# Beyond the Vote (Part 2): Implications for Proliferation in the Middle East

by Robert Einhorn **(/experts/robert-einhorn)** , Olli Heinonen **(/experts/olli-heinonen)**

Sep 21, 2015
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/ma-bd-altswyt-aljz-althany-altdayat-ly-alantshar-alnwwy-fy-alshrq-alawst)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert Einhorn (/experts/robert-einhorn)
Robert Einhorn is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a former State Department counterproliferation advisor in the Obama administration.

Olli Heinonen (/experts/olli-heinonen)
Olli Heinonen is a senior fellow with the Belfer Center at Harvard University's Kennedy School and a former deputy director-general for safeguards at the IAEA.

Brief Analysis

## Two proliferation experts discuss the risk of other regional states pursuing nuclear capabilities of their own to counter Iran, and whether they have the necessary funds, technical capability, outside help, and political will.

*On September 16, The Washington Institute held **a special one-day conference (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-the-vote-implications-of-the-iran-nuclear-agreement)** on the ramifications of the Iran nuclear agreement. The following is a rapporteur's summary of remarks by former State Department counterproliferation advisor Robert Einhorn and former IAEA deputy director-general Olli Heinonen. Read Part 1, **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-the-vote-part-1-implications-for-u.s.-and-allied-intelligence)** featuring Ellen Laipson and Amos Yadlin, or download remarks by Treasury official Adam Szubin **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/SzubinTranscript20150916-v2.pdf)** .*

ROBERT EINHORN

The nuclear deal with Iran is a net plus for nonproliferation. The question of whether other regional countries will go down the nuclear path depends on whether Tehran complies with the terms, and whether the deal is perceived as an effective barrier to the Islamic Republic obtaining a nuclear weapon. Another variable is Iran's regional behavior. Will it use the presumed windfall from sanctions relief to support proxies? A third variable is the role of the United States. Is Washington seen as a reliable security partner, one fully committed to preventing Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons indefinitely?

Yet proliferation risks need to be examined in terms of individual countries. Egypt considered the idea of nuclear

weapons in the 1950s and 1960s, and it has engaged in certain related activities over the years. Today, however, it faces internal threats, so it is difficult to imagine Egyptian leaders seeing nuclear weapons as necessary. In addition, Cairo does not have the financial capability.

Turkey is economically stronger than Egypt but still struggling. Like Cairo, it does not feel directly threatened by Iran -- it sees Tehran as more of a regional rival.

Saudi Arabia has the greatest incentive to match Iran's nuclear capabilities. In recent years, Saudi confidence in Washington's reliability on security issues has declined. The kingdom clearly has the financial resources to make a run for nuclear weapons, but it lacks the expertise and skilled personnel needed for an indigenous program. And while the Saudis may have funded Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, it is doubtful that Islamabad would risk becoming an accomplice to a Saudi weapons program. Without Pakistani help, Riyadh has very few options.

Civil nuclear energy programs in the region do not pose a threat, though they do provide a venue for gaining expertise and are a first step toward potentially obtaining nuclear weapons. The United Arab Emirates undertook a commitment not to enrich or reprocess uranium, but they still have civil nuclear power programs.

Given all of these factors, one outcome seems most likely: just as there is only one country in the Middle East with nuclear weapons today, there will be only one country with nuclear weapons in twenty years.

As for missiles, short-range programs are not terribly worrisome from a nuclear perspective, though they can be. But medium- or intermediate-range missile capabilities are cause for concern. There is a growing missile race in the Middle East. Past UN Security Council decisions contained restrictions on missile technology, but Iran never accepted their legitimacy. Restrictions on ballistic missiles have been renewed in a new Security Council resolution, but they are not included in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which the Iranians argue is the only binding document.

Iran's space program has raised concerns as well; it has rockets that can boost satellites into orbit, and that is the same technology used to boost a ballistic missile. The targets are different, but the technology is the same. Clearly, the Iranians could seek to develop a long-range missile capability under the guise of a space program. They have already conducted a number of tests, and the assumption is that they will try to improve their space launch capability.

To keep Iran's behavior in check, all parties must play their role. The sanctions community has to be vigilant and willing to restore restrictions if Iran violates the agreement's terms. But the most important actors in determining whether Iran obtains a nuclear weapon are the U.S. president and Congress. They need to support America's regional partners and maintain a strong, credible commitment to the issue.

## OLLI HEINONEN

Iran's nuclear program will not really be contained by the JCPOA, because it can expand in fifteen years. And it will pose a risk to other countries. Should these countries look to the United States for security assistance or obtain their own nuclear capabilities? This is the situation the international community is facing -- the Iran deal will make the proposal for a "Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone" in the Middle East much more complicated.

Building nuclear programs takes time, so there will not be any abrupt changes in the region's proliferation status. Since the nuclear agreement is already in place, the question therefore becomes how to reduce the risks of breakout. Yet while various measures could help alleviate concerns in the region, there are numerous proliferation risks as well.

Saudi Arabia has launched an ambitious nuclear power program as part of its efforts to develop the economy. The kingdom also wants to be prepared in case it needs to build its independent fuel-cycle capabilities. But Pakistan

shares a border with Iran, so it will think twice before helping Saudi Arabia further its nuclear program.

More worrisome are the "possible military dimensions" of Iran's nuclear program, which will haunt the international community for years. The JCPOA is not a nonproliferation agreement, but rather a political agreement with a nonproliferation aspect. Iran has not changed its nuclear course and continues uranium enrichment, and it is only implementing provisional restrictions. In addition to longstanding concerns about missiles, one should not discount the potential risk of an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) weapon -- a type of nuclear device exploded high in the atmosphere in order to disrupt electrical components on the ground. Iran could design such a weapon, though its greater challenge may lie in developing a missile delivery system capable of reaching the United States. The reality of the EMP risk is unclear; North Korea might be more of a threat on this issue than Iran.

More broadly, the International Atomic Energy Agency and Iran could have avoided much controversy if they had not made their agreements confidential. Yet there is still a mechanism by which this information can be made available: per Article 5 of the IAEA safeguards agreement with Iran, any members of the agency's Board of Governors can ask to see the confidential "side letter," and even go public with it if they so choose. Since Iran and agency officials are talking about the verification regime, the board has ample reason to request those details, and IAEA officials cannot say no because the board has authority over them. If one of the board's thirty-five member countries -- which include the United States -- asks to see the agreement, then the agency has to show it. Yet they have apparently not made such a request thus far, likely to avoid stoking more public debate on the particulars of the inspection process.

Whatever the case, Washington will be one of the main actors in keeping Iran's behavior in check, as will those neighboring countries who would most feel the effects of a nuclear Iran. Within ten to fifteen years, Iran's breakout time will lessen significantly and could become as short as a couple weeks. The question would then be whether Tehran is in fact making a nuclear device. The only way to find out will be intelligence.

*This summary was prepared by Erica Wenig.* ❖

## RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

## The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

### TOPICS

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)