

Nuclear Dangers in the Middle East: Threats and Responses

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Brief Analysis

Although the Palestinian intifada led to the death of many Israelis (proportionally speaking, the equivalent of 45,000 Americans being killed by terrorism each year), Iranian possession of nuclear weapons would be even worse. Such a development would constitute an existential threat for three reasons. First, Israel's small size and concentration of major assets in one or two key locations make it especially vulnerable to the extensive destruction resulting from a nuclear strike. Indeed, one nuclear weapon would suffice to obliterate the Jewish state. Second, the knowledge that a nuclear attack could occur at any moment would completely change normal life in Israel, becoming far more disruptive than the continual threat of Iraqi Scud missile strikes during the 1991 Gulf War.

Third, Israel would not be able to freely engage in peace negotiations with its neighbors if Iran had nuclear weapons. Tehran could use the threat of such weapons to bolster radical forces that insist on unacceptable peace terms or that reject the very idea of peace with Israel. It would also wield greater leverage in its efforts to prevent the Palestinian Authority from reaching a peace agreement. Given that halting the peace process is the last remaining justification for the 1979 Islamic revolution, Tehran responds to any sign of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front by activating cells to disrupt negotiations. Moreover, according to former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, the likelihood that many Palestinians would be killed in a nuclear attack on Israel would not deter Tehran from taking such a step.

Iranian nuclear weapons would pose a threat to the West as well. Continued development of the Shahab missile has expanded its range from 500 miles to more than 3,000 miles, making it capable of hitting targets in Central Europe.

Military strikes against Iran should only be considered as a last resort. Unfortunately, the prospects are poor that the diplomatic option currently being pursued by the European Union will succeed. Tehran has deceived the world regarding its nuclear ambitions for the past eighteen years, and it is only participating in talks to gain time. It has separated and hidden the portion of its nuclear program dedicated to weapons development, placing it under the defense ministry and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; the current diplomatic discussions have not yet touched on this clandestine activity. That said, the diplomatic channel should not be abandoned altogether, but rather put into context: Tehran's goal is to gain time.

International efforts should focus on encouraging the Iranian street to overthrow the ayatollahs, as happened with the recent "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine. The citizens of Iran need to see their government ostracized by the West, and a UN resolution authorizing stiff sanctions against Iran would do much toward that end. Iranians need to be confident that they would have the world's full support if they were to overthrow the regime. If the ayatollahs were toppled, the threat posed by Iranian nuclear weapons would be greatly diminished. Israel could live with Iranian nuclear capability if a secular, democratic, and sane regime came to power in Tehran.

GRAHAM ALLISON

If the West continues its current policies regarding nuclear proliferation, it will inevitably suffer a nuclear attack. Fortunately, feasible and affordable measures exist to prevent such an attack if they are taken in time.

The effectiveness of such measures will be determined by U.S.-Russian cooperation in developing a transparent plan for securing nuclear materials. Understanding precisely how the post–Cold War “loose nuke” status quo first evolved is difficult, but continued proliferation is due largely to President Vladimir Putin’s failure to understand that Russia is at risk. The current arrangement, through which the United States pays former Soviet Union countries to secure their nuclear materials, makes such efforts seem like a favor to the United States rather than an essential part of their own national security. Israel should use its familiarity with Russia to help the United States convince Moscow that this issue must be given higher priority.

In order to halt the Iranian nuclear program, the United States should offer a grand bargain under which Iran ends all covert nuclear activity and support for terrorism in return for normalizing relations with the United States. This would include a U.S. pledge not to destroy Iran’s existing peaceful nuclear facilities. There is no other option. The likelihood that the UN will pass strong sanctions is slim; in fact, not even the United States would support sanctions on Iranian oil exports. And there is not enough time to wait for the citizenry to overthrow the regime. Reaching a grand bargain will be more likely if Europe offers clear economic incentives to Iran. Washington can also facilitate a deal by convincing Tehran that noncooperation may result in an Israeli strike.

Although Israel has long faced more imminent existential threats than nuclear attack, such an attack is possible. The least likely way for Iran to launch a nuclear attack against Israel would be through missiles, since they have an unmistakable “return address” and therefore run a strong risk of retaliation. The most likely route for a nuclear attack would be terrorism, whose source is often invisible and ambiguous. Determining the source of a nuclear weapon delivered by a splinter group would be particularly difficult; thus, the greatest threat stems from groups splintering off from Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or Fatah.

Although nonstate actors such as these could not make the fissile material needed to produce their own nuclear bomb, they could obtain an existing weapon from former Soviet countries or Pakistan. This weapon could then be smuggled into another country as easily as illegal drugs are smuggled around the world. The Bush administration is too focused on the nuclear threat from states using traditional military means; it does not give enough attention to nontraditional means such as terrorism.

This rapporteur’s summary was prepared by Minda Arrow. ❖

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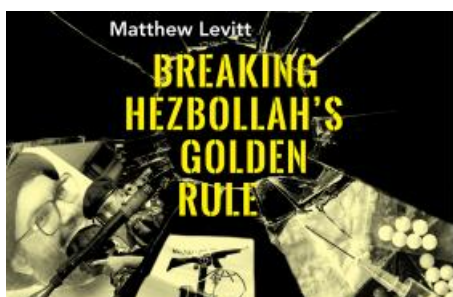
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