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Divided They Dally?

The Arab World and a Nuclear Iran

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The political dynamics that would follow Iran's acquisition of a nuclear device are already partly visible today. Short of an upsurge among anxious Arab states to build nuclear weapons of their own, which is not inevitable, there is little margin for Arab regimes to effectively, autonomously, and in a unified way contain Iran. Consequently, they are likely to rely more on outside actors, above all the United States, while also trying to decrease Iran's regional influence through the limited means at their disposal.

Reactions to a Nuclear Iran: Who and How?

Prevailing Arab reactions to a nuclear Iran can be conceptually broken down into five broad categories.*

GULF STATES

The first category of states is those geographically closest to Iran, whose regimes will feel an existential threat from the presence of a nuclear Islamic Republic that might behave like a hegemon. In the case of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and even Yemen, this would be exacerbated by domestic vulnerabilities because of the potential to mobilize Shiite communities. These states' calculations would primarily center on regime survival, but also on sectarianism. That does not mean Gulf states will not feel economically vulnerable. However, their fixation will be largely political.

NON-GULF STATES

A second category of states includes those further afield, who would have to address the impact of a more aggressive Iran on vital issues over which they feel exposed. These states have more room to maneuver than do Gulf states, and are already facing Iranian pressures today. This category includes Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Egypt, states that would continue to manage the repercussions of Iranian policy on the Palestinian front, which in Egypt's case might also affect the actions of the Muslim Brotherhood.

IRAQ

The last three categories include reactions reflecting the makeup and interests of specific states. Iraq could emerge as pivotal because of its dual identity as a Shiite-dominated state with close ties to Tehran, but also an Arab one with a substantial Sunni minority that recently made its voice heard in elections. Many Arab regimes view Iraq as part of the problem in a rising Iran. This sectarian bias may prove too limiting in the long term.

* Arab regimes refers to regimes in the Gulf, the Levant (including the Palestinians), and Egypt. The other states of North Africa will follow the lead, if lead there is, of the rest of the Arab world without altering outcomes.

LEBANON

Lebanon, unlike other Arab states, risks facing most directly the repercussions of an Iranian nuclear weapon—an Israeli military attack, which would have serious domestic consequences. Lebanon is a distillation of regional contradictions, but also a regional escape valve. That is why it is so apt to witness a breakout of violence.

SYRIA

And, finally, there is Syria, an anomaly in the Arab world for having strategically committed to an alliance with Iran. For Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, a nuclear Iran means a more effective Syria in the Levant, capable of assisting, profiting from, or impeding the actions of Iran's allies such as Hezbollah or Hamas. More generally, Syria provides Arab cover to Iranian actions, even as its own aim today is to bolster “resistance” against Israel and the United States, an agenda that Iran views as the cornerstone of its regional militancy.

How are the states closest to Iran, particularly in the Gulf, likely to react to an Iranian nuclear weapon? They may try to build nuclear weapons themselves, particularly in the case of Saudi Arabia, which would regard this as an instrument of regime protection. However, the political consequences of such action—uncertain command and control structures in many countries, domestic weaknesses not directly related to a nuclear program, and possible Israeli military action—would push the international community, the United States in particular, to try to avert a nuclear arms race. All of this would require fresh thinking from Washington to create a new security framework.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has hinted at the direction the United States might take. Last July in Thailand she said the United States could provide the Middle East with a “defense umbrella.” Implicit in this statement was that Washington would deter Tehran's nuclear weapons with American ones. Secretary Clinton clarified her remarks later on, but the recent deployments of antiballistic missile systems in Gulf countries signal that U.S. thinking when it comes to Iran is, for now, largely reactive. This policy will not be able to stem an arms race.

U.S. nuclear protection might shift the concerns of Gulf states to politics—in particular, ways to consolidate regimes and stifle Shiite discontent. Saudi behavior would be at the center of regional attentions. One should not expect imagination from its aging leaders. The kingdom would likely purchase more defensive weapons, playing on sectarian identity to consolidate its hold internally (offering the right balance of policies to neutralize Shiite behavior), perhaps strengthening religious institutions even more. The kingdom might also fund anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian groups in the region.

The Saudis would seek to impose regional solidarity, as its Gulf partners make different calculations toward a powerful Iran. This is easier said than done. Qatar has already demonstrated the advantages of staking out an independent position in the Gulf, and the United Arab Emirates might find that its financial interests with Iran require a different approach than Saudi Arabia. Kuwait, too, and Bahrain, given their political and social structures, may be forced down different paths, with Bahrain especially exposed. Unity among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in the face of a nuclear Iran is no certainty, pushing the onus onto the United States.

