

# Extended Deterrence in the Middle East: A Fuzzy Concept that Might Work?

Carlo Masala

## Introduction

“Extended deterrence,” or “active deterrence,” as it is sometimes called, threatens a nuclear-strategic response in case of a nuclear attack on the territory or troops of one’s allies. This essay aims to explore the possibilities of extended deterrence in the Middle East in light of an Iranian nuclear military capability. Two preliminary remarks are necessary in order to frame the line of reasoning on the issue.

Discussion of the possibilities and pitfalls of extended deterrence in the Middle East does not intend to insinuate that diplomatic efforts to stop the Iranian regime from constructing a nuclear device have failed or that a nuclear Iran is already a given. Exploring the possibilities of extended deterrence in the Middle East is, rather, an attempt to be intellectually honest and anticipate that all the efforts underway for almost a decade will fail because the Iranian regime might be determined to produce nuclear warheads or reach the breakout point in which it will become a “virtual nuclear power.” Both possible trajectories will have a decisive impact on the nuclear realm, but even more so, on the political balance of power in the region. They have the potential to reshuffle relations in the region, not only between Iran and Israel but also between Iran and the Arab states in the Middle East. If such a development is perceived as detrimental to the already fragile security situation in the Middle East, academics and practitioners had better start thinking about a “plan B” in case Tehran goes nuclear.

Professor Carlo Masala is the dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of the German Armed Forces, Munich. This essay is based on a lecture delivered in November 2011 at the INSS conference “Arms Control in a Changing Middle East.”

A second preliminary remark that must precede any analysis of extended deterrence and its applicability to the Middle East concerns the nature of the subject to be explored. Although over almost six decades there has been a profusion of literature on the mechanisms of deterrence and extended deterrence (joining the same number of critical studies on why deterrence and extended deterrence might not work),<sup>1</sup> we still don't know much about deterrence and extended deterrence. This paradox can be explained by the simple fact that so far we have not experienced the failure of a deterrence relationship, resulting in a nuclear war between two powers. Both the proponents of deterrence as well as their critics believe – in the theological sense of the word – that deterrence either works or doesn't, but both camps don't know for certain. The consequences of this highly unsatisfying state of the art is that neither “the more may be better”<sup>2</sup> nor “the dead end of deterrence”<sup>3</sup> approach provides any form of guidance for policymakers having to deal with the issue at stake. If academics want to speak truth to power they need to be aware of first, the limitations of their theories, and second, that the real world can't be grasped with parsimonious concepts.

With these words of caution the essay proceeds as follows. First it approaches the topic by defining extended deterrence, which in the 21<sup>st</sup> century differs from the old East-West conflict concept by being much broader in its instruments. Turning then to some conceptual problems concerning extended deterrence, the essay argues that in order for extended deterrence to work it must be able to answer three conceptual problems that all are related to the credibility of a threat. After this conceptual clarification the essay introduces the two extended deterrence models familiar from past and present, namely, the European and the Asian models. They differ slightly but decisively. The purpose of presenting these two models is to ask if they are applicable to the Middle East. It will be shown that for different reasons this is not the case, and that neither the European nor the Asian model seems to be a viable approach to the situation in the Middle East. The last section of this paper looks at different possible ways deterrence can be extended to the Middle East. It argues that for the time being only unilateral US guarantees can pave the way for something that comes close to extended deterrence in this highly volatile region.

### The Difficulties of Extended Deterrence

During the Cold War extended deterrence used to be a public good provided by the US and the USSR to some of their allies. Usually extended deterrence materialized in a system of formal alliance relationships among states with either the US or the USSR as formal guarantor. At the time, extended deterrence used to be mainly nuclear. Stretching a nuclear umbrella over allies served two purposes: first, preventing allies from going nuclear themselves, and second, preventing an adversary from attacking an ally (either in a conventional or a nuclear strike). It might seem surprising that extended deterrence is also mentioned here as a tool against any conventional aggression, but in the early days of the Cold War, NATO's strategy of massive retaliation threatened the USSR and its allies with a nuclear attack in case of conventional aggression. Extended nuclear deterrence as an instrument against conventional aggression is essential if the opponent is perceived as a predatory, revisionist state that wants to change existing balances of power to its own advantage by all available means.

The main purpose of extending nuclear guarantees, however, used to be to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the concept of extended deterrence occupied a smaller academic focus, and especially with the rise of violent non-state actors, the question arose whether deterrence and thereby also extended deterrence play any role in security politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, this academic debate is out of sync with political reality. In light of existing or emerging nuclear powers, states in Asia as well as in the Middle East are exploring the possibilities of slipping under a renewed or new nuclear umbrella in order to gain more security vis-à-vis a potential nuclear threat.

While extended deterrence used to be primarily nuclear, today extended deterrence is only partly nuclear and also entails missile defense and to a certain extent means such as prompt global strike (PGS) capabilities.<sup>5</sup> Today extended deterrence, if provided in order to prevent a nuclear attack on an ally as well as excessive conventional aggression, rests on a mix of instruments that make it at least theoretically possible to tailor extended deterrence more precisely to regional needs or to the needs of the guarantor and the guaranteee.

