

The Nuclear Tests in South Asia: Implications for the Middle East

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The nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May created considerable interest in the Middle East. The potential implications of these tests involve their impact on the nuclear policies adopted by the region's states, primarily Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Israel; the likelihood of applying arms control measures in the region; and America's ability to achieve its objectives in the region, including in the realm of Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

The Nuclear Tests and the Muslim States

The Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests may affect Muslim states in a number of ways. First, the tests are likely to affect the internal debate in a number of these states – primarily Iran – with regard to the size of the investments that should be made in pursuit of nuclear weapons. Those advocating larger investments in nuclear activities may now argue that global trends have been reversed to favor nuclear deterrence and that it would be irresponsible to refrain from the acquisition of such capabilities. These “pro-nuclear” forces will also claim that explicit nuclear capabilities provide their possessors the status of “nuclear powers”, and that if the region's states wish to avoid being ignored, they must “go nuclear.”

Those favoring the pursuit of nuclear capabilities will also argue that the weak international reaction – failing to compel India and Pakistan to refrain from further testing – indicates that nuclear capabilities may be acquired and possessed at tolerable costs. They will also point out that India and Pakistan can further minimize the costs entailed in their recent testing through a “grand bargain” that would lift

the economic sanctions that the United States is applying against them in exchange for signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Such a deal would leave India and Pakistan with their new status as “nuclear powers” without requiring them to pay substantial long-term costs for this change.

By contrast, those opposed to investing scarce resources in nuclear technology are bound to argue that the nuclear tests have brought about a further deterioration in the economic situation of India and Pakistan, without resulting in any significant improvement in their strategic standing. This is because the Pakistani nuclear tests have cancelled the deterrent effect of the tests conducted by India. Consequently, the nature of the competition and conflict between them – including in Kashmir – will remain unchanged.

It was also speculated that the nuclear tests conducted in South Asia would accelerate nuclear proliferation in the Middle East directly – through Pakistani transfers of fissile material or sensitive nuclear technology to another Muslim state, primarily Iran. Such a development would provide Pakistan's nuclear capability an “Islamic” facet and would transform its capability – a process already celebrated in the mass media – into an “Islamic bomb.”

Pakistani spokespersons categorically deny any intention to transfer sensitive materials and technology to another Muslim state. They insist that the nuclear capability they now possess is not an “Islamic bomb,” just as the French nuclear deterrent does not comprise a “Christian bomb” and Israel's nuclear potential does

not constitute a “Jewish bomb.”

Beyond these denials, there are four reasons why Pakistan is unlikely to transfer sensitive nuclear material and technologies to another Muslim state. First, Pakistan developed its nuclear capability in response to India's nuclear program and as a result of its concern regarding its overall strategic standing *vis-à-vis* India. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that Pakistan would wish to exacerbate further its security problems by taking steps that are bound to result in a further intensification of the growing defense relationship between India and Israel.

Second, Pakistan is now hard pressed to persuade the United States to lift the economic sanctions imposed upon it. Pakistani leaders made various statements to the effect that their people are prepared “to eat grass” if such a sacrifice would be required to sustain their nuclear capability. However, these leaders will very soon have to confront the harsh economic consequences of America's reaction to the nuclear tests and will have to devote much of their energies to minimizing such damage. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that the Pakistani government would wish to cross another – and much more important – “red line” in U.S. nuclear non-proliferation policy. In Washington's eyes, the transfer of sensitive nuclear materials and technology would mean that in addition to helping breach the nuclear “Club of Five,” Pakistan would be providing direct assistance to the efforts of additional states to acquire nuclear weapons. America's reaction to any evidence of such assistance can be expected to be much sharper than its recent

reaction to the nuclear tests.

Third, if Pakistan's nuclear capability has an "Islamic" dimension, it is as a "card" in the country's quest for influence in the Muslim world. Yet such a capability can provide Pakistan influence among these states only so long as it continues to enjoy a nuclear monopoly among the Muslim states. The transfer of sensitive nuclear material and technology to another Muslim state would contribute to the loss of such a monopoly, and would erode whatever additional influence Pakistan has gained among the Muslim countries through the recent nuclear tests.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the recent tests have not changed in any way Pakistan's capacity to transfer sensitive nuclear material and technology to another state. Even prior to these tests there was little doubt in the Middle East regarding Pakistan's nuclear capability. The various factors that have dissuaded Pakistan from transferring nuclear materials and technology in the past are also likely to inhibit such transfers in the future. Hence, the recent nuclear tests are unlikely to contribute directly to further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

Implications for the Arab States

The nuclear tests conducted in South Asia raised serious concerns among Arab states. First, the weak response by the United States to these tests was perceived by Arab observers as indicating Washington's tacit support for the emergence of a new strategic balance in Asia, based on India's contribution to containing China's growing power. According to this interpretation, the United States may adopt a similar approach in the Middle East and may support the emergence of a new "balance of terror" in the region,

based primarily on Israel's nuclear potential.

Second, Arab observers fear that "the Pakistani bomb" would grant international legitimacy to Israel's nuclear option by making it clear that a Muslim country had become a nuclear power first. In turn, this paves the way for Israel's nuclear policy to become more explicit at lower costs than might have been the case prior to Pakistan's nuclear testing.

