

Iran on the Threshold

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The Third Way

According to the familiar public discourse, two extreme situations could evolve from the current Iranian nuclear predicament. The first and most problematic scenario that has been discussed extensively in recent years is an Iranian “breakout” toward nuclear weapons. An Iranian advance toward military nuclear capability would be a violation of Iran’s commitments to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This could be expected to cost Iran dearly with tough sanctions and perhaps even military action against it. The second and preferred scenario is a situation in which Iran faces heavy enough international pressure and tough enough international sanctions and decides to halt its nuclear project completely. At the same time, stopping uranium enrichment activity in Iran, transferring all the enriched uranium outside the country, ceasing the weaponization, and meeting the NPT’s requirements for transparency involves risks and concessions that the Iranian regime is in no hurry to take upon itself.

Between these extremes there is a third option: Iran maintains a strategy that leaves it “decision making distance” from nuclear weapons. In recent years a number of senior Iranian officials have expressed support for this third option, which would allow Iran to prove – as it consistently claims – that it “does not seek” to acquire nuclear weapons.¹

According to the third option for Iran – an option that surfaces little in the public debate² – Iran would reach the advanced status of a “nuclear threshold state” and retain this status for the long term. While there is no single unequivocal definition in the professional literature, it is customary to define a nuclear threshold state as a state that controls most

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of the components of the nuclear fuel cycle, with an advanced scientific-technological infrastructure, a reserve of fissile material, and the ability to fit a nuclear warhead to the appropriate platform. All that is needed in such a situation is a strategic decision to cross the threshold and attain nuclear weapons. Therefore, we can already define Iran as a threshold state or as being very close to that status.

Similarly, the “threshold point” is not a single point; it includes a range of actions that could be completed in time periods ranging from several days to a number of months, in accordance with the technological and project development of a state with nuclear potential. The strategy Iran has been using for many years is to walk on a technical path that it sees as legitimate, which includes broad-based development of the technology and infrastructure necessary to obtain nuclear weapons within a few months, but stops short of the last actions to assemble and test the weapons. Thus irrespective of the question of where Iran is now in this “threshold zone,” Iranian nuclear weapons may be not much more beyond decision-making distance.

Iran conducts an ongoing strategic situation assessment on whether and at what pace to advance its nuclear program (which naturally also affects the question of if and when to take military action against it). On the one hand, the lesson it has learned from the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, and its fear that the Assad regime in Syria will also be toppled, is likely to bring about a desire to “immunize” itself against an attempt to overthrow the regime in Tehran and therefore to accelerate nuclear development. The Iranian regime also fears that its internal stability will be undermined and the Arab spring will visit Iran. On the other hand, Iran is confronting a more complex set of economic and political pressures than in the past, and it may well abandon its aggressive line. Especially if it estimates that the probability of a military strike against it has increased, it will seek to avoid breaking out to the bomb, and will perhaps even be more flexible on the nuclear issue.

Indeed, Iran is not advancing toward the bomb at as rapid a pace as it could. It appears to realize that such progress would bring with it negative strategic repercussions. Iran might thus sit on the fence and avoid making a decision, especially if in its assessment, a breakout to nuclear weapons is likely to constitute a reason for an outside force to attack the country, which would exact an intolerable price. Nevertheless, an Iranian decision

to remain in this status for a prolonged period, or a failure to decide on its future course, would introduce an increasing degree of uncertainty. Such a situation is likely to strengthen Iran's deterrent image because it would always leave doubt as to Iranian capabilities and intentions and would allow Iran to make its nuclear capability operational within a short time. In turn, this state of uncertainty will increase the drive to deny Iran nuclear capability before such capability becomes operational. This drive requires some restraint on the part of players in and outside of the region.

The use of force against Iranian nuclear facilities has serious implications for Israel, but the ramifications of an Iran with military nuclear capability are even more serious. Some may claim that under certain circumstances, the intermediate option actually becomes the lesser of all evils, provided that the international monitoring regime is effective and is able to prevent Iran from breaking out to nuclear weapons in a short period of time – that is, to keep Iran years away from nuclear weapons.

Iran's nuclear efforts, whether they were intended to produce a bomb or to stop on the threshold of the production phase, would be far less threatening and would arouse less suspicion and opposition if the Iranian regime did not have a reputation for deceit and concealment of nuclear activity, for issuing detailed threats to the country's neighbors, for intervening in the internal affairs of states in the region, and for financing and assisting terrorist organizations. The need to avoid strategic surprises is liable to prompt states to invest resources in improving their intelligence monitoring capabilities in order to clarify where Iran is on the nuclear threshold spectrum. If there is no close inspection and no restrictions are placed on Iranian uranium enrichment, states that feel threatened by Iran's capabilities will likely be more prepared to take risks and attempt to damage Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

Achieving the status of a nuclear threshold state has many advantages for the Iranians. Such status is likely to strengthen the regional and international as well as domestic standing of the regime, since there is still a great deal of public support for nuclear technology development. Iran could also leverage its status as a threshold state by combining political and economic demands with direct or implicit threats to cross the nuclear threshold. A possible result of such a situation would be that

Iran would be rewarded for not crossing the threshold and would achieve an improved strategic position and deterrent capability in the region.

