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

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Brief Analysis

As U.S. policymakers review options for national missile defense and ways to reshape the military to meet future threats, nuclear proliferation -- particularly in the Middle East -- looms large as one of the most critical future challenges facing the United States. In the coming years, it is conceivable, if not likely, that the United States will have to respond to a nuclear breakout by Iraq and/or Iran. Such a development could have a dramatic impact on the strategic environment of the Middle East by altering the regional balance of power and encouraging further proliferation in the region and beyond. A nuclear breakout by either of these countries would also undermine international proliferation norms, put U.S. forces in the region at risk, pose a direct threat to U.S. friends and allies, and greatly constrain America's military freedom of action in the region. The likelihood of such a development -- or at least its potential impact -- will, however, be influenced by steps the United States takes now to deal with such an eventuality. And Washington is more likely to successfully manage the consequences of a nuclear breakout by Iraq or Iran if its response is not improvised, but based on prior planning.

Breakout Dynamics

Neither Iraq nor Iran will have the ability to produce fissile material for a bomb for years to come; their ability to produce a nuclear weapon in the next few years will therefore depend on their success in acquiring fissile material from abroad -- most likely by diverting supplies from the former Soviet Union. This will probably limit the size of an arsenal based on diversion to just a few (say 1-3) bombs, because of the difficulties involved in the diversion of significant quantities of fissile materiel. Nonetheless, one diversion success is likely to inspire hope for further successes, and for this reason -- barring extraordinary circumstances (crisis or war) -- neither Iraq nor Iran is likely to publicize their achievements, at least initially, lest they jeopardize further diversion efforts. Moreover, the U.S. intelligence community is unlikely to learn of such a development until after it occurs (perhaps long afterward), nor is it likely to be able to verify such a development with any degree of certainty for some time. As a result, the United States and its allies are likely to live in an ambiguous gray area concerning the nuclear capabilities of Iraq and Iran for the foreseeable future.

In crossing the nuclear threshold, Iraq or Iran will have to consider the likely international response to a blatant violation of their Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations, including political isolation, economic sanctions, and military action. For a variety of reasons, these factors are likely to weigh much less heavily on Saddam

Husayn, for whom the goal of attaining nuclear weapons (which he apparently sees as key to his survival and to realizing his hegemonic ambitions) probably outweighs all other objectives or concerns. On the other hand, at least some Iranian decisionmakers would likely be concerned about the impact of such a move on Tehran's efforts to improve relations with the outside world, especially Europe and Japan, which are essential if Iran is to attract foreign investment for its struggling economy. In the end, however, Iran's leadership may believe that if they can keep their proliferation successes a secret, they may succeed in averting the possibly negative consequences of crossing the nuclear threshold. As a result, the fear of adverse reactions may not ultimately effect an Iranian decision to go nuclear.

Alternately, Iran may cite fears about Iraq's retained weapons of mass destruction capabilities to withdraw from the NPT as it crosses the nuclear threshold (even though it might not openly declare itself a nuclear power or test a weapon). Iran might hope that just as North Korea's nuclear activities were a catalyst for dialogue with the United States, and geopolitical considerations have caused Washington to consider lifting sanctions imposed on India after its May 1998 nuclear weapons tests and to move closer to New Delhi, Washington's concerns over Iraq might cause it to respond with understanding to an Iranian decision to withdraw from the NPT. Some Iranian leaders might thus believe that an Iranian nuclear weapons capability is a necessary condition for a fruitful dialogue between the two countries.

To Test, or Not to Test?

Because a nuclear arsenal based on diversion would be so small (1-3 bombs), Iraq and Iran might be initially reluctant to test a device or weapon to demonstrate their nuclear capability, since a test could leave them bereft of their nuclear card should the surviving bomb or two be "duds." Should Iraq and Iran remain silent about their nascent nuclear capabilities, they are likely, nonetheless, to encourage speculation concerning their true nuclear status -- to obtain the benefits of possession without the costs. And should the need arise, announcing possession of such a capability would probably be all that is needed to obtain the desired political results; potential adversaries will cautiously assume that a weapon can be successfully delivered and will work as designed, since the cost of underestimating an adversary in such a situation could be dire. Thus, the world is unlikely to learn of a decision by Iraq or Iran to cross the nuclear threshold when it happens, unless a crisis or conflict compels either of these countries to declare its status as a nuclear power.

However, Saddam Husayn -- always suspicious of others -- might eventually be tempted to test a nuclear weapon in the desert, to demonstrate Iraq's new-found nuclear capabilities to himself and to the world, and thereby allay concerns that his scientists might be lying to him about their achievements. (Iran's clerical leadership might entertain similar concerns about their bomb scientists.) Thus, were no new diversion opportunities to arise and, were Iraq and/or Iran to finally develop an indigenous fissile materiel production capability, they would probably test.

Impact on Iraqi and Iranian Policy?

Iran's clerical leadership is unlikely to alter the country's regional policies dramatically should it acquire the bomb; the policy of dtente toward its GCC neighbors is likely to continue, though one could expect Tehran to be more self-confident and assertive in pursuing its agenda in the region, particularly regarding Israel (e.g., increased support for the Lebanese Hizballah and the Palestinian intifada). As for Saddam Husayn, he is likely to try to exploit the perceived political and military potential inherent in his nascent nuclear arsenal by engaging in some high-stakes gambit in order to strike a death blow to U.S. efforts to contain Baghdad or otherwise enhance Iraq's regional and international influence. Just as Iraq's growing chemical and biological capabilities emboldened Saddam in 1989-1990 to pursue a more aggressive regional policy (eventually leading to its invasion of Kuwait), a nascent nuclear arsenal would likely encourage further adventurism and aggression by Baghdad. Thus, whereas Iran might keep its

nuclear arsenal a secret until circumstances forced it to acknowledge its existence (e.g., an Iraqi nuclear breakout, crisis, or war), Iraq would likely foment a crisis that could require it to brandish its new-found nuclear capabilities in order to avert a diplomatic setback or military defeat.

Technical Constraints

A first-generation Iraqi or Iranian nuclear weapon might be too large or heavy to mount on any of the missiles these countries currently possess. Moreover, Iraq's small surviving arsenal of al-Husayn missiles and Iran's Shahab-3 missiles are of uncertain reliability, and a first-generation weapon might not be robust enough to withstand the rigors of missile flight. Also, missiles may no longer provide an assured penetration capability, as a result of the deployment of increasingly capable missile defenses in the region. For this reason, boat or aircraft might be the delivery means of choice for a first-generation nuclear weapon. Boats can carry large, heavy payloads -- but are slow and are an unsuitable delivery means during a fast-moving crisis, when time is of the essence. And, while aircraft are more vulnerable to enemy defenses than missiles, they have fewer payload limitations.

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