

International failure and regional high alert

Emily B. Landau

The first implication of Iran becoming a nuclear state will be to drive home the extreme helplessness of the international community in the face of a determined nuclear proliferator. This scenario will mark the failure to present a united and determined international front against Iran's defiance in the nuclear realm, a responsibility shared by all the actors that have faced Iran over the past seven years. The inability to secure the necessary international cooperation to implement painful economic sanctions as a prelude to more effective negotiations with Iran will be a particularly troubling aspect of that failure.

The ramifications of Iran attaining nuclear weapons will reverberate strongly both regionally and globally, especially if Iran decides to become an overt (rather than ambiguous) nuclear state, with proven missile capabilities to deliver nuclear warheads. Within the Middle East, a nuclear Iran means an even stronger regional presence that will gain an immediate and significant advantage over all of its non-nuclear neighbors. Due to Iran's already apparent hegemonic ambitions, the added status and potential for mass destruction will cast a heavy shadow over all.

But while Iran will seek to capitalize on this to impose its will on the region, the primary effect of nuclear weapons is psychological deterrence, which is a function of how other states react to their presence. It will take time before we see the real effect on inter-state dynamics and are able to appraise the full implications of Iran's enhanced regional potential.

In the meantime, however, fears among the non-nuclear states in the region are likely to push them more determinedly in the direction of attaining or developing their own nuclear capabilities. In a sense, this process is already under way: many regional states have expressed interest over the past three years in developing civilian nuclear programs. The UAE has moved particularly quickly to conclude nuclear deals with France and the US, but there are other serious contenders, not least Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The scenario of a chain reaction of nuclear proliferation is a dangerous one, although for most states this will mean a long and arduous process; these states are all parties to the NPT, and will thus have to proceed clandestinely. The sad reality is that the international community is unlikely to be better equipped to deal with these countries' nuclear ambitions than it was with Iran's--so if they are determined, they will probably get there.

Although the long, drawn-out process of seven or eight years of failed attempts to stop Iran through diplomacy will have left Israelis with no illusions as to the real prospects of their success, the news of a nuclear Iran will still be received in Israel with a degree of shock. It will be earth-shattering in the sense that it will eliminate a long-standing pillar of Israel's security and nuclear policy; and the frequent references to Iran as an existential threat will continue to ring in the ears of Israelis, eliciting fears that the fate of the country is now on the line. Surely the very fact that Iran is nuclear will introduce an unavoidable additional layer of caution whenever Israel contemplates action to confront threats to its security.

But because the stakes are so high, it is to be expected that both in the direct Israeli-Iranian context and with regard to broader regional dynamics, some kind of stability will ultimately begin to be established. The principles of the process will probably be similar to the US-Soviet experience--namely, mutual deterrent threats, then realization that nuclear exchange could result, beefed up missile defenses and finally some kind of tension-reduction process--but it remains to be seen what the specific path will be. A central question is just how dangerous it will get before new rules of the game for managing inter-state relations in the Middle East are put in place. The explosiveness of the region, especially due to Iran's ability to stir up tension and violence through Hamas and Hizballah, does not bode well for the interim period.

At this advanced stage of Iran's nuclear activities, it is difficult to assess the implications of Iran going nuclear in isolation from the last effort to stop it. Will that be only a failed US negotiation effort or military action as well? As the US has signaled its distaste for military force and has given Israel a clear red light in this regard, the likely scenario at present is that this will come in the wake of a long, drawn-out and failed US attempt to engage Iran. After assuming the role of the major external player facing Iran, then



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abandoning both economic and military pressure, it will be primarily US President Barack Obama's failure when Iran ultimately goes nuclear. The US will be exposed globally as weak and ineffective, with an unsophisticated approach to negotiations.

And Obama's probable reaction once it is clear that Iran has become a nuclear state? Additional attempts to negotiate, no doubt--with Iran poised to get the best deal yet, at the expense of all. - *Published 28/5/2009 © bitterlemons-international.org*

Dr. Emily B. Landau is senior research associate and director of the Arms Control and Regional Security Project at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University. She teaches nuclear arms control at Tel Aviv and Haifa universities.

