Since broader threat perceptions interact with – that is to say, are reinforced by and in turn exacerbate – *nuclear-specific* threat perceptions, regional responses to Iranian nuclearisation will depend on how these states’ varying concerns evolve over time – for example, how the Syrian civil war progresses – in what is likely to be an uneven process. Additionally, addressing these individual concerns could also contribute to a broader regional *détente* of the sort that would buttress nuclear diplomacy and any eventual, long-term deal: the United States can theoretically ignore its allies and partners in striking and enforcing a deal, but it will be more stable over the longer term if these states also increasingly see Iran as a less

threatening entity. Yet such a *détente* looks unlikely, at least in the absence of very significant progress in the resolution of regional political conflicts (for example, in Syria and Bahrain, and in relation to Israel and Palestine).

With regard to varying attitudes to Iran's nuclear programme specifically, one of the most striking findings was that many policy elites interviewed for this study had only a rudimentary understanding of the details of Iran's nuclear programme and the specific terms of the dispute. For instance, they had little sense of the relationship between enrichment capacity and breakout timelines beyond a broad sense of urgency. They also had little grasp of the nature of pre-2003 weapons-related research that Iran had allegedly undertaken, and a weak understanding of the specifics of Iran's safeguards agreement with the IAEA and the resultant inspections regime. Most relevant to the issue of a nuclear deal, these policy elites had little idea of the specific verification measures that might be implemented to provide them with reassurance, beyond Iranian ratification of the Additional Protocol.

One important division in this regard is that those states that perceive Iran to be posing an indirect threat (such as Egypt) or those with aspirations for civilian nuclear programmes with a complete nuclear fuel cycle (such as Jordan and Turkey) tend to be more open to compromise on the core issue that divides the EU/E3+3 and Iran: Iran's right to enrich uranium on its own soil. Israeli, Saudi Arabian and Emirati elites, by contrast, tend to adopt a more demanding approach, stressing the importance of enrichment suspension (Saud Al Tamamy's response to the chapter on Saudi Arabia is notable in demanding corresponding enrichment rights for Saudi Arabia, something that reveals the symbolism of enrichment as much as its securitisation). However, even many in this group acknowledge, first, that Iranian transparency with the IAEA over allegations of historic and more recent weapons research is more important than enrichment *per se* and, second, that there is little they can do to prevent the EU/E3+3 from compromising on enrichment, the first steps of which have been taken in the Geneva agreement.

Israel is the only regional power with the ability to strike Iranian nuclear sites and therefore to disrupt a nuclear deal by force. However, Israeli elites were in near-universal agreement not only that that active diplomacy severely restricted their ability to issue military threats against Iran, but also that a deal would tie their hands entirely. Only if Iran were to transgress brazenly (for instance, if it renewed higher-grade enrichment or hindered the work of inspectors) would Israeli military action be remotely credible in the interim period.

Prior to the Geneva agreement, Israeli elites were also the most specific about their concern over current trends: that Iranian enrichment capability

could increase to the point at which undetected or unstoppable breakout would become a realistic possibility. This suggests that if a long-term deal cannot be struck and Iran renews enrichment to higher levels, Israel may assess Iran to be de facto nuclear-weapons capable at a much earlier point than the United States and others. Even if Israel then abjured military action, whether under US pressure or out of a calculation that it could not do sufficient damage to Iranian nuclear sites, it may therefore respond in ways discussed earlier in preceding chapters: for example, through covert action against Iranian nuclear personnel and sites. It is in the interests of all members of the EU/E3+3, with a particular responsibility on the part of the United States, to signal to Israel that any unilateral coercive measures – including acts of sabotage or assassination – would be damaging even after a deal has been done. In this regard, British Foreign Secretary William Hague warned that ‘we would discourage anybody in the world, including Israel, from taking any steps that would undermine this [Geneva] agreement’.<sup>6</sup>

The wider policy implication of these diverse threat perceptions is that the EU/E3+3 should not be deterred by the public rigidity of Iran’s regional adversaries; the group has considerable latitude to build on the Geneva agreement to strike a longer-term deal with Iran in which limited enrichment is permitted under much stricter international safeguards, as per the agreement’s provision for a ‘mutually defined enrichment programme’. It should be able to assuage *most* concerns as long as it clearly indicates that Iran’s ability to produce nuclear weapons is being concretely and verifiably reduced, with the IAEA playing a strong role in verification. Subsequently, the specific means by which Western states reassure their regional partners will, of course, need to be tailored to the partner in question. While diplomacy over a comprehensive settlement is ongoing, EU/E3+3 states should brief and consult Israel and Saudi Arabia to a greater degree than they seem to have done between August and November 2013, but this requires mutual trust, including assurances that details of such consultations will not leak to the media at sensitive moments.