Third, there is concern among some Arab states – Egypt among them – that the strategic surprise caused by India's nuclear tests to the intelligence communities of the Western countries may strengthen Israel's arguments to the effect that it is impossible to assure detection of activities that violate global arms control agreements. Thus, Israel may use this surprise to illustrate why it must continue to refrain from signing the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Fourth, it is possible that Egypt and other Arab states might interpret Washington's weak response to the nuclear tests in South Asia as indicating that it is highly unlikely that the United States and other Western countries would ever compel Israel to sign the NPT. In turn, this may propel the Arab states to adopt a "more realistic" – and hence more constructive and cooperative – approach toward the prospects of applying arms control and confidence building measures in the Middle East. Alternatively, it may lead these states to conclude that the multilateral Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks should be permanently abandoned since they are unlikely ever to induce Israel to disarm its nuclear option.

Finally, America's inability to compel India and Pakistan to adopt its priorities

in the nuclear realm may be interpreted by the Arab states as another manifestation of the limits of U.S. power and prestige. Thus, Arab observers may argue that if Washington failed to dissuade Pakistan from reacting to India's nuclear tests, it cannot be expected to be more effective in compelling Israel – a country enjoying considerable domestic support in the United States – to make greater concessions in Israeli-Arab negotiations. In turn, such an inference may lead Arabs to two different reactions: despair regarding the peace process, possibly resulting in violence and terrorism, including suicide bombings; or, the adoption of lower expectations, making more gradual progress in the peace process possible.

Would Israel Follow India and Pakistan?

The speculation that Israel might follow the South-Asian example and conduct nuclear tests ignores the significant differences between its strategic circumstances – including its relations with the United States and its approach to global nuclear arms control treaties – and those of India and Pakistan. Analyzing the implications of such a step would dissuade Israel from changing its nuclear policy; the costs involved in such action would far outweigh its benefits.

First, India already faces two nuclear neighbors: China, an explicit nuclear superpower, and Pakistan, an undeclared nuclear state. Similarly, Pakistan already faces an ambiguous nuclear India. By contrast, Israel does not face an adversary capable of presenting it with an existential threat. While a nuclear Iran might pose such a threat in the future, its military nuclear program is still in its infancy. Clearly, Israel would not wish to take steps

that would be bound to encourage Iran to accelerate its nuclear efforts.

Instead, Israel is devoting its energy to persuading the United States to exert pressures that would prevent the proliferation of mass destruction weapons to Iran. Similarly, it is attempting to persuade the members of the United Nations Security Council – including the United States – to refrain from closing the “nuclear file” of the inspection and monitoring regime that the International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEA) and the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) are applying in Iraq.

Hence, Israel would wish to avoid any step that might provide legitimacy to the nuclear efforts of Iran and Iraq and would bring about a complete halt in U.S.-Israeli cooperation in preventing the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the two countries.

Second, Israel's approach to global nuclear non-proliferation efforts is quite different from India's. New Delhi always rejected the discriminatory nature of the NPT – the division it institutionalized between the world's nuclear “have's” and “have not's.” By contrast, Israel never

defied the NPT regime, nor did it reject its premises – it merely pointed out that the political conditions in the Middle East do not yet allow it to join the Treaty. It also emphasized that the verification measures applied by the IAEA are insufficient to prevent states from violating the stipulations of the Treaty and from developing nuclear weapons clandestinely, as was demonstrated in the case of Iraq.

Third, U.S.-Israeli relations are very different from Washington's approach to India and Pakistan. First, in contrast to the latter two countries, Israel is the recipient of \$3 billion in annual direct U.S. economic and military assistance. Existing legislation compels the Clinton Administration to end all direct assistance to any state that conducts a nuclear test.

In addition, the array of Israeli responses to the emerging strategic threats – primarily the proliferation of ballistic missiles in the Middle East – all require close defense ties between Israel and the United States. The efforts to prevent the transfer of missile technology from Russia to Iran require close coordination between Jerusalem and Washington; Israeli

deterrence against existential threats requires that the United States continue to regard Israel as a “special case” in its nuclear non-proliferation policy; the central pillar of Israel's “active defense” efforts – the Arrow missile defense system – is funded largely by the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO) of the U.S. Department of Defense; the efficacy of Israeli “passive defense” efforts depends on its ability to obtain instant warning of missile launching – a capability that only the U.S. spy satellite network can provide; finally, the U.S. provides Israel the means of acting offensively against strategic threats – for example, F-15-I long-range strike aircraft that can be employed against ballistic missile launchers and facilities where mass destruction weapons are being produced.

In short, Israeli nuclear testing would result in an immediate and complete halt to the close defense ties it enjoys with the United States. As a result, Israel's ability to confront the strategic threats it now faces will be eroded. Hence, Israel is unlikely to follow the examples of India and Pakistan.

Summary

The analysis provided here points to a number of conclusions regarding the implications of the nuclear tests conducted recently by India and Pakistan:

- The influence of the nuclear tests conducted in South Asia on the internal debates in Arab states and Iran with regard to the efforts that should be invested in the nuclear realm is unclear. Recent developments may strengthen the cases of both those advocating greater investments in this realm and those arguing the opposite.

- Pakistan is highly unlikely to transfer sensitive nuclear material and technology to another Muslim state. Hence, the nuclear tests recently conducted in South Asia are unlikely to accelerate the process of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.
- The Arab states have good reasons to suspect that the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan, as well as the weak Western response to these tests, will strengthen the arguments that comprise the basis of Israel's nuclear policy. They may further conclude

from this response that the United States would not compel Israel to accept its preferences in the realms of arms control and the Middle East peace process.

- Israel will not follow the examples of India and Pakistan; it will continue to refrain from nuclear testing. This is due to the significant differences between Israel's strategic circumstances – including its relations with the United States and its approach to global nuclear arms control treaties – and those of India and Pakistan.