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EXTENDED DETERRENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Yair Evron

The article presents and analyzes the US extended deterrence commitments in the Middle East as well as those provided by regional states, and assesses the effectiveness and credibility of these commitments. The article then proceeds to analyze a situation wherein Iran successfully develops nuclear weapons. It considers first the security requirements and alternatives of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and then proceeds to assess the stability—or instability—of an Israeli-Iranian nuclear balance. The enhancement of US extended deterrence in the region is required in order to deter Iran, reassure allies, and contribute to the stability of an Israeli-Iranian nuclear balance. The article also discusses several contextual issues, such as: the future form of US extended deterrence; distinguishing between the latter and other US extended deterrence commitments; and the different approaches of specific GCC states and Israel.

KEYWORDS: Middle East; Iran; Israel; deterrence; extended deterrence; nuclear balance

This article discusses some of the issues relevant to the current state of extended deterrence policy in the Middle East and the possibilities for future extended deterrence in the region. While the main emphasis is on US extended deterrence in the Middle East, defense commitments amongst regional states that include elements of extended deterrence will be discussed as well. The article discusses these issues both within the current, existing situation, and then within the context of a nuclear weapons-capable Iran.

Extended deterrence involves defense guarantees by a state to its allies, usually—but not exclusively—in the form of formal military alliances, the purpose of which is to deter a common opponent from undertaking military moves that might affect the political and military interests of the allies. Extended deterrence thus depends on the sharing of important security interests, as well as coordination, between the guarantor and the ally. In order to succeed, it also requires sufficient political will from both sides to enter into, and maintain, this security relationship.

American Extended Deterrence in the Middle East

During the Cold War, the United States and other Western states sought to establish defense alliances in the Middle East as part of a global strategy against the Soviet Union. The most famous attempt was the 1955 “Baghdad Pact,” which established the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) between Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and, briefly, Iraq, which withdrew after its 1958 revolution. CENTO’s limited regional membership,
combined with its inability to either affect regional conflicts or stem Soviet influence, led to its ultimate dissolution in 1979. Overall, Western attempts at creating defense alliances among Arab states failed. Israel, meanwhile, tried to enter into a formal defense alliance with the United States many times, including through North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership, but failed due to NATO states’ concerns about Arab reactions.

Since the end of the Cold War and the retreat of Soviet power from the region, the United States ceased attempts to form defense alliances in the Middle East. Significantly, however, the United States was able to mobilize the military support of the most important regional states in its 1991 confrontation with Iraq, and it enjoyed virtually complete freedom of military action in the 2000s.

**The Current Situation**

At present, the United States has no defense alliances with regional states that include formal extended deterrence commitments. However, there are several informal extended deterrence commitments that arise from political and strategic relationships, as well as various presidential declarations and formal security agreements of different types, including the deployment of American forces in some states. First among these is the longstanding US-Israeli “special relationship” that is based on both “soft” and “hard” factors. Although the United States was unwilling to enter into a formal defense alliance with Israel due to Arab sensitivities, the two states have intensified and deepened their defense relationship over the years. The United States extends an annual aid of about $3 billion to the Israeli defense budget, and supplies most of the main hardware to the Israeli air force, as well as some armaments to other branches of the Israeli forces. In addition, the United States prepositioned $800 billion of armaments in Israel for urgent use, and military coordination between the two defense establishments is extensive. Finally, several presidential declarations underscore the US commitment to Israel’s security. All of this enjoys wide American public support. While this support may, at some point, be somewhat undercut by political disagreements over the Palestinian issue, it is unlikely that this “special relationship”—and the benefits it accrues—will change significantly.

The United States has close political and strategic relationships with all six of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC)—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—which host US military facilities and personnel. For example, the headquarters of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, and US military units are deployed in Kuwait and Qatar. The close relationship between the intelligence services of all these states and the US intelligence community is well known. The US military presence creates a strong assumption of direct American military intervention, should it be necessary to defend the host states. The United States has very close political ties with Saudi Arabia and has a longstanding and significant interest in its defense.