#### *Proliferation Risks*

Regional elites are ambivalent about the question of whether and when Iranian nuclearisation could result in a so-called ‘domino effect’ of further nuclear proliferation in the region, and the ‘possibility of a highly unstable regional nuclear arms race’.<sup>7</sup> However, apart from Israel, which already possesses nuclear weapons, and Saudi Arabia, nearly every regional policy elite interviewed for this study dismissed the possibility that their nation would seek its own nuclear-weapons capability. This includes elites in Turkey and Egypt, both of which are widely touted as would-be proliferators.<sup>8</sup> It is telling that, in these cases, non-governmental officials were more likely than those in positions of authority to invoke the possibility of a national nuclear option – though rarely in considered, specific and informed terms.

Notably, interviewees assessed this prospect over the medium term, with very few considering the issue over a longer timeframe – in contrast, for instance, to the UK's 2006 White Paper regarding the renewal of its own nuclear deterrent, which made reference to 'the global security environment over the next 20 to 50 years'.<sup>9</sup> This is a particularly important factor when considering the likely third-order effects of Iranian nuclearisation – that is to say, the potential further reaction to the regional responses discussed in this study.

Saudi Arabian interviewees were emphatic that the possibility of Saudi nuclearisation could not be dismissed merely on the grounds of its technical or diplomatic difficulty, instead insisting that it was a serious political option. This viewpoint was shared by many in Bahrain and the UAE (both GCC partners), including serving officials. Yet these are costless (that is, non-binding) and therefore unreliable signals: it is in Saudi Arabia's interest for both Iran and the United States to believe that it will disrupt the non-proliferation order and chart an independent course if strict measures are not taken against Iran, regardless of whether Riyadh actually intends to do so.

Indeed, one reason to read these signals with scepticism is that those very same Saudi Arabian elites often discussed their own nuclear hedging as a prelude to discussions of Western security guarantees – and, upon being pressed, acknowledged that such guarantees, including formal extended deterrence commitments from the United States, might only be possible *in exchange for* Saudi Arabian restraint and not as a supplement to independent Saudi Arabian moves towards nuclear capability. In other words, Saudi nuclear signals should be understood as being as much bargaining chips as signs of concrete intent.

A question of credibility arises here: is it credible for Western powers to threaten to limit their assistance to Saudi Arabia in the event of Iranian nuclearisation at the precise moment that their reliability would be called into question, and with the perceived vulnerability of their ally at its peak? In addition, would Saudi Arabia's partners from outside the region be of a single view here? France, the United Kingdom and the United States all play important independent roles in the Kingdom, and Riyadh has pitted one against the other in the past and, most recently in November 2013, has threatened to do so again.<sup>10</sup> If, in response to attempted Saudi nuclearisation, one of these allies threatened to withdraw support in the name of non-proliferation principles, another could, by their actions, undercut that message – and might be heavily incentivised by Saudi Arabia to do so. Even if such a scenario is improbable, Western states should co-ordinate their policies and messages, and do so now rather than after any crisis begins. They should also send strong dissuasive messages to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia's likeliest source of nuclear technology or weaponry.

It is important to note that Iran's own post-nuclearisation behaviour might also shape the regional response, with respect to both proliferation and other reactive measures: if Iran used its nuclear status as the basis for détente, restraint and co-operative security, that would diminish the incentive for Saudi Arabia to respond by also seeking nuclear weapons. If, on the other hand, Iran were to employ nuclear weapons as a shield behind which to intensify its interference in and aggression towards other states, it would amplify Saudi Arabia's incentives in this regard.

*Security Guarantees: Reassurance*

Ultimately, the most important policy question presented by a nuclear Iran is how existing bilateral security partnerships – above all, the American network of alliances – can and should respond to Iranian nuclearisation.

Despite the strain that has been placed upon these extant partnerships since the start of the Arab Awakening – and, of course, the greater strain that would result if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons in defiance of US commitments – they are nevertheless sufficiently robust to cope with such a scenario. Although some more visible signs of commitment – such as joint exercises – might offer a greater indication of US commitment, other forms of commitment, such as the deployment of theatre-based nuclear weapons, are unfeasible. Furthermore, it is more important that Western states and their local partners achieve better mutual understanding of the scenarios in which security guarantees might be invoked, so that their expectations do not diverge too greatly. This would also enable them to shape their military preparations accordingly.

What is the purpose of security relationships in the first place? US policy objectives are to deter, and if necessary deny, aggression towards its allies and to protect its own interests in the region (including, for example, in relation to energy security and counter-terrorism).

Security guarantees with regard to the first of these objectives can feature multiple, overlapping aspects:

- Verbal commitments to conventional defence or nuclear retaliation
- Formal agreements to defend an ally under threat
- Predominantly defensive measures, for example ballistic-missile defence
- Over-the-horizon military forces, such as regional carrier groups
- Regional bases
- The deployment of combat forces
- The deployment of nuclear forces.

