

Don't Make Iran an Israeli Issue

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Articles & Testimony

As Iran makes steady progress toward achieving its nuclear ambitions, the debate over how best to respond is growing louder. Lately, however, the public discussion has been focused too much on the specific threat that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose to Israel.

Israel's friends do indeed have reason to worry. Iran's leaders not only regularly issue inflammatory threats against Israel, they also spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year arming and training terrorist organizations that are committed to its destruction. Given this record of belligerence, Iran's nuclear program represents a potentially grave threat to the Jewish state.

The singular focus on the threat that Iran represents to Israel, however, obscures the other profound dangers posed by Tehran's nuclear program. A nuclear-armed Iran would be a menace, not only to Israel, but also to its Arab neighbors and to American and Western interests in the region.

Already, Iran funds, arms and trains violent radicals fighting moderate Arab governments in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The Islamic Republic has a long history of sponsoring terrorist attacks in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain -- a country that hardliners claim is an Iranian province. On all of these fronts, a nuclear Iran could well be more assertive and more willing to risk confrontation. For instance, much of the world's oil passes the Strait of Hormuz, right by islands disputed between Iran and the United Arab Emirates. A nuclear Iran might feel emboldened to actively control the oil tanker traffic through the strait.

Faced with a more acute threat from a nuclear Iran, the Middle East could experience a nuclear cascade. Experts who have studied this issue warn that, at the very least, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey will think long and hard about whether to develop a nuclear weapons option. And if any one of them goes that route, the pressure will build for others to do the same, if for no other reason than to maintain the balance of power. The prospect of nuclear weapons in the hands of the Mubarak regime or the House of Saud is not a comforting thought, made even worse by the possibility that Islamists hostile to the West could overthrow these not entirely stable governments.

There is also the danger that Tehran could share its nuclear knowledge, or even its nuclear weapons. Iran's leaders loudly proclaim their willingness to share their nuclear expertise, while being vague about what exactly they have in mind. Indeed, Tehran's South American ally, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, has said he wants to acquire nuclear expertise from Iran, which says it will cooperate with him.

Moreover, the possibility that Iran would provide terrorist groups with nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out. After all, Iran's leaders have provided impressive military technologies to other terrorists: Think of the hundreds of long-range rockets in Hezbollah's hands or the sophisticated improvised explosive devices used by Iraqi insurgents to kill so many American soldiers. The chances of Tehran behaving similarly with nuclear armaments may seem slim, but given the radical character of the Iranian regime and the seriousness of the stakes, it is nevertheless a frightening scenario.

More broadly, if Iran can get away with violating the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) -- to which it is a signatory --

then the whole global system for preventing the spread of nuclear weapons could fall apart. To date, the NPT system has worked pretty well. Several countries that had nuclear weapons programs -- or, in South Africa's case, actual weapons -- have dismantled them and joined the NPT.

Outside of the five original nuclear powers -- America, Britain, France, Russia and China -- the only four countries that have nuclear weapons have been nations that refused to fully join the NPT: Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea. But if the NPT begins to weaken, quite a few countries around the world may reconsider their nuclear option. Important political leaders in Argentina, Brazil and South Africa have all said that it was a mistake for their countries to abandon the pursuit of nuclear weapons. It would not take much for the world to end up with dozens of nuclear powers.

Proliferation is a complicated issue, hard to explain in a sound bite, so it may never dominate public discussion. But it is something that matters deeply to policy elites in many countries. The Clinton administration fought hard to get Nato to define proliferation as the main global security threat. For France and Russia, their nuclear weapons are central to their claim to be world powers. If, on the Iranian nuclear issue, we want to get Europe to do more to add bite to its bark, and if we want to figure out how to move Russia and China to do more, we are more likely to persuade these governments by emphasizing the risk of proliferation rather than the threat to Israel, a country they do not necessarily care much about.

The menace posed by a nuclear Iran is broad and multi-faceted. Focusing exclusively on a single aspect of the issue -- namely, the threat to Israel -- is not helpful. Americans are more likely to be concerned about defending their country's national security than about protecting another nation, even a close ally such as Israel. And the international community is more likely to mount a vigorous response to Iran's nuclear ambitions when the nature of the threat is not framed as an Israeli issue. Stopping Tehran means making the case that the Iranian nuclear program is a menace, not only to Israel, but to world peace.

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