The United States also has strong political and strategic relationships with other regional states, primarily Egypt and Jordan. The relationship with Egypt in particular is important because of Egypt’s centrality in the Arab world. Unlike the Gulf states, Egypt...
does not perceive a military threat from Iran. Therefore, the question of extended deterrence does not arise with Egypt in the same way it does with the Gulf states.

Extended Deterrence Among GCC States

There are close defense relationships among the members of the GCC. While conflicts of interest exist between some states, the GCC members share a deep concern about possible threats emanating from revolutionary Iran. Shared political interests and the concern over potential Iranian political pressure led Saudi Arabia to send forces to Bahrain in 2011 in order to quell an insurgency there that was partly backed by Iran. Interestingly enough, the resolute Saudi action deterred Iran from further intervening in Bahrain.

A Comment on Domestic Changes in the Arab States

While the “Arab Spring” has created many uncertainties about the future politics of the Middle East, many of the issues and dilemmas resulting from the ongoing tensions between Arab states and Iran will probably remain. Most of the GCC states, for example, have not yet been affected by the revolutions in the region and, because of their wealth, would possibly be able to accommodate many of the demands of their populations. In addition, it is likely that the vital national interests of the different states would continue to dictate the main policy orientations toward future regimes, as will likely be the case with Egypt. In the Syrian case, on the other hand, a change of regime would most probably lead to the end of its close relationship with Iran.

Current Deterrence Against Iran

It appears that the regional states’ deterrence policies toward Iran, backed by the informal commitments (and, in some cases, presence) of the United States, are effective. Iran’s attempts to threaten regional states with its conventional military are effectively deterred, either by the conventional capabilities of regional states, as in the Israeli case, or by the security assurances provided by the United States. To illustrate the efficacy of these deterrence policies, by 2012, Iran ceased its threats to close the Straits of Hormuz after the United States moved its ships and later its aircraft into the Persian Gulf.

In this context, it is important to draw a distinction between US deterrence posture, and US readiness to initiate offensive military action in new theaters of conflict. With the enormous costs of the involvement in Iraq and in Afghanistan, the United States is not eager to initiate additional military entanglements. However, should Iran make significant, aggressive moves against US allies and vital US interests, the United States would almost certainly react with a direct military response. Under these circumstances, US deterrence policy appears credible.
Iranian Motivations to Go Nuclear

It is reasonable to assume there is more than one factor driving Iran’s nuclear program. Some Iranian leaders may consider nuclear weapons an effective deterrent against several nuclear powers in Iran’s strategic environment, primarily the United States and Israel, but possibly also Russia and Pakistan. They may also believe nuclear weapons will increase Iranian political and strategic influence in the region. In addition, a nuclear arsenal may serve wider, more aggressive ambitions.

Which States Would Seek US Extended Deterrence?

Iran is under a regime of intensive economic sanctions and the option of a military action against its nuclear facilities looms, which could, potentially, encourage Iran to return to effectively verified compliance with its nonproliferation obligations. At the time of writing, the outcome of negotiations between the “P5 + 1”—the five members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany—and Iran, which are intended to stop the Iranian nuclear military program, remains unclear. In addition, there is always the possibility of a military strike by the United States or Israel on Iran’s nuclear facilities. This article, however, focuses on the possibility (without attaching to it any explicit probability) that Iran’s nuclear program proceeds and that it produces a small arsenal of nuclear weapons. Another possibility is that Iran withdraws from the NPT—but does not overtly test or otherwise declare that they have produced a nuclear weapon—and adopts an ambiguous nuclear posture.

If Iran proceeds with its military nuclear capability, would US deterrence continue to be credible and effective, and to what extent? There would probably be a need to further strengthen its credibility through additional measures, possibly including formal agreements. Such steps might also be needed in order to reassure allies. But which US allies in the region would seek such reassurance?

This question speaks to the obvious differences between the GCC states, non-GCC Arab states, and Israel. The GCC states do not have a nuclear weapons capability and thus are unable to deter Iran on that level. Israel is presumed to have nuclear weapons and therefore seemingly needs no external guarantees. There are also political differences between these states.

Issues related to the GCC states will be examined first, followed by a discussion of the stability (or lack thereof) of a possible Israeli-Iranian nuclear balance. American extended deterrence can play similar—and different—roles in both contexts.