The United States already implements every one of these measures, albeit not all of them in every regional state. In particular, only Turkey enjoys



nuclear-related guarantees and the deployment of nuclear forces on its soil due to its membership of NATO.

It should be no surprise that the research for this study indicates a regional appetite for upgraded US measures in virtually every one of these dimensions, albeit to varying degrees and in different forms. In some respects, the US and its allies are already meeting this appetite.

It was not until 2009 that a senior US official – then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – openly spoke of a non-nuclear ‘defence umbrella’ over the Middle East, but US activity predates that.<sup>11</sup> Theatre missile defence is being implemented across every one of the states covered in this Whitehall Report and in most cases (Turkey being an exception) at almost as rapid a pace as is possible, suggesting that even Iranian nuclearisation could not substantially accelerate this.<sup>12</sup> US–Israeli co-operation on missile defence is particularly advanced. US and European arms exports to Gulf states also remain elevated (with Germany high on the list of exporters). Although the Middle East’s purchasing share of the global arms market fell slightly from 22 per cent during 2003–07 to 17 per cent during 2008–12, these figures are subject to lags between orders and deliveries.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, the US refused to suspend military aid to Egypt during the Egyptian army’s toppling of the elected President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 and the subsequent massacre of his supporters, only doing so tentatively much later on. The US has also remained committed to its own military facilities in the Gulf, including its Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, the site of a pro-democracy uprising against the Sunni-dominated regime, as well as inserting more forces into Jordan (albeit directed towards Syrian contingencies). The UK is consolidating its own relationship with the UAE, Oman, Bahrain and the other Gulf states in what has been called a ‘pivot to the Gulf’, including arms sales, joint exercises and training, and long-term basing.<sup>14</sup> These are all costly and therefore meaningful signals of alliance solidarity.

In the event of Iranian nuclearisation, what more would be needed? There is an open debate over how a nuclear Iran might behave and whether this would depend on the degree of its nuclearisation. Overall, regional powers tend to believe that an Iran in possession of even non-deliverable weapons (that is, crude nuclear devices that could not be mounted onto missiles) would have increased status and influence in the region, as well as an increased ability to use brinkmanship to cause instability and pursue its objectives. Some states – notably, Israel and the Gulf states – see this as a more serious threat than others. However, most regional elites interviewed for this study agreed that – despite the greater risks involved following an Iranian nuclearisation – there would be conventional means by which malign Iranian activity could be deterred and contained, mostly within the broad

parameters of existing security arrangements. Some Saudi Arabian and Emirati officials and strategists emphasised that larger numbers of Western troops on their soil would no longer be a political issue (as it was after the First Gulf War) and that public opinion in this regard is irrelevant, but very few interviewees deemed troop deployments a particularly crucial sign of alliance credibility.

One implication of this is that there should be no rush to significantly expand the scope of Western military involvement in the Gulf. Far more important is that existing arrangements are seen as credible and that there is mutual agreement on the conditions under which current conventional guarantees might be invoked.<sup>15</sup>

In particular, Gulf states have been prone to attributing domestic instability to Iranian activity, often without adequate evidence.<sup>16</sup> It must be asked how these states' Western allies would respond if a nuclear Iran were seen to be fomenting instability in the Gulf states but its role was either opaque or disputed. This would be especially challenging because the former's ability to come to the military aid of regimes engaged in ongoing domestic repression would be constrained by national political opinion and, possibly, by national legislatures, as evidenced by Britain's experience in relation to Syria in August 2013.

*Direct* security guarantees (that is, commitments to use military force, as opposed to other forms of reassurance, such as arms exports) would therefore be more credible were they to focus on a narrower range of issues that directly impact the security provider in question; for instance, in Britain's case, the flow of natural gas through the Strait of Hormuz and the security of British nationals in the Gulf. These would not always coincide with the interests of the Gulf allies in question, which would want to broaden the coverage to include as wide a range of threats as possible. For example, would the UK bear any responsibility for addressing Iranian aggression towards Qatari or Bahraini ships, and would considerations such as who initiated this aggression affect its decisions in this regard? It would therefore be useful for Western states to better understand the *specific* geographic and issue areas in which their partners fear the consequences of a nuclear Iran would be felt the most.

Additionally, Western states, like most larger powers in alliances or partnerships, worry about 'moral hazard': the risk that their local allies could initiate conflict, or become less risk-averse in other ways, under the impression that they are protected. This obviously risks the former being pulled into a crisis that is peripheral to their interests; the alternative – refusing to get involved – would cause grievances to develop within the alliance. Without a clear discussion of expectations on both sides, there is the possibility that such scenarios could ultimately generate mutual distrust

and encourage regional powers to seek their own solutions, much as Saudi Arabia has done in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere, even when this has been detrimental to Western interests.