Moreover, an attempt to prevent Iran from crossing the threshold, assuming that there is quality intelligence that will indicate movement toward the threshold, is likely to cost the international community dearly in political, economic, and other terms. Thus if Iran stops on the verge of developing nuclear weapons, while reaching understandings on the issue with the P5+1, over time it may be able to chip away at the economic pressure it is under and even provide itself with immunity from further sanctions and from a military strike, because it will be considered to have responded to international pressure. At the same time, this would allow Iran to plunge deeper into the “zone of immunity” and protect its nuclear sites actively and passively in a manner that would make it difficult to strike them. In such a situation, Iran could, therefore, receive many of the strategic advantages associated with possessing nuclear weapons without actually possessing them.

In light of the dangers inherent in Iran’s becoming a nuclear threshold state, it is essential to determine whether the United States and Israel define the red lines regarding Iran in the same way. Iran as a threshold state is liable to be a highly problematic strategic challenge for Israel, but perhaps the lesser – and acceptable – of all evils for the United States. Indeed, from statements and leaks from US government officials, it appears that the United States is prepared to accept Iran’s remaining on the threshold spectrum, as long as it does not break out to nuclear weapons. A threshold state, in contrast to a state with a policy of ambiguity, is subject to full IAEA monitoring, and therefore a breakout to nuclear weapons would presumably be discovered in a relatively short time. Senior US officials, including the Secretary of Defense and top military figures who are eager to calm their Israeli counterparts, claim that the United States will know how to identify an Iranian breakout to nuclear weapons through use of satellite photographs, human intelligence, and information conveyed by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors.³ However, there is a not-insignificant difficulty in coping with the intelligence challenge presented by the Iranian nuclear program, *inter alia* because of the small number of principal figures and scientists who can be monitored to provide useful information – a function of Iran’s

meticulous compartmentalization and its strategy of concealment and deception.

Israel is not convinced that the United States is capable of identifying an Iranian breakout to nuclear weapons, and in any case it is not prepared to take the risk of such a breakout. The two states have different perceptions of the threat and differing military capabilities, and for Israel, the red line is much nearer than the United States acknowledges. The most difficult problem from Israel's point of view is the need to rely on intelligence systems to provide adequate warning – in this case not of war, but of the assembly of nuclear weapons. This is a complex problem, especially when the timetable is very limited. Israel feels that reliance on such an intelligence warning is not a reasonable gamble. This is its main argument for claiming that Iran as a threshold state creates an unstable and intolerable situation, especially when it is far from exhibiting transparency and has a history of concealment and deception. Consequently, Iran is likely to cross Israel's red line when the plant in Fordow, near Qom, is fully operational. In contrast, the American line is very faint and difficult to identify. It is grounded in US policy, which seeks to delay the inevitable, and to the extent possible, avoid a decision.

If Iran remains a threshold state, will this change Israeli forecasts on the nuclear arms race in the Middle East, part of every discussion of the implications of Iran's going nuclear? Stopping Iran before the threshold is likely to slow down the nuclear arms race in the region because states that feel threatened by nuclear weapons in Iran would then be likely to feel less committed to development of their own independent nuclear program. Nevertheless, it is not inconceivable that other states would actually seek to adopt the "Iranian model," and this would necessarily lead to the creation of a wide array of nuclear threshold states in the Middle East.

Iran's retaining the status of a threshold state, if it is reliably kept years from nuclear weapons, could also be advantageous in some way. The fear shared by many Israelis of living in the shadow of the bomb would be diminished if Iran remained far away from a breakout moment, and if it refrained from taking steps indicating it was once again seeking to approach a position from where it could break out at relatively short notice.

A Bad Deal on the Horizon?

A round of talks between the P5+1 and Iran on the nuclear issue was held in Istanbul in April 2012, and another round is expected to take place in Baghdad in May 2012. In spite of a decade of fruitless dialogue, the two sides have an interest in holding negotiations: Iran, in order to avoid further tightening of sanctions, and President Obama, in order to put off difficult decisions, at least until after the presidential elections in November 2012. Although the opening positions of the sides are far apart, the nature of negotiations is to bring positions closer together, especially considering that the two sides have a clear interest in creating an image of success for the process, if only in order to remove the option of an Israeli strike.