GCC States

Most GCC states have a tense relationship with Iran and perceive a direct threat to their vital national interests should Iran obtain nuclear weapons. Their threat perception revolves around scenarios in which Iran seeks a hegemonic role in the Gulf area and demands various territorial or other concessions from the GCC states, backed by an explicit or implicit threat of nuclear action. Although these are political demands, they might
involve the use of military threats backed by nuclear weapons. In this way, the existence of an Iranian nuclear capability might be used for political coercion. Such a threat perception could lead the GCC states to seek and accept US security guarantees, or alternatively, to pursue an independent nuclear deterrent.

Egypt, which has no common border with Iran or territorial proximity to it, most likely does not perceive the same kind of threat. Its concern is not about the possibility of a direct nuclear threat (explicit or implicit), but rather an assessment that a nuclear Iran might increase its regional political influence. It is instructive to compare this with Egypt’s attitude towards Israel’s nuclear capability. Before the 1979 peace treaty between the two states, Egypt viewed the Israeli nuclear capability as a possible military threat. This concern gradually diminished, yet Egypt maintained its strong and persistent opposition because it viewed the nuclear arsenal as an additional component in Israel’s suspected— and resented— regional political ambitions. It is doubtful, however, that the concern about the political advantages Iran might gain through a nuclear weapons capability would provide sufficient motivation for Egypt to seek further American military guarantees. Nonetheless, Cairo would likely welcome a stronger US defense commitment to the GCC states designed to deter Iranian dominance in the region.

Among the Gulf states, the only one that could conceivably choose either of these alternatives is Saudi Arabia. Thanks to its long and close relationship with nuclear-capable Pakistan, Saudi Arabia might be able to develop a nuclear capability with Pakistan’s active support. However, barring the direct transfer of the weapons themselves, this is an option with many obstacles; the development of a nuclear infrastructure is difficult and time-consuming. Moreover, Saudi Arabia lacks the scientific manpower to develop and maintain such infrastructure. It might take at least a full decade before such a project could materialize, if at all. Iran, which has a strong group of nuclear scientists and engineers, has required more than a decade to develop its enriched uranium project, even with significant assistance from the A.Q. Khan network. All of this might lead Saudi Arabia to prefer formal guarantees, including strong extended deterrence commitments, from the United States. (However, public opposition to closer overt military relations with the United States might lead the Saudi regime to seek only low-visibility US commitments.)

Hints that Saudi Arabia would seek a nuclear weapons capability could either be interpreted as valid indications of intent, or as an effort to apply pressure on the United States to act against Iran. Either way, because of the difficulties associated with developing a nuclear capability, Saudi Arabia would likely need a US defense guarantee, and the US would most probably oppose an independent Saudi nuclear deterrent.

There are two considerations that might serve as counter arguments to a Saudi quest for US security guarantees: first, a relative lack of Saudi confidence in the United States resulting from what it considered to be US abandonment of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in face of the Egyptian revolution; second, the Saudi public’s opposition to a formal reliance on US power.

There are three reasons to believe that if the United States extended a formal guarantee to Saudi Arabia (as well as to other GCC states), it would stand by its commitment. First, the potential rival is Iran, which has no real capability to match overall US military power. While some may have doubted the credibility of American guarantees
vis-à-vis the Soviet Union within the context of extended deterrence in NATO—due to substantial Soviet military capabilities (discussed below)—such considerations are not relevant to the Iranian case. Second, US interests in the Gulf are considerable, and hence the commitment to defend them would be credible. Finally, an alternative to US guarantees might be further regional nuclear proliferation, something that would adversely affect international security and undermine another major US security interest—halting and reversing nuclear proliferation.

Some arguments suggest extended deterrence could be provided by other external powers. Pakistan has been mentioned, but it appears unlikely that Pakistan would assume an additional enormous security burden outside its borders and beyond its competition with India, especially given the problems it faces domestically and in Afghanistan.

