

Risking the Finlandization of the Persian Gulf

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Mar 19, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Articles & Testimony

A nuclear-armed Iran could bring Soviet-style intimidation to the Middle East.

Where is the Iranian nuclear showdown going? No doubt that will be a subject of discussion when President Obama visits Israel this week and meets with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But in Washington, Jerusalem and other capitals, officials tend to discuss whether time remains to prevent (or delay) an Iranian bomb, and what the consequences would be if not. Many speak with certainty, but their most basic assumptions remain questionable.

Can even the most sophisticated intelligence services know, in real time, the nuclear progress of a country half the size of Europe? The U.S. was caught off-guard by nearly every country that has gone nuclear, from the Soviet Union in 1949 to North Korea in 2006.

It is useful, then, to consider how the world would look with a nuclear Iran. Even today, without a bomb, Iranian leaders already boast regularly of their intention "to wipe Israel off the map." While many non-Israelis consider this scenario implausible, Iran's ambitions don't end with Israel.

Tehran wants to dominate the Middle East, playing for regional hegemony, energy resources and cultural supremacy. As a double minority in the region -- Iran is Persian and Shiite, while the rest of the region is Arab and mostly Sunni -- Tehran seeks to tilt the balance of power by projecting influence deep into Arab and Sunni lands.

Iran has used the disorder of the Arab revolutions to advance its influence in areas with large Shiite populations under Sunni rule. Already influential in Syria (through its support for the heterodox Alawite Assad regime), Lebanon (through its proxy Hezbollah) and Iraq (where Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government maintains strong Iranian ties), Tehran has exacerbated the chaos in several other countries directly across the Persian Gulf.

Bahrain, an island kingdom with a Shiite majority but a Sunni royal family, is wobbling under daily riots by Shiites. Saudi Arabia, which sent forces to neighboring Bahrain to help put down the antiregime protests in March 2011, has

also experienced a spike in popular demonstrations, especially in its Shiite-populated and oil-rich eastern province. In Yemen, authorities recently seized an arms shipment originating in Iran.

The Gulf region looks today like Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1940s, at the dawn of the Cold War. At that time, Soviet control over the "Eastern Bloc" wasn't yet absolute. Washington outmaneuvered Moscow's attempt to isolate Berlin, and Harry Truman stared down Stalin in Iran, leading to the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Greece and Turkey were salvaged and remained in the Western camp.

Then Stalin tested his first atomic bomb in August 1949. Soviet dominance became total in the Eastern Bloc, with dreadful consequences. Riots in East Germany in 1953, protests in Poland and the invasion of Hungary in 1956, the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 -- all left the West standing on the sidelines. Once the Soviets possessed nuclear weapons, it was inconceivable to risk trading Moscow, Prague or Budapest for Washington, New York or Los Angeles.

Stalin and then Khrushchev even made supposedly strong U.S. allies waver about lining up firmly behind Washington. Think of the opposition in West Germany to the stationing of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on that country's soil, or of Austria's neutrality and absence from NATO. Finland, despite having been invaded by the Soviet Union during World War II, adopted a policy of coerced neutrality -- giving rise to the term "Finlandization." After Moscow went nuclear, virtually half of Europe was abandoned to Stalinism.

An Iranian bomb would engender a similar crisis in today's Middle East. Iran would dominate the small, energy-rich Gulf states, and it would cause tremors among supposedly staunch U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The larger nations in the region, if they deem that America has lost its will to defend them from Iranian encroachment, may also fall into line.

If the U.S. allows Iran to go nuclear, it risks the "Finlandization" of the Persian Gulf. The period of Soviet terror and domination over Europe lasted more than 40 years. How long would Iran's endure in the Gulf?

Mr. Henderson is the Baker fellow and the director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. Mr. Scheinmann is a doctoral student at Georgetown University and a visiting fellow at the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs. ❖

Wall Street Journal

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya
(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



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)

TOPICS

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

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

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