



# A Nuclear Iran and the Ramifications of a Poly-Nuclear Middle East

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The failure of the international efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a military nuclear capability has raised debate in the academic and strategic communities regarding the possibility that such a development may still be averted and regarding the ramifications of a nuclear Iran.

The classic European thesis which has now been adopted in Washington is that there is some – yet undiscovered – enticement that can be offered to Iran which would hold greater value than becoming a nuclear power. A cursory examination of what Iran believes it can achieve with even the image of being a threshold state will show that nothing the West can offer Iran (short of total hegemony over the Gulf and parts of Central Asia) can give Iran more. Furthermore, the basic Iranian perception of the conspiratorial West – including perfidious Albion – is that such offers are no more than a ruse to disarm Iran of the only capability that can protect it from western subterfuge.

Another popular hypothesis draws an analogy between Iran today and the Soviet Union in the mid 1980's. It focuses on Iran's economic situation, the behavior of the younger generation who are attracted to Western culture, and what appears to be the decline of the clerical authority in Qom, comparable to the disintegration of the Communist party's authority. Those who believe that it was the detente and the American engagement opposition in the former USSR that encouraged the internal opposition to the regime and ultimately contributed to the fall of the Soviet Empire now advocate Western "engagement" with civil society in Iran, which will, they believe, ultimately produce a similar Iranian "counter-revolution". Unfortunately, this "deus ex machina" will not appear. The disparity between the Soviet Union before its collapse and Iran today is vast. The Communist ideology that went bankrupt in the Soviet Union was a secular ideology superimposed on the nation's root religion. Its abandonment did not entail giving up basic cultural beliefs. In contrast, while the Islamic regime in Iran may not be liked by the populace, it does represent a strong tradition in Iran that existed before the revolution and retains the devotion even of those who oppose the regime. Furthermore, the Soviet Union did not fall overnight: its collapse can be traced to first stages of détente in the 1970's when it became clear to the Kremlin that it had to reach a strategic accommodation with the US. The Soviet Union also went through a series of destabilizing leadership changes with one octogenarian coming fast on the heels of another. Other forces

that had no little effect on the fall of the Soviet Union were the SDI and the defeat in Afghanistan. There is no analogy in Iran for any of these forces.

Even if, despite the dissimilarity to the Soviet Union, we accept that Iran is tending to a democratic counter-revolution, the timeline for the transformation makes this irrelevant to the nuclear crisis. Even the optimists do not see democratic change happening within the next year or two, the time most experts believe Iran needs to cross the threshold of a military nuclear capability. And because the public, even the public that seeks democratic change, will congratulate the regime for its achievement, acquisition of a nuclear bomb will only lengthen the road to democracy in Iran.

If the above is not likely, then the question should be: what are the regional ramifications of Iran becoming a nuclear power. A common argument is that nuclear weapons endow their owners with a heavy sense of responsibility in the light of the awesome destructive power of those weapons. This would lead us to believe that a nuclear Iran will be more restrained in its behavior in the region than Iran is presently. This argument is also specious. In any case, it behooves us to explore the potential for further nuclearization in the Middle East, a breakdown of the non-proliferation regime in general and implications for the relationships between a number of nuclear states which would not be grouped in two main blocs as was the case in the cold war.

The prospect of such a “poly-nuclear” Middle East has given rise to a number of theories regarding the relevance of the lessons of the cold war to such a situation. Some highly respected experts (among them Kenneth Waltz and Thomas Schelling) regard the cold war experience as highly relevant to such a scenario. Some argue, on the basis of that experience, that a nuclear Iran not only may not be a destabilizing factor in the region, but may even provide the foundation for a regional order based on the Cold War doctrine of mutually assured destruction or MAD. According to their line of thought, the very possession of nuclear weapons tempers military adventurism and inculcates a degree of strategic responsibility commensurate with the grave consequences that would result from nuclear conflict. These experts point at the fears that permeated the western military establishments of a nuclear China and the fact that a nuclear Indian sub- continent did not result in nuclear war, despite mutual hostility and frequent outbreaks of crisis.

Others point at substantial differences between the cold war and the type of nuclear Middle East that may evolve. According to his viewpoint, all of these stabilizing characteristics of the Cold War strategic balance that saved the world from a nuclear war are absent in the Middle East:

1. MAD--was based not on small nuclear arsenals in the hands of several countries but large stockpiles in two nations (or two alliances) that really did assure mutual destruction. The first years of the Cold War, before the two Superpowers developed the capabilities for mutual destruction and the command and control mechanism to prevent such a catastrophe, were the most dangerous and held the highest risk of both nuclear war and local conflicts under the “umbrella” of nuclear deterrence.
2. The Cold War was in essence a **bilateral** struggle between American and Soviet blocs, which simplified the signaling of intentions and prevention of misunderstandings. A nuclear Iran will lead to a “poly-nuclear” Middle East in which the potential for nuclear error will be greatly increased. Nuclear posturing by one party will not be interpreted only by the party it was intended for but by all other parties. Regimes in the Middle East have shown a much higher predilection for brinkmanship than the US and the USSR ever did.
3. Both sides to the cold war were governed by elite decision making groups with much in common; a centralist executive system and a clear preference (in the case of the Soviet Union – even an ideological preference) for “rational” and “pragmatic” decision making. Public discussion of nuclear

weapons in the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War tended to be restricted to experts, so policy makers could develop rational strategies with little public pressures to take a more belligerent position. It is argued that never did crowds in Washington or Moscow demonstrate – as they have in Pakistan - with models of nuclear bombs and calls to use them against historic enemies. Religious and nationalistic fervor have led Arab countries to countless military debacles. There are no grounds to argue that the possession of nuclear weapons will change these patterns of behavior.

4. Cold war parties did not have to deal with apocalyptic or suicidal traditions or with the centrality of honor as it is manifested in the Middle East. As eminent a scholar of Middle Eastern culture and politics as Prof. Bernard Lewis has argued that presenting a threat of destruction to a leader or leadership group which fervently believes in the imminence of the apocalypse would not be a threat but a promise. Muslim belief in the appearance of a Mahdi who will fight on the side of Allah's soldiers and protect them, heightens the risk. Other scholars – while they do not go as far as imputing suicidal apocalyptic goals to these leaders – argue that their very posturing as believing in such a development or in claiming divine protection from any devastating reprisal from the enemy holds potential for escalation which can get out of control.
5. Regimes in the Middle East are notoriously weak and fragmented with strategic decisions taken for internal political reasons. Elements of regimes tend to latch on to the “strategic issues” confronting those countries as levers for enhancing their clout within the regime. This tendency, if translated into multiple parties involved in nuclear programs – or even in nuclear command and control – would make command and control in the hair-trigger situations that nuclear conflicts can create more difficult than was ever experienced during the cold war.
6. The cold war did not have at its core an age-old enmity such as the Sunni-Shiite and Arab-Iranian conflict. An Iranian bomb would be perceived in the Sunni Arab world as an Iranian (i.e. anti-Arab) and Shiite (i.e. anti-Sunni) capability.

So what would a nuclear Middle East look like? Certainly not a re-run of the cold war. We should expect that a nuclear Iran will move to assert its dominance in the waters that it likes to remind all is the “Persian Gulf” and to gain hegemony over the Gulf, including dictating oil production levels. Even before the present economic crisis, Iran's economy was in shambles; the decline in oil prices has exacerbated the situation and Iran will probably attempt to intimidate its neighbors in order to raise prices. Iran will also assert itself in the heart of the Middle East by using terror with impunity. These and the very potential of a nuclear confrontation in the region should bring the western world to the conclusion that the best option remains prevention at all costs.