*Security Guarantees: Extended Nuclear Deterrence?*

The experience of South Korea in relation to North Korean nuclearisation, and of European states regarding Soviet nuclearisation, suggests that conventional reassurance is rarely enough for the weaker parties in alliances. However, the Gulf case is idiosyncratic insofar as the ostensibly 'weaker' parties within the various alliances with Western powers are generally conventionally superior to Iran – universally so, given the likely coalitions in which the smaller states would operate. In 2011, Iran's defence expenditure fell to less than 10 per cent of the MENA region's total whereas the spending of the GCC states excluding Saudi Arabia comprised 17 per cent; including Saudi Arabia, that figure rises to 54.3 per cent.<sup>17</sup> While South Korea spends more on its military than its northern neighbour, it also faces a greater threat from North Korean ground forces, whereas Iran's large army is seen as being of less concern in comparison to its other capabilities. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that those states without nuclear guarantees of one sort or another – that is, all regional powers except Turkey and Israel – feel vulnerable, albeit to varying degrees.

Although interviewees for this study generally recognised that conventional forces would be the primary means of response to Iranian aggression, some Gulf elites echoed the Cold War logic of European states in their concern that this would not be 'backstopped' with nuclear forces, and that Iran could therefore deter US or Western intervention in a smaller crisis simply by bringing its status as a nuclear power to bear on their calculations. This was not a widely expressed view, and those who articulated it rarely offered a plausible scenario in which Iranian interests would be sufficiently entrenched to make it worthwhile.

Some Emirati and Saudi Arabian interviewees, echoing the distrust of some South Koreans of the reliability of the US in deploying strategic weapons in response to local crises, expressed a strong interest in the deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons either within their territory or in countries nearby. They suggested that Abu Dhabi and Riyadh would go 'to any end' in acquiring nuclear-capable aircraft for delivering a small number (one or two) of these weapons. The notion of US nuclear forces based in the Gulf appears fanciful, but in 1990 the Bush Senior administration 'fairly heavily debated and discussed' the issue during the First Gulf War, eventually clarifying that it did not have nuclear weapons stationed in the region and would not send any.<sup>18</sup>

While the technical and financial hurdles are surmountable, it is doubtful that any US administration, even if able to circumvent opposition from Congress and Israel, would be willing to engage in managed proliferation to any ally, let alone autocratic states in highly unstable environments. The 1990 decision stemmed in part from the judgment that security precautions would be overwhelming ('You'd need 20,000 men just to guard them,' noted a senior military officer).<sup>19</sup> A 2003 Defense Threat Reduction Agency study of this issue also concluded that 'theatre nuclear forces do not appear to reassure allies and friends significantly', and emphasised that 'forward-deployable' systems – those which need not be based in a particular region but could be moved there in a crisis – were more flexible.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, US nuclear weapons have not been located in South Korea for over two decades, and were never publicly stationed in Japan; yet the US (successfully) provided extended nuclear deterrence assurances to both of these allies, despite periodic calls for tactical nuclear weapons to be based in these areas.<sup>21</sup>

If the US nuclear umbrella were to be extended over the Gulf states, Jordan or Egypt – let alone be reinforced by theatre-based nuclear weapons – this would have major consequences for the nuclear posture of the United States (which has sought to reduce the prominence of nuclear weapons in its defence portfolio), global arms control (given the US's efforts to reduce its emphasis on nuclear weapons) and crisis dynamics (local allies might have differing nuclear thresholds, for instance). Extended nuclear deterrence would require establishing what, exactly, is being deterred: for example, if deterring existential threats to its allies, the US must consider whether that threat is to the governments, regimes or states more broadly. Furthermore, it must be asked how to distinguish between domestic and foreign sources of instability in a region where they are intertwined. The nature of the threat presented by Iran makes these questions harder to answer in relation to the Gulf region than, for instance, the Korean Peninsula. In general, the threats perceived by regional powers are not 'territorial', and therefore would not be best addressed by higher troop numbers, as was the case in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran.

Finally, these questions cannot be answered within the parameters of nuclear strategy and security issues alone. If the US, the UK and other European states are to be taken seriously in their overarching commitment to democracy and human rights, it is important that they pursue this agenda with more than token attention to political reform in these states.<sup>22</sup> A failure to do so will exacerbate political instability and facilitate Iranian interference, to the extent that it already exists. Naturally, this caveat applies more to the Gulf states, Jordan and Egypt than to Turkey or Israel. Even in the case of the latter countries, however, Western states might seek to ensure that security guarantees do not undermine efforts to achieve settlements of the Kurdish and Palestinian issues, respectively.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this Whitehall Report has been to examine how Iran's nuclear programme is viewed within the region, and how regional powers might respond to a nuclear-armed Iran in the future. The Geneva agreement has reduced the near-term prospect that Iran will be able to produce nuclear weapons, but it has not eliminated this fear, or that of growing Iranian nuclear capabilities. The Geneva agreement might collapse; fail to be replaced with a long-term agreement; or give rise to a long-term agreement that is seen, by regional powers, as permitting an unduly large Iranian nuclear programme. While the Geneva agreement has improved the chances of a durable settlement that would realistically preclude Iran from developing nuclear weapons, this is not a given. Certainly, this is not how Israel or Saudi Arabia view the situation. It therefore remains important to consider regional responses to actual or anticipated Iranian nuclearisation rather than write these off as irrelevant.