**Turkey’s Position**

Contrary to some suggestions, it is doubtful that Turkey would develop an independent nuclear deterrent in response to Iran’s. Turkish authorities have expressed dissatisfaction and concern over reports claiming that Turkey is considering nuclear weapons as a response to Iran’s nuclear weapons program. Turkish-Iranian relations are complex and multidimensional. On one hand, Turkey has good economic relations with Iran. For example, the extent of the trade between them has grown considerably over the last few years (over the period 1991-2008, for example, the overall trade between the two states grew from $178 million to about $10 billion, mainly due to the export of Iranian gas). On the other hand, there is currently tension between the two states on several issues, primarily the civil war in Syria and relations with Iraq. Beyond that, the two states appear to be competing for positions of regional leadership.

Turkey is a party to both the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and considers proliferation a serious threat to international security. It is clear that Turkey has a strong stake in preventing an Iranian bomb. Indeed, Turkey has been very active in trying to bring about a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis that would dissuade Iran from becoming a nuclear power.

A critical factor in Turkey’s assessment of its strategic environment in the context of a nuclear capable Iran is its membership in NATO. US tactical nuclear weapons are still deployed in Turkey, and it has also agreed to host a US missile defense radar system. Against this background, a Turkish decision to develop an independent nuclear deterrent appears to be of low probability. Only a general retreat of the United States from the region (which is improbable), coupled with a marked weakening of the US commitment to NATO, might begin to change Turkish calculations about the advisability of an independent nuclear deterrent. However, it is possible that Turkey might seek clarifications about the US commitment to deterring another regional state’s aggressive moves within the NATO framework.
The Stability of an Israeli-Iranian Nuclear Balance

While Israel maintains a policy of nuclear ambiguity—neither confirming nor denying its possession of nuclear weapons—it is estimated to have a considerable nuclear arsenal. (The authoritative London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies has repeatedly suggested that Israel has up to 200 nuclear warheads.) For years, reliable international sources have pointed out that Israel most likely already has a second strike capability through its air force and probably also with surface-to-surface missiles. In addition, Israel reportedly has a sea-launched cruise missile capability through its Dolphin submarines.

If Iran “goes nuclear,” how would this affect its strategic relationship with Israel? There are two schools of thought. The majority of theoreticians and practitioners have pointed out the dangers of nuclear proliferation to international stability, as well as the destabilizing effect of nuclear weapons in regions where proliferation takes place. The other school argues that regional proliferation might stabilize conflicts between newly armed nuclear powers. Adherents of this view cite the model of the central balance of deterrence practiced during the Cold War.

For a variety of reasons—political, technological, cognitive—the context from which the US-Soviet model of deterrence emerged is very different from a possible Israeli-Iranian nuclear relationship. To name just a few: stable deterrence was achieved only after a long period of learning about the nature of nuclear weapons, during which major crises occurred (most notably the Cuban Missile Crisis) with a high risk of escalation to the nuclear level. The two superpowers maintained open channels of communication. Indeed, even before the establishment of the nuclear hotline in 1963, there were full diplomatic relationships between them that enabled them to manage their crises. Their regimes were stable, both deployed significant second-strike capabilities, and over time they developed extensive and credible early warning systems. Moreover, beginning in the early 1960s, the two superpowers embarked on a process of arms control negotiations and agreements that increased the stability of their strategic relationship. All of these elements are absent from the Israeli-Iranian relationship and would take time to develop, perhaps only after severe regional conflicts. Iran lacks a credible command and control system, a fact that would likely arouse anxieties in Israel. The regime in Tehran is unstable. The process of “learning” and “socialization” with regard to nuclear weapons would take a long period of time, and there are serious cognitive obstacles that might hamper rational decisions in times of crisis, such as the possibility of misperceiving the other side’s readiness to launch a first strike.

In light of the conditions hindering the development of a stable hypothetical Israeli-Iranian nuclear deterrence relationship, we can infer some tentative conclusions. On a first level of analysis, Israel and Iran would probably be mutually deterred from launching a first strike because of the certainty of a devastating counterattack. Because Israel already has a credible second strike capability, Iran would likely be deterred from launching a first strike. Since the destruction of Iran is not an Israeli objective, Israel would have no motivation for a first strike. Thus, mutual deterrence could prevail. However, problems might arise under several other conditions, such as: an escalating crisis between Israel and an ally of Iran (e.g.,
Syria, Hezbollah), which would heighten fears of a rival’s first strike, or a situation wherein domestic instability breeds uncertainties about the control over nuclear assets, leading to fears of potential unauthorized use.

