

Beyond Iran: The Risk of a Nuclearizing Middle East

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Brief Analysis

The statements about Iran's nuclear program made by the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Muhammad ElBaradei, have served as an eye opener for many Turkish officials, both from civilian and military ranks. They are now taking Iran's activities in the nuclear field much more seriously and are more concerned with the possibility that Iran may develop a nuclear-weapons capability. Such an eventuality may upset the long-established parity between the two countries. The fact that Turkey and Iran have not had even a border dispute since 1638 should not necessarily suggest that they have always had friendly relations. The parity that existed between the two countries in terms of geographical locations, demographic structures, and military capabilities made both sides exercise restraint, even though they may have had ambitions to attack each other. However, should Iran develop nuclear-weapons capability, this may dramatically tip the balance in favor of Iran.

Developing nuclear weapons has never been a state policy in Turkey, nor will it be in the foreseeable future so long as the government and the military are in responsible hands. However, the loyalty of an increasing number of Turks, especially from the younger generations (be they in politics, in academia, in the military, or in state bureaucracy), to the norms of the nonproliferation regimes cannot be taken for granted indefinitely, if the United States and the European Union fail to convince Iran to forego the nuclear weapons option. There are several reasons to be concerned about Turkish attitudes towards proliferation if Iran becomes nuclear-capable.

For one thing, Turks have seen that the much-publicized opposition of the United States to North Korea's nuclear weapons program did not prevent that country from advancing its capabilities. The concerned body of intellectuals in Turkey think this is because of a lack of commitment by the United States to upholding the principles of the nuclear nonproliferation regime due to its excessive engagement in the "war against terror," sending wrong signals to the aspiring states. The possibility of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons becoming an ineffective treaty may lead some in Turkey to espouse the idea of having at least the basic infrastructure for nuclear weapons capability.

An additional factor is the perceived weakness of NATO, which is seen as being in a protracted process of soul searching since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, NATO, which used to be the international organization most trusted by the Turks, turned down Turkey's request to enact Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty in the days leading up to the United States war in Iraq.

Furthermore, a huge number of Turks are unhappy with the policies of the United States toward the Kurdish groups in northern Iraq, a region that was ruled by the Turks for centuries and then lost to the British after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Many believe that the United States is helping the Kurds build an independent state, regardless of what the American diplomats are asserting publicly. Some even argue that a confrontation with the United States over northern Iraq is a scenario, if a far-fetched one. Having heard what was said and written in U.S. media after the failure of the troop-basing resolution in the Turkish Parliament on March 1, 2003, many Turks maintain that Turkey must be powerful against the United States.

Turkey should not develop a nuclear weapons capability. Turkey does not need to possess nuclear weapons to protect itself from its rivals. A Turkish nuclear weapons capability would lead to the closure of NATO's nuclear umbrella, which is still a credible deterrent. Also, such an eventuality could, in the future, bring more trouble to Turkey in the form of war by proxy by the country's neighbors.

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Were Iran to become a suspected or actual nuclear power, regional states may well consider their nuclear options. The American perspective about proliferation has dangerously focused on usual suspects among the cast of hostile actors, such as al-Qaeda, Iran, and Libya, instead of considering other potential nuclear weapons aspirants, several of whom are friendly to the United States. It is in the United States' interest to speculate on their motives in advance and implement preventive policies. Some of those who might reconsider their nuclear options if Iran's program proceeds are:

> Iraq. Even with Saddam Hussein gone, a nuclear Iran will pose an acute security dilemma for Iraq. Iran may use its nuclear card as a means of political coercion or as an actual battlefield tactic, placing extraordinary pressure on Iraq to consider nuclear alternatives.

Saudi Arabia. The possibility of a nuclear Saudi Arabia should not be ruled out because of its partnership with the United States. Not only is its traditional gulf rival, Iran, obtaining nuclear weapons, but Saudi Arabia is also concerned about what the Iraqi future will look like. There is always the standing security concern of Israel and even the possibility of future hostilities with the United States, leaving the nuclear option as a tempting quick fix for present and future security dilemmas.

Egypt. Despite its close security relationship with the United States, Egypt may very well consider nuclear alternatives on the basis that Egypt no longer carries the prestige of Arab politics that it once did. Its power is not at all commensurate with its population base, and a nuclear Iran would be yet another insult to Egyptian prestige. In addition, notwithstanding assistance from the United States, Egypt must also worry about its conventional military capability. Obtaining nuclear weapons will not only resurrect the lost political status it once had, but will also provide leverage in future negotiations.

Syria. Syria's strategic calculus may also point towards nuclear attainment. With an ambiguous future in Iraq and with Israel to the south, Syria occupies a position that is extraordinarily isolated, insecure, and vulnerable.

Despite Iran, these nuclear weapons aspirants are also surveying the behavior of the international community toward North Korea. With knowledge of their nuclear capabilities, the United States is much less assertive and more cautious about its relationship with North Korea. Alternatively, the United States went to war with a nonnuclear Iraq. Chemical and biological weapons were once considered as the substitute for nuclear weapons, but that mindset failed to hold up because Iraq had a robust chemical and biological weapon infrastructure. Furthermore, countries that lack conventional military capabilities can turn to nuclear weapons as compensation.

Rather than being reactive to an eventual turn of events, the United States should be forward leaning with policy options that promote nuclear deterrence. In terms of Iraq, some residual military presence by the United States in the long run will bring to mind the American nuclear deterrent in the event of an Iranian conflict. Another way to dampen potential Iraqi interest in nuclear weapons is to discuss the refurbishment and modernization of Iraqi air force capabilities coupled with radiant ballistic missile capabilities. Diplomacy is the best route in dealing with Egypt, as demonstrated when diplomacy succeeded in dissuading Egyptian cooperation in the Condor program with Argentina and Iraq. However, the United States has profoundly less leverage in dealing with Saudi Arabia, because of reliance on Saudi oil. Syria, much like Libya, can be presented with a package of diplomatic and economic tools that would bring an end to its isolation.

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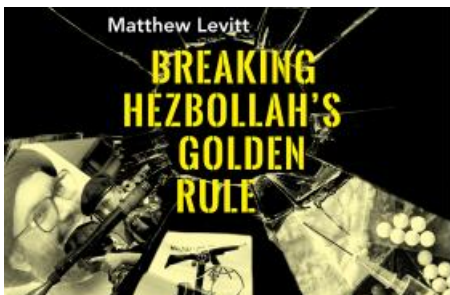
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