Iran sits in a broadly adversarial relationship to all the states considered here, notably Saudi Arabia and Israel, but to differing degrees and in different ways. Its nuclear programme is interpreted differently in each capital, but nowhere is the prospect of a nuclear Iran welcomed as desirable. The most common concern is that a nuclear-armed Iran would be empowered to intensify support for its allies and proxies in the region, insulated from regime-threatening retaliation. This was felt most keenly by the interviewees in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Israel. Their counterparts in Egypt, Jordan and Turkey tended to focus less on the threat to their own territories, but more on the broad regional impact of an emboldened Iran. For interviewees in Turkey and Jordan, the focus was Iranian behaviour in Syria and Iraq; for those in Egypt, predominantly Palestine. The smaller Gulf states were concerned not just about Iranian behaviour, but also the second-order consequences of Saudi Arabian unilateralism and activism.

In most cases, policy elites were wary of discussing their responses to a nuclear Iran for fear that it would undercut the narrative of their present policy of preventing that outcome. Although those in the more powerful regional states emphasised the viability of unilateral options – in Israel's case, military action, and in Saudi Arabia's case, the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons – they ultimately spoke of these in the context of external security guarantees, above all from the US. Most did not acknowledge the tension between taking steps that would concern the US at the same time as deepening their security relationship with it.

Ultimately, a common thread through this report is the authors' own scepticism about the prospect that any of these countries, including Saudi Arabia, would choose to or be able to press ahead with the acquisition of indigenous nuclear weapons (or, in Riyadh's case, their possible import) at

the expense of conventional and possible future nuclear guarantees from the US. As Gregory Gause argues, 'like the NATO allies in the Cold War, the Saudis' strategic choices are very limited'.<sup>23</sup> Although policy elites in the region complain about US unreliability and abandonment, the behaviour of their principal ally points in a different direction. The US continues to work with nearly every one of its security partners to upgrade missile defences, shore up indigenous conventional capabilities, and preserve existing basing arrangements.

If Iran were to nuclearise, it seems likely that the US would extend those security guarantees. However, the form this would take is open to question. Placing a nuclear umbrella over hitherto unprotected allies (those in the Gulf, Egypt and Jordan), let alone stationing tactical nuclear weapons in theatre, would represent a major shift in policy. It would tie the US into regional crises in unpredictable and dangerous ways, and might create momentum that would require further signs of credible commitment (as is evident in the US–South Korean relationship, with some in South Korea periodically calling for the return of US nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula). Nuclear security guarantees would also create domestic political difficulties, particularly within the respective legislatures, and might inadvertently undermine faith in existing, conventional guarantees. In light of these difficulties, the US should explain to policy elites and public audiences in allied states – notably in the Gulf – why conventional means of reassurance are adequate.

Finally, paradoxically but predictably, the successful nuclear diplomacy of late 2013 has also given rise to fears of a US–Iran *détente* at the expense of the United States' traditional Arab allies and Israel. Under the terms of the deal, Iran has moved further from nuclear weapons, but the very same fear of Iranian power that lends menace to the prospect of those weapons in the first place now drives fear that Iran's role in the region will be legitimated, and the United States' commitment to curbing that role will be diminished. These fears are overstated. The emerging nuclear thaw is unlikely to give rise to normalisation in US–Iran relations, given the range and intensity of contested issues since the Arab Awakening. However, many of the same questions of reassurance and security guarantees considered above might now arise, albeit in different form, for the US, the UK and France. In this respect, the arguments pertaining to Iranian nuclearisation set out in this Whitehall Report apply just as much to the status quo of strained US–Gulf ties. The extension of current security guarantees would be fraught with domestic political difficulty for the US. As such, no such steps – conventional or nuclear – should be taken without a much better understanding of the specific scenarios against which Gulf states require protection. Reassuring regional allies ought to be possible by reinforcing existing security guarantees rather than overhauling the status quo.

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## Response: Multi-Layered Assurance in the Gulf

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Zachary K Goldman and Mira Rapp-Hooper

THE FOREGOING set of prescriptions for US policy towards its Gulf partners has much to commend it: the authors agree wholeheartedly that the diversity of regional threat perceptions, regarding both the nature and intensity of the threat posed by Iran, requires a variegated approach.<sup>1</sup> They also concur that Gulf states have varying views on Iran's nuclear programme itself, and that these differences must be recognised by US diplomats.