Given these possible scenarios, significant and continuous efforts must be made to stabilize an Israeli-Iranian nuclear dyad. Such efforts should include, among other things, arms control agreements and confidence-building measures.

US extended deterrence to Israel should not be considered a substitute for Israel’s own capability and deterrence posture, but rather as an element to further stabilize the Israeli-Iranian nuclear relationship. US reassurances to Israel that it would help deter an aggressive Iran would also indirectly reassure Iran that, in a crisis, Israel would not need to preemptively strike.

US Extended Deterrence with a Nuclear-Armed Iran

Current US commitments to GCC states derive from important US interests in the region, and comprise two existing elements, as discussed previously: the range of various agreements and understandings between the United States and GCC states; and the presence of US forces and bases in these states. The emergence of a nuclear weapons-capable Iran might, however, change regional perceptions about the US commitment. It would therefore be important to upgrade these commitments.

From a US perspective, a nuclear-armed Iran would signify a failure of US and international efforts to halt this process. Such an occurrence would require a new policy of containment and deterrence to replace both the diplomacy and the military option designed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Such a policy would have to include extended deterrence. Discussing and preparing for a more salient US extended deterrence posture would buttress present efforts to halt Iran’s program. Iran’s realization that fortified extended deterrence would undermine its ability to politically coerce neighboring states or increase its general influence in the region could weaken its appetite for a nuclear weapons program.

Before elaborating on different ways of upgrading US extended deterrence posture, it is worthwhile to consider other current US extended deterrence commitments, namely to NATO and to East Asia. There are significant differences between the two. NATO is an alliance comprising many states in which there is an overall unifying commitment, with the United States providing the main (nuclear) security assurance. US ground and air units are deployed in some states. In addition to the US-based arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons, non-strategic nuclear weapons are deployed in several European states (Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey). Finally, the United Kingdom and France have their own independent nuclear deterrents (with the UK’s fully integrated into the NATO military framework), and there are joint mechanisms that plan the nuclear policy of the alliance.

In East Asia, US commitments are structured very differently. There are separate bilateral defense agreements with different states, including Japan, Australia, South Korea, and, less explicitly, Taiwan. The Australia-New Zealand-US Treaty ended years ago due to
disagreements between the United States and New Zealand over nuclear weapons, but cooperation continues. US ground, air, and sea units are deployed in Japan and South Korea (and, recently, a small contingent in Australia as well) but no non-strategic nuclear systems are deployed in the region. Strategic nuclear deterrence depends on off-shore systems, both those deployed in the United States and on strategic bombers deployed in Guam and on submarines. These various defense treaties were created to reassure allies and deter the Soviet Union and China. With the end of the Cold War, deterrence began to focus more on China and North Korea.  

Structure of an American Extended Deterrence System in the Middle East

Since there already exists a regional alliance in the Gulf area, the GCC, it would be reasonable to assume that this alliance could be connected to the United States in a cooperative military-security arrangement. The specific modalities of such an arrangement would need to be worked out, and some formalization of the US commitment would probably be necessary. This would enhance trust between the United States and GCC states, strongly affect Iranian cost/benefit calculations about the use of the nuclear instrument as a vehicle for political pressure, and significantly reduce motivations by GCC states to develop independent nuclear arsenals. A defense alliance would also require the creation of mechanisms for cooperation and the preparation of contingency plans for crisis operations. One of the main lessons of both NATO and US commitments in East Asia has been that constant consultations and the creation of forums for such consultations and common planning contributes to both deterrence and reassurance.

A lower level of formalization might involve a clear presidential declaration entailing the readiness of the United States to extend military help and respond to aggression against the states to which the commitment is extended. An issue that might be raised is whether the commitment should be directed only against the threat of use of nuclear weapons or against any threat or actual use of military force against the allied states. In this context, it is worth mentioning that President Barack Obama’s 2010 Nuclear Posture Review warns Iran that any attack on allies and partners “…will be met with a response that would be effective and overwhelming.”