The common assessment is that in any possible deal between the international community and Iran, Iran will be granted legitimacy for enriching uranium. The difference between a “good deal” and a “bad deal,” therefore, is not the legitimacy of enriching uranium, but the parameters that will prevent Iran from obtaining the capability to break out to nuclear weapons, which will stop the clock or even turn it back (by removing most of the enriched material from Iran), and will prevent it from entering the zone of immunity. These parameters actually exhaust the non-military options for stopping Iran’s military nuclearization.

A “good deal” will thus include significant restrictions on continued uranium enrichment in Iran, the removal of most of the enriched uranium from the country, the closure of the facility in Fordow, an Iranian response to the open questions from the IAEA, and Iranian agreement to close inspection (including implementation of the IAEA’s Additional Protocol). Such a deal would ensure that the Iranian effort to break out to nuclear weapons would take much longer and that Iran would be outside the zone of immunity. The deal would not meet the maximal demands made of Iran in the past, but it is better than the alternatives of “the bomb or the bombing.” However, there is very little likelihood that Iran will accept the terms of such an agreement.

If agreements are reached between the international community and Iran, Iran, in exchange for tactical measures and minor limitations on enrichment and/or inspection, will be able to continue its civilian nuclear program.

From Israel's point of view, the main disadvantages of a dialogue with Iran include the possibility that Iran will receive legitimacy for enriching uranium without verification that the enriched material is removed from the country and without the closure of the Qom facility, so that the nuclear clock would not be stopped; the immunity it would receive from attack, at least during the talks; the time it would gain, especially if amassing of uranium is not stopped; and the fear that international pressure on Iran will be reduced.

It is not inconceivable that the US administration will seek to increase the size of the pie in order to add levers for pressure on Iran and discuss issues besides the nuclear issue. Possible American "carrots" to be presented to Iran include security guarantees, that is, removing the military option from the agenda; removing Iran from its political isolation; and granting it economic aid, including investments and access to Western technology. Such inducements are likely to bring about the continuation of the contacts, which suits Iranian interests.

Israel must demand that the United States focus on the Iranian nuclear issue, the most problematic issue from the strategic point of view, even if this leads to a crisis in the talks. It should be made clear to Washington that until a suspension of uranium enrichment is achieved, Israel has no interest in expanding the talks with Iran to other subjects. From the Israeli point of view, an achievement in the talks with Iran would be a verified complete cessation of all fuel cycle activities in Iran; full implementation of the Additional Protocol of the IAEA; closure of the Fordow facility; removal of all enrichment products in Iran; and establishment of an effective international mechanism to inspect suspension of enrichment. However, as it considers the issue on a more closed level, it is perhaps worthwhile for Israel to adopt a more modest goal.

The talks with Iran, at least as long as they continue and certainly if they result in the sides' reaching any understandings, will limit Israel's ability to present a credible threat to use force, which is an essential element in the attempt to change Iranian policy. On the other hand, Iran, by creating difficulties and illustrating that it is not interested in seriously discussing its nuclear project, will give greater legitimacy to the potential use of force against it. In any case, a prolonged round of talks with Iran is likely to aggravate the trend toward international acceptance of a situation in which Iran is slowly becoming a nuclear state.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the negative strategic consequences of Iran's possession of nuclear weapons, and conversely, about the problematic implications of attacking Iran's nuclear facilities. Much less has been written on the likelihood and the implications of Iran's stopping on the threshold.

In our assessment, this could be a preferred strategic option for Iran: to be strategic decision making distance from nuclear capability. This option is dangerous because Iran would retain the possibility of arming itself with nuclear weapons within a short time when conditions were optimal from its point of view, for example, a crisis in another corner of the world, American attention focused on other strategic threats (such as Pakistan, North Korea, or China), and an international community that is tired and has become accustomed to the idea of a nuclear Iran.

As a threshold state, Iran would continue – and with greater self-confidence – to work to exert its influence and engage in negative intervention in various theaters in the region, without the restrictions and risks that would apply if it chose to break out to the bomb. The threshold state status would provide the Iranian regime with prestige and a certain amount of immunity from attack, and it would be more difficult than in the past to mobilize support for sanctions against Iran, especially as long as there is a sense that it is possible by various means to keep Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold.

The third option is important, and its implications must be clear. Any agreement with Iran, or out of weakness, acceptance of leaving Iran with uranium enrichment capability without restrictions as to the purpose, location, and control of the material, is tantamount to recognizing Iran as a threshold state. It would appear that the third option is becoming attractive to Iran, and perhaps also to the West, which is seeking to postpone any decision on the Iranian nuclear issue and fears the price of attacking Iranian nuclear sites.

Notes

- 1 “Khamenei: We'll Attack with the Same Force as Israel and the United States,” *Ynet*, March 20, 2012.
- 2 See Yoel Guzansky, “Compromising on a Nuclear Iran,” *Strategic Assessment* 12, no. 3 (2009): 87-96.
- 3 David Sanger, “On Iran, Questions of Detection and Response Divide U.S. and Israel,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2012.