However, in attempting to contain Iran's influence and assure its regional partners, the US may face more of a novel challenge than this broad assessment would suggest. The tools for allied assurance that the authors recommend are those that the US has traditionally used to manage its alliance commitments around the globe – that is, formal security guarantees, often referred to as the US nuclear umbrella.

Where assurance of Gulf states is concerned, however, the future is unlikely to look like the past. Extended deterrence is necessarily aimed at two audiences: the adversary and allies. For it to function effectively, the US must not only send strong, perceptible messages to Iran using its traditional deterrence toolkit, it must also convince allies that their security concerns are being addressed. The latter task, while far from impossible, demands that the US engage with the specific anxieties of the Gulf states using diplomatic, military, economic and other tools selected specifically for this purpose.

Since the chartering of NATO in 1949, the US has relied on formal security guarantees (that is, treaty-based commitments) as one of the most important tools of statecraft. It now officially guarantees the security of approximately thirty countries in Europe and East Asia. Beyond formal defence treaties, the US has used physical demonstrations of force, including forward bases, forward-deployed conventional troops, joint military exercises and even forward-deployed nuclear weapons to convince allies of its lasting commitment to their security. This system was possible because of the US's desire and ability to establish a stable international order after the Second World War.

The last time the US extended a new, formal security guarantee, however, was in 1954. It has since drawn down its so-called 'tripwire' troops significantly, and withdrawn almost all of its tactical nuclear weapons from allied countries. There is little chance that the Senate would see fit to ratify a mutual-defence treaty with a Gulf monarchy, or that Washington would consider sending nuclear weapons to the region, given both the recent softening of its emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons in defence policy and the instability in the region. It may also face congressional hurdles to the establishment of new bases or the deployment of troops there, given the current fiscal climate.

This extended-deterrence toolbox is not just limited by US constraints: for important political reasons, Gulf monarchies themselves could not easily accept a formal defence treaty with the US, or a highly visible US military footprint. Some of the other forms of recommended co-operation are already being pursued, including verbal statements of assurance, ballistic-missile-defence co-operation and arms sales. Tangible but more episodic indications of commitment, such as joint exercises or carrier-group movements, would surely signal to Iran the United States's presence.

The crucial question, however, is not whether the US has more traditional deterrence tools to which it might turn – certainly it does. Rather, the question is whether these will be the *right* tools to convince Gulf partners of its commitment to containing an Iranian threat. Given the complex politics within and between Gulf states, indicia of commitment to the security of allies may need to extend far beyond the traditional signs of military alliance, namely bases, mutual-defence pacts and nuclear umbrellas.

A fundamental challenge for the US in seeking to assure its Gulf allies is the fact that the dimension of the Iranian threat about which Gulf states are most concerned – that affecting the internal stability, security and legitimacy of the ruling regimes – is that which formal American guarantees may be least able to ameliorate. Large, visible symbols of American commitment help to signal that the US is willing to devote conventional forces to fend off external threats. However, these measures at best protect the 'flank' of the Gulf monarchies, while leaving unaddressed the internal sources of their insecurity.

At present, the US is deepening its traditional forms of engagement with Gulf Arab monarchies through mechanisms such as the GCC–US Strategic Cooperation Forum. Simultaneously, however, it is

taking measures in other arenas that, in aggregate, send (perhaps inadvertently) the signal that it is unwilling or unable to address those internal existential threats to their regimes. This is because one of the things that the Gulf Arab monarchies fear most about the further development of the Iranian nuclear programme is Iran's concomitant ability to exacerbate internal disturbances within their countries. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait fear Iranian agitation among their substantial Shia minority populations, while Bahrain fears further aggravation of its recent (sectarian) strife, and the UAE fears alienating its significant Iranian expatriate community. The deployment of an extra aircraft carrier may not do much to palliate such concerns.

At the same time, the US's lack of engagement in the Syrian civil war, while understandable from a domestic perspective, signals that it is far from eager to become deeply involved in the region's most pressing and complicated crisis.<sup>2</sup> Military victories by President Assad's forces, won with the support of Iran and Hizbullah, feed the perception that Iran and its allies are ascendant in the region, while Saudi Arabia's claim to leadership of the Sunni community – an important source of the regime's legitimacy – is correspondingly undermined. Other issues should be added to this list, including the US's perceived 'abandonment' of the Egyptian military in its struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood (and of long-time ally Hosni Mubarak before that), its inability to achieve progress in peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, and its prolonged internal political and fiscal paralysis. Perhaps most significant is the fear that the EU/E3+3 will strike a deal with Iran that leaves it capable of short-term nuclear breakout, and then disengage. In the meantime, the US is making greater progress than ever on its perennial goal of energy independence, simultaneously removing a substantial motivating factor behind sustained American engagement in the region, and cutting directly at the fundamental ruling bargain in the Gulf Arab monarchies.