The United States may find itself in the midst of sectarian conflicts without a clear sense of how to balance its relationship with a mainly Shiite Iraq and a Saudi Arabia leading the Sunni response to Iran. Washington needs an overriding strategy tying the two poles together in a joint effort, but given

their deep contradictions, whether in the nature of their governments or oil interests, this would be difficult.

For countries like Jordan and Egypt, as well as the Palestinian Authority, the repercussions of a nuclear Iran are less daunting, but nevertheless quite serious. At the heart of the problem is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Iran has been opportunistic in its use of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but that does not mean it has succeeded. A struggle is taking place over the Palestinian future today, with Hamas able to derail progress but not offer a viable model of statehood.

For Jordan's regime, who emerges victorious from the Palestinian struggle has existential meaning. A nuclear Iran will not necessarily mean a stronger Hamas, but it will mean a more intransigent and confident one than today. Amman's focus will remain on reinforcing the Palestinian Authority, through a U.S.-negotiated settlement in the near term. There are few other options. The idea that Jordan might revive its control over the West Bank is illusory, particularly if Hamas gains strength, just as a stronger Hamas would make the regime feel doubly vulnerable about a modus vivendi with Jordan's Islamists. For King Abdullah, it is the "peace process" or the unknown.

Egypt is in a slightly better position. Cairo is strengthening its leverage over Gaza through the wall it is building around the territory. However, there are costs—not least that Egypt looks like it is undermining Palestinian rights. Complicating matters is that there may soon be a change of regime in Egypt, where a transfer may not be as smooth as ailing president Hosni Mubarak would like. Egypt will probably weather the consequences (depending on timing, a nuclear Iran may create an external bogeyman), particularly with respect to the Muslim Brotherhood; however, a nuclear Iran would also erode Egypt's already declining regional sway. Egypt hopes for diplomatic gains on the Palestinian front, which Iran will urge Hamas to deny Cairo.

There is little room for Egypt to be a game changer in the region if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, as it has much less leverage to lead a unified Arab response. Nor does Egypt have the means to force a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, so it will remain an active bystander. The regime may also look more inward in the coming years, as Mubarak's successor consolidates power and focuses on restraining the impact of the Palestinian conflict on Egypt.

As for the Palestinian Authority, its priority is to arrive at some form of settlement, or settlement framework, while Hamas is still contained. Hamas, in turn, seeks to take control of the Palestinian national movement. A nuclear Iran could shift the regional focus away from Palestinian affairs, energize Hamas and the "resistance" option, and bolster the Palestinian Authority's rivals, not least Syria. So here, too, Mahmoud Abbas has few options but to negotiate with Israel, without much confidence that negotiations will lead very far.

In Iraq, the Shiite-dominated regime could turn its relationship with a strong Iran to its advantage by acting as both a mediator between Iran and the Arab world and a potential counterweight to Iran. It might exploit this to curb Arab destabilization of Iraq's political order, partly bolstered by Sunni fears of the leadership in Baghdad. Stability would facilitate Iraq's plans to greatly increase oil output, thus increasing its leverage in oil markets. The risk is that more polarization because of an Iranian nuclear capability might make Iraq's regional reintegration more difficult. Iraq remains divided, so management of the new situation may be derailed by Sunni-Shiite discord.

Syria covets the role of mediator between the Arabs and Iran, as this increases its regional weight; it would pursue Iraq's destabilization to deny this role to Baghdad. Destabilization also buys Syria credit in Saudi Arabia. Syria sees a nuclear Iran as an opportunity, but also as an opening to reassert its hegemony in Lebanon, where Hezbollah will be perceived in the West as an even greater threat to

regional security, because it is an Iranian extension. Damascus has understood the merits of seconding Iran in its “resistance” agenda, which creates myriad opportunities for Syria, in Lebanon, on the Palestinian front, and in exploiting Western desires to break Syria away from Tehran. This latter goal, however, is a mirage, since Syria is not about to surrender so valuable a card.

Finally, there is Lebanon. While there has been much talk of a Lebanon war recently, as long as Israel seeks primarily to deny Iran a nuclear capability, it will not risk a sideshow in Lebanon, nor will Hezbollah waste its deterrence capability by initiating one. However, once Iran has a nuclear weapon, the probability of an Israeli attack against Hezbollah will rise, as Israel would be tempted to neutralize a potent Iranian ally on its northern border, particularly one that might eventually possess Iranian weapons of mass destruction.

