

The IAEA and Iran: The Perils of Inaction

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Brief Analysis

Deep divisions among the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), currently meeting in Vienna, continue to hamper U.S. efforts on two key fronts: pressing Iran to suspend work on its nuclear program, and referring allegations of Iranian violations of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to the UN Security Council. With the current meeting unlikely to produce tangible steps to halt Iran's nuclear program, it is important to understand the potential consequences of Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability.

Political Dynamics: Iran and Beyond

Iranian possession of nuclear weapons could have significant political consequences. It might dim prospects for political change in Iran by discouraging supporters of reform and bolstering outspoken hardline supporters of the nuclear program. It might cause some of Iran's neighbors to accommodate the Islamic Republic on various issues, while influencing others to seek an independent deterrent capability or to deepen security cooperation with the United States—though Iranian nuclear weapons could constrain U.S. military freedom of action in the Persian Gulf as well. Such a development would also likely embolden forces opposed to Arab-Israeli peace (such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hizballah), further complicating efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. And, as Iran eventually extends the range of its missile force to enable it to strike targets outside the Middle East, the states of the European Union will have to factor the country's nuclear potential into their policymaking toward Tehran.

Stoking Proliferation?

North Korea's unchecked development of a small nuclear stockpile has long prompted fears that South Korea and Japan might develop nuclear weapons themselves; recent revelations regarding South Korean enrichment experiments carried out four years ago have vindicated these concerns. Iran's nuclear program—whether or not it results in a declared nuclear weapons capability—has likewise raised concerns that it could spur a new round of proliferation in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia might try to purchase a nuclear weapon from North Korea or Pakistan, while some of the smaller Gulf states might leverage their petrochemical industries to produce modest chemical weapon stockpiles for deterrence. Israel would probably continue its successful policy of nuclear ambiguity, though it may find ways to bolster its deterrent posture by further reducing the thin veneer of ambiguity regarding its

nuclear status. This could cause Egypt and Syria to explore their nuclear options (although there is reason for concern that Syria is already doing so). Finally, Iran's activities could eventually cause post-Saddam Iraq to consider its nuclear options, if and when a degree of stability returns to that country.

Fostering Stability or Instability?

There are two schools of thought regarding how nuclear weapons affect the behavior of states. One argues that the acquisition of nuclear weapons induces greater prudence and caution among possessor states, and adduces U.S. and Soviet behavior during the Cold War as proof (though post-Cold War revelations regarding the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and false warnings of nuclear attacks during the Cold War have diminished the appeal of this model). The other argues that the acquisition of nuclear weapons (or, more generally, weapons of mass destruction) can lead to an increased propensity for risk-taking. Thus, Iraq's maturing chemical and biological weapons programs may have emboldened Saddam Hussein to pursue a more aggressive regional policy in 1989-1990 and to invade Kuwait. Similarly, the confidence that Pakistan's leadership drew from its May 1998 nuclear weapons test may have emboldened it to attempt to seize a portion of Kashmir from India, due to its mistaken belief that India would be deterred from responding militarily. This attempt resulted in the Kargil Crisis of May-July 1999.

It is impossible to know how nuclear weapons might affect Iranian policy, though several of the regime's past actions give reason for pause: witness Tehran's employment of gunboat diplomacy in 2001 vis-a-vis Azerbaijan (to halt its exploration for oil in contested portions of the Caspian Sea); its abandonment of an October 2003 agreement with Britain, France, and Germany that temporarily froze key elements of its nuclear program; its humiliating treatment of British servicemen recently detained in the Shatt al-Arab waterway; its threats to annihilate Israel should the latter bomb sites associated with the Iranian nuclear program; and its rebuff of an IAEA request to visit a suspected nuclear site at a military industrial facility at Parchin. Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons might further embolden its increasingly self-confident hardline leadership to bully its neighbors, stiff-arm Europe, threaten Israel, and more aggressively work to undermine U.S. interests in the region.

Military Risk-Taking?

Iranian decisionmakers may believe that the possession of nuclear weapons could provide Tehran with greater latitude to pursue more aggressive policies against its neighbors, the United States, or Israel. Although Iran is unlikely to conduct conventional military operations against any of its neighbors (its conventional military forces are weak, and there are few scenarios in which a conventional military move would make sense), it might increase support for terrorist groups that target U.S. or Israeli interests, or resume efforts to export the revolution to places where there are large Shiite communities.

Implications of Instability in Iran?

Instability and unrest in a nuclear Iran could have dire consequences. Were antiregime violence to escalate to the point that it threatened the survival of the Islamic Republic (unlikely in the near term, but a possibility in the future should popular demands for political change continue to be ignored by conservative hardliners), diehard supporters of the old order might lash out at perceived external enemies of the doomed regime with all means at their disposal, including nuclear weapons. The apocalyptic possibility of nuclear terrorism by an Islamic Republic in its death throes, though unlikely in the near term, cannot be dismissed as a source of concern.

Potential for Nuclear Terrorism?

The fact that Iran or its agents have not yet used chemical or biological agents in terrorist attacks may indicate the existence of a normative threshold, or it may indicate that, having achieved important successes by conventional terrorism (e.g., the 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing, which led to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Lebanon), Tehran perceives no need to incur the risk that the use of weapons of mass destruction would entail. Nevertheless,

Iran is likely to seek, when acting against more powerful adversaries, the ability to covertly deliver such weapons by nontraditional means (i.e., terrorists, boats, or remotely piloted aircraft). Because such methods offer the possibility of deniability, they are likely to become important adjuncts to more traditional delivery means such as missiles. In situations in which deniability is a critical consideration, they are likely to be the delivery means of choice. The possibility of deniable, covert delivery of nuclear weapons by Iran could pose a major challenge for deterrence—particularly if the country's leadership believed that the nation's vital interests or the regime's survival was at stake.

Conclusion

Any assessment of the implications of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons is necessarily speculative, and it is unlikely that all of the aforementioned possible outcomes will come to pass. But there can be no doubt that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by an Iran that supports terrorism, seeks hegemony in the Gulf, works to undermine American efforts to achieve Arab-Israeli peace and other critical U.S. interests in the region, and continues to call for the destruction of another UN member-state (Israel), will be a source of instability in a region of strategic importance to the international community.

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