

## Preparing for a Nuclear Breakout in the Middle East (Part II)

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### Brief Analysis

**A** nuclear breakout by Iraq or Iran could have a number of direct and indirect effects on the region: First, a nuclear breakout by either will cause the United States to be much more careful in its dealings with that state, particularly when it comes to considering military action. America's military freedom-of-action will be greatly constrained. Second, an Iraqi breakout would almost certainly cause Iran to further accelerate its own nuclear efforts and might spur Tehran to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which it increasingly sees as a liability. Third, the emergence of a nuclear Iraq and/or Iran could cause the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to seek an independent deterrent capability -- including chemical weapons. (The large petrochemical industries of the Gulf could provide many of the precursor chemicals needed for such an effort.) Saudi Arabia might even seek to buy nuclear weapons from Pakistan.

Fourth, the prospect of further proliferation in the Gulf might spur the United States to consider extending a deterrent umbrella to the GCC states to reassure them and thereby discourage them from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD) of their own. Fifth, a nuclear breakout by Iraq and/or Iran, would bolster the confidence of rejectionists in the region, and further complicate efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Finally, a nuclear breakout by Iraq and/or Iran might cause Israel to further reduce the already thin veneer of opacity surrounding its own nuclear capabilities, and perhaps even consider overt possession. Such a decision might, in turn, cause Egypt to reconsider its own nuclear option. In the end, while a nuclear breakout by Iraq or Iran is unlikely to produce all of these possible outcomes, it will make the strategic environment in the Middle East less stable and increase the long-term likelihood of WMD-use in the region.

### Implications

As the prospects for a nuclear breakout by Iraq or Iran increase, and as some states in the region reconsider their options, the United States must consider how it will respond to such an eventuality while working to downgrade regional perceptions of the utility of WMD. The following steps might form the basis for such an approach:

- Without downplaying the dangers of a nuclear Iraq or Iran, U.S. officials should avoid discussing the problem in a way that either inspires fear in the American public or frightens friends and allies to act contrary to U.S. interests (e.g., by accommodating Iraq and Iran or by proliferating); after all, it is always possible that efforts by either country to acquire fissile material will fail. For these reasons, an alarmist approach would be self-defeating.

- Likewise, U.S. policymakers need to start thinking about policy toward Iraq and Iran on two tracks. Though policy toward both countries should be firmly grounded on intelligence assessments of their nuclear capabilities, (for now, apparently 'no evidence that either has "the bomb"'), Washington also needs to consider how the sudden revelation that either is nuclear capable would alter various planned steps (especially U.S. military action). For instance, an Iraqi nuclear breakout could cause the United States to cease enforcing the no-fly zones over Iraq or abandon prospective efforts to bring about regime change in Baghdad, which under these circumstances might be deemed too risky.

- Washington should underscore that nuclear weapons will not stop the United States from meeting its security commitments to friends and allies in the region, or from retaliating for WMD use against U.S. personnel (and possibly allies). At the same time, Washington should clearly identify those "red lines" whose violation could result in U.S. military intervention in the region. This would reduce the potential for miscalculation by potential adversaries such as Iraq or Iran and thereby bolster deterrence.

- The risk of diversion only underscores the need to place an even greater priority on cooperative threat-reduction-type programs in the former Soviet Union that can help prevent the diversion of material, manpower, or know-how to countries of proliferation concern. Alternatively, these programs could limit the damage if diversion has already occurred. The U.S. government budget for these efforts needs to be increased, not cut.

- The United States must lay the groundwork for military action in the event that detailed, accurate, and timely target intelligence allows a conventional preventive, or preemptive strike on the nascent nuclear arsenals of Iraq and/or Iran, while recognizing the political and operational difficulties inherent in such a course of action. It is not clear that the intelligence community and armed forces have done all that is necessary to provide policymakers with such an option.

- The United States must work with regional allies to strengthen their ability to detect -- at sea -- nuclear explosive devices aboard boats or ships plying the waters of the Persian Gulf and to bolster regional air and missile defenses, through bilateral efforts and by encouraging regional cooperation in this area. This would enhance the likelihood that attempts to deliver nuclear weapons by sea or air will be thwarted.

- Likewise, the United States needs to help its allies in the GCC to develop the ability to retaliate against Iraq or Iran by conventional means (e.g., using naval special warfare and aerial strike forces). Strengthening the conventional deterrent capability of the GCC states might make it easier to convince them to eschew WMD. These efforts should -- whenever possible -- leverage assets and weapons currently in the inventories of these countries to avoid the appearance of making either a pitch for new arms sales or a bid to heat up regional arms races.

- Convincing Tehran not to go nuclear will require the United States and its European and GCC allies to create a framework of incentives and disincentives relating to nuclear proliferation by Iran. As part of this effort, they should not miss an opportunity to warn Tehran of the potential political, economic and military costs of such a decision. Likewise, encouraging the trend toward greater pragmatism evident in aspects of Tehran's foreign policy (e.g., toward Afghanistan and the GCC states) may help mitigate the effects of Iranian proliferation, though the United States has limited influence there. Conversely, dissuading Iraq from going this route under Saddam Husayn is likely to prove impossible; perhaps the only way to effectively manage Iraqi proliferation (if nonproliferation proves unsuccessful) is through regime change.

A Middle East populated by multiple nuclear powers will be a much more dangerous place for America and its allies. For this reason, preventing nuclear proliferation is preferable to dealing with its unforeseeable consequences. But only by taking steps to avert this eventuality now, and preparing beforehand for the possible failure of these nonproliferation efforts, can Washington hope to mitigate the risks of such an outcome.

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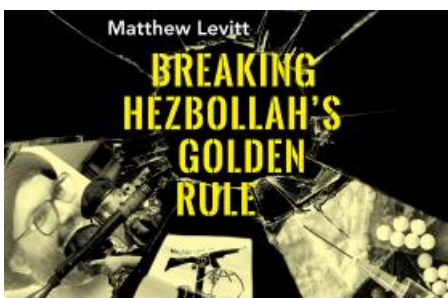
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