Specific Issues and Dilemmas for US Extended Deterrence in the Middle East

The effectiveness of any extended deterrence policy depends on both its perceived credibility by the opponent as well as the degree to which the states it seeks to protect feel reassured. The credibility of extended deterrence under conditions of rivalry between two major nuclear powers, as was the case during the Cold War, is debatable. Within NATO, some Europeans continuously voiced doubts about the US commitment in face of the enormous Soviet nuclear arsenal, asking if the president would risk the destruction of the United States in order to defend European allies. We may never know with certainty whether it was the US nuclear guarantee that deterred a Soviet attack on Western Europe, or whether the Soviet leadership desisted for other reasons. However, it
can reasonably be argued that, notwithstanding these doubts, deterrence did contribute to the “long peace” in Europe. In any event, the situation in the Middle East is very different. Iran will, at most, be a regional nuclear power and would not possess the Soviet Union’s capability to launch an overwhelming attack on the United States.

A more relevant case for comparison with Iran might be North Korea and the threat it poses, as perceived by South Korea and Japan. There, US extended deterrence commitments are viewed as credible, both as deterrents as well as instruments of reassurance. Several factors appear to solidify the commitments. These include: (1) the formal defense treaties between the United States, Japan, and South Korea; (2) the deployment of US forces in these states; and (3) continuous joint security planning consultations, as well as military exercises.

**NATO and Afghanistan**

NATO’s retreat from Afghanistan would strengthen US extended deterrence in the Gulf in several ways. First, a portion of the retreating US ground forces could be redeployed in the GCC states. Second, there would be fewer vulnerable US security assets in Afghanistan that could be targeted by Iranian operatives. Finally, with an end to the military involvement in Afghanistan, the American public might be more willing to support additional security commitments, including extended deterrence, abroad.

**Deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment**

Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, its leadership could decide to make coercive political demands intended to achieve greater influence in the Gulf area, direct territorial gains, or to effect political change in neighboring states. Another scenario could involve Iran attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz in response to continued economic sanctions. The probability of such moves is unclear.

Ideally, the United States should be able—in conjunction with regional forces—to deny success to different levels of Iranian military action. Such an ability would make deterrence by denial threats credible. In the event that such capabilities are insufficient, extended deterrence—the threat of severe punishment as retaliation—would become necessary. A mixture of deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment is based on the US forces’ capability to destroy Iranian air force bases, general command and control systems, and other military assets, through combined air and naval attacks.23

The most likely type of military activity will be low-level, asymmetric warfare (guerilla warfare, terrorism, or the use of small military units such as small boats), and will probably be conducted below US tolerance thresholds. The armed forces of the GCC states would probably be sufficient to repel such attacks. A recent example (cited above) was the behavior of Iranian naval forces, which moved toward Bahrain during a clash in 2011. But after Saudi forces moved into Bahrain to assist the regime, the Iranian naval unit retreated.
Similarly, Iran is unlikely to prevail with large-scale military ground operations. The Iranian armed forces, although relatively unsophisticated in terms of hardware and organization, are numerically superior to what the GCC states could field (though the latter have much superior weapon systems). The US ground forces deployed in the area, though qualitatively superior to the Iranian ones in every respect, may need reinforcements in time of crisis. However, US air and naval assets, either deployed or able to quickly deploy to the region, would be able to fill this gap. Consequently, the conventional balance favors the combined US-GCC capabilities. 24

Deterrence Against Nuclear Threats

Should it acquire them, Iran’s actual use of nuclear weapons—or even explicit threats to use them—is extremely unlikely. Threats might arise only if the survival of the regime were in doubt. Barring this, US deterrence by punishment would be very credible. This need not even require nuclear deterrence—US conventional capabilities are quite capable of inflicting tremendous damage—although the nuclear option should be left open. The United States has many long-range weapons that could reach Iran. There is no need, therefore, for deployment of nuclear assets in the region. The deployment of extensive anti-ballistic missile systems, both ground- and sea-based, is also important to deterrence, and, even more so, to the reassurance of allies. Planning for such deployments has already begun. 25

One Alliance or Two?