Thus, the most visible signs of American commitment will only ever partially address the second, perhaps more important audience for messages of assurance: the US's allies in the Gulf themselves. Ultimately, the Gulf monarchies do not have other alliance options, and will be much better off with US diplomatic and military support than without it.<sup>3</sup> In light of the host of divergent political priorities, however, Washington will need to think of extended deterrence and assurance to these states in a far more nuanced manner than it has in the past. Assurance strategies will need to account for the internal

security concerns of Gulf partners, as well as their regional priorities, which the US may share only in part.

The US will always face a challenge in reconciling its commitments to its allies with its other priorities in the region. It can, however, assure its allies by taking some steps toward rolling back Iran's asymmetric regional influence, without assuming significant foreign-policy burdens at odds with other US obligations. Such efforts might revolve around a sustained campaign to publicise and delegitimise the involvement of Iran and its allies in illegal and destabilising activities. A campaign of this sort might include prosecutions aimed at Iranian-linked groups like Hizbullah that may be involved in narcotics trafficking and other illicit conduct;<sup>4</sup> the imposition of additional financial sanctions and travel bans targeting Iran-linked individuals and entities providing support to the regime of President Assad; the provision of assistance to Gulf allies in identifying and arresting Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Ministry of Intelligence and Security officers operating in the Gulf; or explicitly declaring the circumstances under which attacks by Iran and Hizbullah might be attributed to each other.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the US should set up formal, bilateral security dialogues with Gulf partners so that their individual security concerns can be heard and addressed to the greatest extent possible. Such actions would demonstrate to the United States' Gulf allies that it is able and willing to counter the ways in which Iran is currently exerting power in the region, as opposed to the ways in which it might do so one day in the future. This would obviate the need for significant commitments to new alliance structures or potentially costly foreign-policy initiatives that are perceived to be inconsistent with other core American interests.

*Zachary K Goldman is the Executive Director of the Center on Law and Security. He has previously served as a policy adviser in the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes, and as a Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His publications have appeared in Cold War History, Foreign Affairs, The Atlantic, The Diplomat, National Interest and others.*

*Mira Rapp-Hooper is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at Columbia University and a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Her dissertation, 'Absolute Alliances: Signaling Security Guarantees in International Politics', analyses the formation and management of nuclear umbrella pacts. Mira's writings have appeared in Survival, Strategic Asia, The Atlantic, The Diplomat, National Interest and others.*

### Notes and References

1. For a similar approach, see Zachary K Goldman and Mira Rapp-Hooper, 'Conceptualizing Containment: The Iranian Threat and the Future of Gulf Security', *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol. 128, No. 4, Winter 2013).
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3. On this point, see Colin Kahl and Jacob Stokes, 'Overcoming the Gulf in the Gulf', *Defense One*, 31 October 2013, <<http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2013/10/overcoming-gulf-gulf/72983/>>, accessed 1 December 2013.
4. In 2011, for example, prosecutors accused three Lebanese financial institutions of money laundering that benefited Hizbullah, and indicted one man, Ayman Joumaa, for his role in the scheme. Dugald McConnell and Brian Todd, 'Prosecutors Accuse Lebanon Bank of Laundering Money for Hezbollah', *CNN*, 15 December 2011.
5. For more on how a declaratory policy might connect Hizbullah's actions to Iran and vice versa, see Erica D Borghard and Mira Rapp-Hooper, 'Hizbullah and the Iranian Nuclear Programme', *Survival* (Vol. 55, No. 4, August/September 2013), pp. 85–106.



## Response: European Attitudes towards Iranian Nuclearisation

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**Jean-Loup Samaan**

This report's conclusion discusses Western attitudes *vis-à-vis* the Iranian nuclear crisis. Specifically, the authors ask whether a sustained diplomatic breakthrough with the Iranian authorities would alleviate the concerns of regional powers over its nuclear programme. The policy implications that they identify (threat perception, proliferation risks and security guarantees) would demand sound and cohesive diplomatic positions from Western countries.

However, Europeans may appear in a state of disarray on all of these critical questions. First, diplomatic success between Iran and the West is very likely to decrease the latter's level of awareness and worries about the Iranian nuclear programme. Some European countries dream of a 'grand bargain' with Iran, in which the nuclear issue would be one among others (such as the regional security system or economic exchanges). Certainly, the E3 countries – the UK, France and Germany – have proven to be tough negotiators over the last decade. Overt French scepticism in the first round of diplomacy over the temporary nuclear deal agreed between the EU/E3+3 and Iran in November 2013 exemplifies this toughness. However, for a number of European countries, the threshold for acceptance and accommodation with Iranian demands is much lower.