While a majority in Lebanon would regard an Iranian bomb with alarm, national policy would be imposed by Hezbollah and Syria, with little prospect for domestic dissent. Lebanon would become the front line in an Iran-Israel confrontation, which could have dire consequences if Israel retaliates harshly against Lebanese territory (and perhaps Syria) and this retaliation leads to sectarian Lebanese tensions between Sunnis and Shiites.

Inter-Arab Relations After an Iranian Bomb

How would inter-Arab relations fare if Iran builds a nuclear weapon, and what trends would define them? The Arab states would mainly seek to do what they do best: impose a status quo when it comes to their vital interests. An Iranian bomb would shake the Middle East, but it would also encourage Tehran to press on into the byways of the region’s contradictions, where it would become riskier to alter delicate power relations. The region can be a graveyard for hubris. Arab states would try to take advantage of this.

That said, a unified, cohesive Arab response to Iran seems unlikely. The Arab state system has been in decline for the past decade and more, as its twin pillars of Egypt and Saudi Arabia have become less consequential ideologically, politically, and even generationally. Syria has gone its own way, as has Qatar, and the penalty for brooking the Arab consensus is not only negligible; it has actually benefited the dissidents. Iran can exploit Arab states’ limitations at several levels, not least in playing on Iraq’s discontent with Saudi Arabia and Syria, but also on Riyadh’s more limited means of imposing its will on the Gulf Cooperation Council states when compared to the past.

A Palestinian-Israeli settlement is not the key that will unlock all regional problems. However, in the absence of a settlement, Iran will be able to keep countries like Jordan and Egypt on the defensive by continuing to arm and finance Hamas and by manipulating Arab and Palestinian frustration with Israel. Tehran’s possession of a nuclear weapon will not fundamentally alter its behavior compared to today. With or without a bomb, Iran will support armed groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and Syria will exploit the “resistance” option against its Arab adversaries. But a nuclear Iran will make the armed groups more self-assured, so their acceptance of negotiations or integration into state structures will become even less likely.

Without an inter-Arab mechanism to plan a united reaction to a nuclear Iran, many individual states may resort to the most potent instrument at their disposal: sectarianism. But playing the Sunni card is fraught with risks. For starters, it could further fragment the region, and might have dangerous repercussions in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Kuwait, to name only some. Significantly, sectarianism will favor religious parties and organizations, and this might undercut regimes that have, until now, sought to contain or absorb religious manifestations. Everyone knows of the dangers, but with little else at the disposal of Arab regimes, most of which suffer from doubtful legitimacy, sectarianism may be the only way.

But sectarianism is only a defense mechanism, not a means to impose a stable, long-term equilibrium. And in this the Arab states, whether opposed to Iran or with the most to gain from its going nuclear, may find common agreement. Syria like Egypt, or Qatar like Saudi Arabia, will welcome a stalemate because their interests demand it. Too weak a Saudi Arabia or Egypt, for example, is not in Syria's interests, since its strength comes from maneuvering between Iran on the one hand and the Saudis and Egyptians on the other. Syria loses in an anemic Arab world, since that would only highlight Syrian marginalization.

As a result, a nuclear Iran would push the region to rely more on outside actors such as Turkey, and even indirectly Israel, but also, and above all, the United States. The failure of inter-Arab mechanisms to contain Iran would exacerbate a phenomenon visible for the past decade, particularly after the Iraq war: the "peripheralization" of the Middle East state system. Iran's rise has been a facet of this, but so has Turkey's growing role in mediating in regional disputes from which it had been excluded. Israel, in turn—while it will not soon be integrated into the regional state system—will be looked upon by Arab states as useful in weakening Hamas and Hezbollah.

The choice role, however, will be that of the United States. It was the Iraq war that altered the regional state system by bringing to power a Shi'ite-dominated regime, but also by removing the leading Arab state that once contained Iran. This is not to say that the United States was wrong, but that the aftermath of the war has yet to find a new balance. Nor has the Obama administration given Iraq the importance it merits, preoccupied as it is with Afghanistan and an Iraqi pullout. A nuclear Iran will impose different priorities.

Only the United States has the military means to deter a nuclear Iran while buttressing this with a political framework that integrates the major Arab actors into a defensive effort. And only the United States can bring peripheral states into a new security architecture for dealing with Iran. The administration has failed to define a regional strategy, but a nuclear Iran demands one.

That is why, even if Tehran's acquisition of nuclear weapons ultimately proves to be an act of hubris, its confidence until now has been justified.