If we turn to the question of essential prerequisites for viable extended deterrence, it must be kept in mind that extended deterrence faces three problems that must be solved before there is any validity to the concept of extended deterrence.

- a. The threat needs to be credible to an adversary on behalf of or in collaboration with a third party;
- b. The elite of both the guarantor and the guarantee need to be convinced on a bipartisan basis that extended deterrence is credible;
- c. The domestic audiences of both the guarantor and the guarantee need to believe that extended deterrence is necessary and practicable.

With the nature and the conceptual problems that accompany extended deterrence as background, the applicability of extended deterrence to the Middle East given an Iranian nuclear capability can now be examined.

### **Extended Deterrence in the Middle East: Difficult but Possible?**

Broadly speaking, there are two familiar models of extended deterrence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the European and the Asian models. Both models rest on a significant number of conventional ground, air, and naval forces stationed in the respective regions. They differ with regard to the forward deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW). While nuclear deterrence to US allies in Asia is provided through capabilities stationed in the US, the European model rests on the forward deployment of NSNW as well as a form of nuclear participation within NATO.<sup>6</sup>

At first glance both models are not applicable to the Middle East. Neither is it thinkable that Arab countries will accept the deployment of US forces on their soil (especially given the anti-US sentiments among large parts of the population), nor is it likely that the US will deploy NSNW in the region (given the volatility of existing regimes). Although large numbers of US ground, air, and naval forces are already stationed in the Arabian Gulf, extended deterrence rests on a country-based strategy, meaning that in every country that enjoys a nuclear umbrella, a tactical link such as US installations or US troops must be present. As of today it is hard to envision that US forces will be stationed in Egypt or Jordan. Indeed, the already existing US ground presence in the Arabian Peninsula is a constant source of tension between the leaderships of those countries with a US presence and their populations. As long as the

population is not convinced that such a presence is needed to guarantee national sovereignty and survival, the credibility of extended deterrence is weakened.

Thus if both models are not applicable to the region, how can extended deterrence be tailored to the Middle East?

This depends partly on the answer of four “known unknowns.” First, how will a nuclear Iran behave? Will it be a defensive status quo or an offensive revisionist power? Second, how can extended deterrence be provided to the region, given the Arab-Israeli divide? Third, given their security cultures, will Arab states and/or Israel trust external guarantees? And lastly, how can Iran be made to believe, in case Tehran develops long range delivery systems in the future, that the US is willing to live up to its commitments?

Based on these unknowns, four models on how extended deterrence can be guaranteed for the region are plausible and should be discussed with regard to their applicability to the Middle East. The models are multilateral agreement, a regional security system, the Holocaust declaration, and unilateral US guarantees.

One possibility of providing the region with a kind of extended deterrence entails nuclear great powers declaring their willingness and their readiness to defend Israel and Arab states, if necessary by nuclear means, if Iran attacks. Together with a declared willingness to use PGS capabilities and with the Israeli Arrow system, this form of guarantee could either be provided by a joint P5 declaration or a Russian-US statement on the Middle East and nuclear weapons. At first glance this option looks appealing, since the major nuclear powers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (US, Russia, and China) would pool their capabilities and send a clear and strong signal into the region. Even if Russia and China currently object to any stronger sanctions (not to speak of military action) against Iran, they both share a strategic interest that there not be nuclear escalation in the Middle East. In a mid-term perspective it is possible that these three countries, together with the two European nuclear powers, would be willing to extend their deterring capabilities to the Middle East.

Such an option, however, would face an enormous credibility gap, which thereby makes it unlikely that it will ever materialize. The likelihood that Israel would consider such a guarantee as credible must be considered as extremely low. The option of multilateral guarantees

might be appealing to some or all Arab states in the Middle East, but given Israel's historical record with Russia and France and the current behavior of China and Russia vis-à-vis the Iranian file, it is hard to imagine that the Israeli elite as well as public opinion would perceive such guarantees as credible. Multilateral agreements would also give Iran an opportunity to try to drive a wedge among those countries that would provide extended deterrence to the Middle East. The conclusion, therefore, is that multilateral agreements provided by the P5 or by a Russian-US consortium could not be implemented due to a lack of credibility.

A veteran idea that is frequently aired when it comes to Middle Eastern security is that of a regional security system. With regard to the purpose of extending deterrence, such a system would comprise Arab states and Israel as well as external powers such as the US and maybe Russia. Participants in such a system would commit themselves to defend any member of the system attacked by an outsider with all means available (nuclear, PGS, and missile defense). Such an arrangement would make the system look very much like a formal alliance. A regional security system could be designed as single purpose (exclusively against the external threat posed by a nuclear Iran) or multipurpose (trying to create interdependencies among signatory states in the field of security). Although the theoretical literature on building alliances suggests that given an external threat alliance building is even possible among states that have enmities, it seems unlikely that Arab states would be willing to form an institutionalized regional security system to oppose the Iranian threat. Furthermore, if bilateral relations between Israel and Arab states would not be settled beforehand, such a system would always face a high degree of instability, and intra-system balancing would impede the system itself from being credible in the eyes of the Iranian regime.