For political reasons, it is difficult to envisage an alliance incorporating both Israel and the Arab states. Were the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be resolved, then the possibility of Arab states partnering with Israel might be more realistic. One possible solution to that difficulty could be two parallel sets of US commitments. These could be in the same form, or could be defined differently, but the level of declared commitment should be similar.

Should Iran be Specifically Identified as the Threat?

Identifying Iran as the threat would focus the US commitment and provide additional reassurance to both GCC states as well as Israel. A more open-ended definition, such as a US commitment to defend against any nuclear threat in the region, might cause difficulties because Israel remains an undeclared nuclear power.

Would the US Public Support This?

This is an open question. However, both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama declared that the United States will not accept a nuclear Iran. If Iran nevertheless became a nuclear power, US insistence on deterrence is necessary in order to maintain its credibility in the region and to deter potential aggressive Iranian moves. This would fit the policy of containment and deterrence. It would also be a strong instrument to preempt the possibility
of further proliferation. The US public is presently tired of military interventions abroad, particularly if they involve the deployment of ground forces for extended periods of time. Strengthening deterrence would actually lower the risk that Iran might try to challenge regional allies, reducing, the probability of direct US military involvement. Such considerations might counterbalance the public’s trepidation about further commitments abroad.

An Israel-United States Defense Treaty

There have been several attempts to formulate an US-Israeli defense alliance, both during the Cold War as well as in the 1990s and 2000s. The main difficulties from the US point of view were: the demand to secure peace agreements beforehand; and the difficulty in accepting the Israeli independent nuclear capability. The latter has been tolerated by the United States for several reasons, most notably Israel’s official policy of opacity or ambiguity. But in the context of a defensive alliance, the issue could come up. However, in the context of a nuclear Iran, and, provided Israel maintained its posture of ambiguity, it is possible that this difficulty could be overcome.

The Israeli position is also complex. On the one hand, there have been several Israeli attempts to secure a formal US guarantee to Israel. On the other hand, there have been reservations about relying on external guarantees. Israel prides itself on its self-reliance, and a formal defense alliance could constrain Israel’s freedom of military action. This includes the argument that the United States, concerned about regional stability, would restrain Israel’s freedom to use nuclear weapons in response to an Iranian attack.

Three major considerations counter these arguments: first, a formal US guarantee would add to the credibility of the Israeli nuclear deterrent, should Iran perceive Israel as vulnerable to a first strike; second, as noted above, such a guarantee would enhance the stability of the Israeli-Iranian nuclear balance. Third, if the US extended formal defense commitments to the GCC states, the absence of a similar commitment to Israel might be construed as a weakening of the overall US commitment to Israel.

Conclusion

Deterrence against direct military aggression by Iran vis-à-vis the GCC states or Israel appears to be solid and credible. It is based on regional capabilities as well as the ongoing US military presence and commitments. However, if Iran builds nuclear weapons, several major threats might emerge: political coercion against the GCC states; an increase of the overall instability in the region; and the emergence of an unstable and dangerous Israeli-Iranian nuclear balance. Enhancing US extended deterrence commitments could significantly lessen these threats.

NOTES

1. Since the initial preparation of this article, the RAND Corporation published an extensive study of some of the issues it discusses. See Lynn E. Davis, Jeffrey Martini, Alireza Nader, Dalia Dassa Kaye,


7. This assertion is based on dozens of meetings the author held with Egyptian diplomats and ex-officials in various international conferences.


10. For a recent account of the Dolphin submarines, see ibid.


13. For Turkey’s stand on these issues, see Sinan Uglen, “Preventing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: What Role for Turkey?” Discussion Paper Series-2010/2, Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (June 2010).


16. For a recent account of the Dolphin submarines, see ibid.


22. The literature on deterrence, in general as well as on extended deterrence, is enormous. For useful accounts of the main types of deterrence, including an account of deterrence during the Cold War, see, inter alia, Patrick Morgan, Deterrence Now (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Lawrence Freedman, Deterrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

23. For an early definition of these two types of deterrence, see Glenn H. Snyder, Deterrence by Denial and Punishment (Princeton: Princeton University Center of International Studies, 1959).