This relates to a crucial reality: the fact that the Iranian nuclear conundrum has never been seen by Europeans as either an existential or immediate threat. Within NATO fora, northern European countries would rather discuss developments in Russian politics than Iranian ones. For countries like Estonia and Lithuania, the greatest potential threat emanates from Moscow, not from Tehran. For southern European states such as Italy, Spain and Greece, relations with Iran, although not perfect, have never reached the level of defiance and hostility characterising those between Iran and the UK and France. For these southern countries, the result of US and EU/E3 assertiveness was a UN and EU regime of economic sanctions that dramatically impacted their ability to meet their own energy needs (notably from Iran's oil and gas reserves). Despite promises from Saudi Arabia to provide back-up oil supplies, the suspension of Iranian imports translated into economic loss. This partly explains why officials from the EU were

extremely careful in autumn 2013 to convey the message that there was no talk of expanding existing sanctions. In other words, the tool of EU sanctions reached its maximum extent with the last round of new sanctions in 2012.

In addition, European countries tend to look at the Iranian nuclear crisis through a legacy Cold War lens; pundits as well as diplomats and military officers tend to nuance the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran as a result of a proclivity to rely on deterrence logic. Simply put, Europeans coped with a balance of terror on their continent for several decades – and believe that the Middle East could too. Though they are not denied, regional powers' worries over Iranian nuclearisation or the proliferation chain that this could trigger are usually considered to be inflated. Over the last few years, this rift among Europeans has translated into the disagreements within NATO regarding its missile-defence architecture. While some countries explicitly see the Iranian nuclear enterprise as the driver of NATO's programme, others oppose such an assertion.

The fact that a majority of European states would likely be ready to live with a nuclear-armed Iran does not mean that this is a unified position. Countries like France and the UK have been the most vocal about preventing such an outcome. Specifically, Iranian nuclearisation directly impacts upon French and British defence ties with the Gulf monarchies. France has signed defence agreements with Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. The latter is also tied to the UK through a defence agreement, while British armed forces are currently stationed in Oman as well.

As discussed in this Whitehall Report, London is also said to be preparing for a 'pivot' of its military stance towards Jordan and the Gulf. This revamping of British posture in the region has led observers to speculate about a policy of a 'return east of Suez'. France has also substantially shifted its military focus to the Gulf, with the opening of a new military base in Abu Dhabi in 2008 and the strengthening of its defence agreements with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies.

These Franco-British efforts reflect enduring resolve towards the Gulf *vis-à-vis* Iran, but a number of issues might jeopardise the two countries' long-term postures. The first is the fact that French and British efforts in the Gulf are less driven by a solid strategic vision than by economic austerity. As European countries continue to make deep cuts in defence expenditures, their national industries are in dire



need of new markets. The UK's active engagement with Abu Dhabi grew in earnest only in late 2011, after the emirate publicly expressed its dissatisfaction over negotiations with the French authorities and Dassault over the sale of sixty Rafale multirole fighters. Thus the current situation reflects a Franco-British industrial confrontation in the Gulf more than the reinforcement of a strategic axis.

In addition, the shrinking in size of both the French and British militaries raises questions about the credibility of the countries' commitment to their Gulf allies. Although the Europeans are unlikely to abandon the peninsula completely, part of the fallout from the financial crisis means that they no longer have the necessary means to shape security partnerships of the region. As a consequence, it is unclear how the UK can militarily 'return east of Suez'. These developments have critical implications in terms of the security guarantees that Gulf kingdoms might look for should Iran nuclearise.

In the long term, the hard reality of a European role regarding a potentially nuclear-armed Iran is that a majority of European countries may opt for a state of benign neglect, while those few that would oppose it may no longer have the means to reassure their allies in the Gulf. This dual trend explains why the Gulf countries are increasingly relying on the US rather than the Europeans for their security partnerships.

*Jean-Loup Samaan is a researcher in the Middle East Department of the NATO Defense College (Rome, Italy). He holds a PhD in political science from the University of Paris and has been a visiting scholar at Duke University and the RAND Corporation. From 2008 to 2011 he served as a policy adviser for transatlantic relations at the French Ministry of Defense.*



## About the Authors

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**Shashank Joshi** is a Research Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), where he focuses on South Asia and the Middle East. He is a PhD Candidate at Harvard University, and holds degrees from Cambridge and Harvard Universities. He has been published in journals including the *Washington Quarterly*, *Survival*, *RUSI Journal*, *Orbis*, *Current History*, and the *Journal of Strategic Studies*. His articles also have appeared in newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, and *The Hindu*. His monograph, *The Permanent Crisis: Iran's Nuclear Trajectory*, was published in RUSI's Whitehall Paper series in late 2012.

**Michael Stephens** is the Deputy Director of RUSI Qatar, having joined RUSI's London office in September 2010, first in the Nuclear Security Programme, then in International Security Studies. His recent research has focused on Arab Shia identity across the Middle East and its relationship with Iran. He is also a specialist in Qatari foreign policy and Gulf security, writing about issues of society and security from his base in Doha. As a frequent commentator on Middle East affairs, his writing has appeared in many news outlets and he is also a regular broadcast commentator. Michael studied at King's College London and in the Middle East.



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