Charles Krauthammer has proposed the so-called "Holocaust declaration"<sup>7</sup> as one form of extending deterrence to parts of the Middle East. Within this framework, the US would state unilaterally that it would not allow a second Holocaust to take place, meaning that the US would be willing to use nuclear weapons in order to prevent Iran from exterminating the Jewish state. This kind of unilateral extended deterrence just for Israel would face two major obstacles. First, it would single out Israel as the only state in the Middle East that is of concern to the US and thereby potentially have a detrimental effect on US-Arab

relations, and second, the Israeli elite might feel limited in its freedom of maneuver vis-à-vis Iran and beyond.

Thus, these three models on how to extend deterrence to the Middle East suffer from logical flaws given the political reality in the region. Currently the major obstacles for establishing an overall (meaning including Israel and the Arab states) system of extended deterrence are the lack of trust among Arab states and Israel and Arab security cultures, which make it hard to believe that Arab leaders and the Arab street are to be convinced that the US would defend them in case of an Iranian assault.

Realistically speaking, the creation of a comprehensive and credible system of extended deterrence must start from unilateral US statements to Israel and the Arab states that the US will not allow any other country to blackmail or threaten its allies in the region. This means of extending unilateral deterrence guarantees is far from perfect. It is weak in the sense that there will be no link between the strategic nuclear capabilities of the US and the security of its allies in the region (as in the case of Europe or Asian countries). It will suffer from the basic credibility problem of extended deterrence,<sup>8</sup> which Charles de Gaulle captured so precisely in the 1960s when he asked Adenauer if the German chancellor really believed that the US would risk the destruction of New York for the liberation of Hamburg. The credibility problem nowadays is even worse since the current US administration has shifted its attention to the Pacific and does not seem too determined to stop Iran “by all means necessary” from going nuclear. Added to this, US credibility and its commitment to get tough on Iran if the mullah regime, once nuclear, threatens US allies might suffer from the fact that the US has lost two conventional wars in the broader region (Iraq and Afghanistan), and public opinion does not support getting bogged down again in the Middle Eastern quagmire.

But given the aforementioned obstacles facing other forms of extended deterrence in the Middle East, unilateral guarantees might currently be the only form of extending deterrence to the region. Those who point to the fact that Israel has sufficient deterrence capabilities of its own and does not need any kind of extended deterrence<sup>9</sup> are right from a purely military perspective but utterly wrong given the political signal sent to Iran if the US extended its deterrence only to Arab states. This signal could be interpreted by the political and religious leadership in Tehran as a crack in US-Israeli relations and as an isolation of Israel in the Middle



East. In turn such a policy could cause Iran to step up its aggressive provocations (via its proxies in the region) below the threshold of a direct attack against the Jewish state. For political reasons it would be necessary for the US to extend its deterrence to Israel too.

Thus unilateral declarations by the US to be willing to extend its deterrence to the Middle East is the weakest form of extended deterrence, but currently the only option that appears at all realistic. In the mid-term (assuming that Iran goes nuclear) a more credible and stable system of extended deterrence for the region is needed. Such a system might be composed of unilateral Israeli capabilities, multilateral security agreements between Israel and the Arab states, and US nuclear guarantees for all members of a security architecture of this form. But there is a long way to go before time will be ripe for such a system.

### Notes

My thanks to Emily Landau and some of the participants in the INSS conference “Arms Control in a Changing Middle East” for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

- 1 Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).
- 2 Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better,” *Adelphi Papers* No. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).
- 3 Kyrón Huigens, “The Dead End of Deterrence, and Beyond,” *William and Mary Law Review* 41, no. 3 (2000): 943-1046.
- 4 On this discussion, see Bruno Tertrais, “In Defense of Deterrence: The Relevance, Morality and Cost-Effectiveness of Nuclear Weapons,” Paris, 2011.
- 5 Prompt Global Strike (PGS) is a US effort to develop a system that can deliver a precision conventional weapon strike anywhere in the world within one hour, in a similar manner to a nuclear ICBM.
- 6 For a detailed account of both models see Clark A. Murdock, *Exploring the Nuclear Posture Implications of Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, CSIS, 2010.
- 7 Charles Krauthammer, “The Holocaust Declaration,” *Washington Post*, April 11, 2008.
- 8 Vesna Danilovic, “The Sources of Threat Credibility in Extended Deterrence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 3 (2001): 341-69.
- 9 A summary of this debate is provided by Shen Dingli, “Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Fading Fast,” *Interpreter*, February 3, 2011, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/02/03/Extended-deterrence-fading-fast.aspx>.