Strategic ASSESSMENT

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Strategic ASSESSMENT

The purpose of *Strategic Assessment* is to stimulate and enrich the public debate on issues that are, or should be, on Israel's national security agenda.

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Abstracts

If Attacked, How Would Iran Respond? / Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov

Many in the West and in Israel have warned of a tough Iranian response and escalation into regional war in the event of a military strike against the Iranian nuclear program. Close scrutiny, however, suggests that these assessments are exaggerated, with the likely Iranian response far more limited. Moreover, such overestimation serves the Iranians, providing an excellent tool for deterrence, and dilutes the goal of a credible military threat prompting the regime to agree to a diplomatic solution. This article analyzes Iran's capabilities and the range of possible Iranian responses toward Israel, including the response capabilities of Iran's allies in the region, particularly Syria and Hizbollah. The article challenges the scenario of a regional war in the wake of a military strike against Iran's nuclear program, and offers recommendations for a response to the anticipated Iranian retaliation that would reduce the likelihood of extensive regional escalation.

An Israeli Attack on Iran: The International Legitimacy Factor / Yoel Guzansky and Ron Tira

In contemplating a possible military attack on Iran, the Israeli decision maker must weigh the element of international legitimacy. Though only one consideration among many and not necessarily the most crucial, legitimacy is nonetheless a major factor in the web of considerations accompanying any decision. There is currently diminished legitimacy for an Israeli attack on Iran, and therefore Israel must understand that building and maintaining a cloak of legitimacy is an integral part of the military effort. This article will analyze what a legitimacy-promoting campaign can and must achieve, namely, understanding among others – as opposed to approval – regarding the attack. It sketches a framework for campaigns before, during, and after an attack to cultivate and strengthen the perception of legitimacy for an attack among select key audiences.

The Plutonium Option: Iran's Parallel Route to a Military Nuclear Capability / Ephraim Asculai

Since the first announcement in August 2002 that Iran was constructing a heavy water production facility at Arak, there has been little doubt in the minds of many people that Iran has embarked on a plutonium route for the production of fissile materials for military use. With the approaching completion of the IR-40 heavy water natural uranium reactor at Arak, this scenario has commanded more public attention. The potential for using plutonium in the core of a nuclear explosive device is serious, and indeed, this project has proceeded in blatant disregard of Security Council resolutions. Although the estimated date of completion of this route is not imminent, the project is nevertheless nearing a so-called critical point. This paper describes the general processes involved in the production of plutonium, and then considers the potential of the Iranian plutonium program, an estimated timeline and other aspects of the program, and prospects for the future.

A Nuclear-Armed Iran and US Extended Deterrence in the Gulf / Mark Doyle

This paper considers some of the complexities of US extended nuclear deterrence to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies in the face of a nuclear-armed Iran. In the past, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies appeared prepared to remain without independent nuclear arms, perhaps feeling sufficiently protected by US extended nuclear deterrence. This is unlikely to remain the case with a nuclear Iran. The article considers the alternatives available to the Saudi kingdom and the Gulf monarchies: independent nuclear weapons, an extended deterrence arrangement with Pakistan, or perhaps a much reinforced and extended US nuclear umbrella, codified more formally in some new treaty arrangement.

Alone at the Top: Bashar al-Assad and the Struggle for Syria / Eyal Zisser

Bashar al-Assad emerges from the quagmire of Syria's civil war as the man who carries the entire weight of the Syrian regime on his back, who stands starkly alone at the top, and who makes fateful decisions affecting him and Syria by himself. It seems that never before has the identification of the Syrian regime with its leader been as pronounced as it is today. The Syrian regime's success in surviving the revolution is

also – and especially – the personal success of Bashar al-Assad. Bashar has shown resilience and personal fortitude as well as lasting power not many believed he possessed. When he assumed the presidency the assertion often made was that he lacked the killer instinct, a necessity for anyone trying to rule Syria. But Bashar has emerged as an icy dictator willing to sacrifice an entire nation for the sake of his own survival.

The Hamas Predicament: Organizational Challenges in a Volatile Environment / Benedetta Berti and Anat Kurz

Hamas seemed to emerge from the November 2012 confrontation with Israel in a position of relative strength. The terms of the ceasefire and the limited steps Israel undertook in the aftermath of the war to lift some of the restrictions on the Gaza Strip substantiated Hamas's sense of victory and control. The Gaza-based Palestinian movement also benefitted from regional backing, particularly from Qatar and Egypt, which confirmed the overall perception that Hamas had been able to take advantage of the upheaval generated by the Arab Awakening to improve its regional status. Yet in the following months this trend reversed quickly, propelling Hamas from a position of strength to one of clear fragility. Hamas now finds itself at a crossroads, forced to choose between isolation and integration and between political and military tracks to advance its organizational interests.

Chinese Involvement in the Middle East: The Libyan and Syrian Crises / Yoram Evron

China's involvement in the Middle East has increased in recent years, and notwithstanding the assumption that Beijing has no interest in intervening in regional processes, a shift toward political involvement is evident. At the same time, the nature of Chinese involvement in the region is as yet unclear, particularly in view of the gradual and at times obscure nature of the change in its behavior. This article assesses the pattern of Chinese involvement in the Middle East in recent years through two test cases: the Libyan and Syrian crises. It appears that China's near-exclusive reliance on economic motives, its conformity to Russian policy in all matters pertaining to the Middle East, the centralized management of its foreign policy, and its avoidance of taking a stand in regional disputes are assumptions not fully supported by the events. The article thus proposes several alternative explanations for the pattern of Chinese involvement in the region.

If Attacked, How Would Iran Respond?

Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov

Introduction

A report by the Iran Project published in late 2012 warned that "a U.S. and/or Israeli preventive military action against Iran could...perhaps contribut[e] to increased sectarian conflict and regional war."[1] In March 2012, pundit Fareed Zakaria warned that an Israeli or American strike against Iran could be "a path to another Middle East war."[2] While other experts have actually posited a more measured Iranian response, they have not offered a systematic analysis of Iran's strategic capabilities.[3]

Iran could respond to an attack in two main arenas: against Israel, or in the Persian Gulf against the United States and/or the Sunni Gulf states, mainly Saudi Arabia. The common Western assessment, which envisions a horror scenario of Iranian responses and consequent developments, serves as an excellent deterrence tool for the Iranians by undermining the threat of the military option and reducing the likelihood that the regime in Tehran will agree to a diplomatic solution.

This paper challenges the commonly held Western view through a systematic analysis of Iran's capabilities and the possible range of Iranian strategies to be used against Israel. The analysis complements studies that have been conducted on the Iranian response in the Gulf,[4] and takes into account the response capability of Iran's ally Syria and that of Iran's Lebanese and Palestinian proxies. In addition, this paper makes four policy recommendations to reduce the possibility of regional escalation, which in any case is unlikely, considering the interests of the relevant actors. The main conclusion is that the possibility of a strike against Iran is a pivotal instrument of diplomacy. A measured but credible use of this tool can help achieve the goals of the international campaign: to pressure

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Iran so that it agrees to concessions regarding its nuclear program, which will ensure that it does not possess military nuclear capabilities, and to reduce the likelihood of regional escalation.

The Iranian Military Response: Capabilities

An examination of Iran's ability to inflict harm on Israel touches on several levels, including the use of missiles, airpower, naval capabilities, and terrorist activity.

An Iranian missile attack constitutes the main threat. Iran has two types of missiles whose range allows them to strike targets in Israel: Shehab 3 missiles, with a potential range of 1,300 kilometers, and Ghadir missiles, with a range of over 1,600 kilometers.[5] Both missiles have a low level of accuracy, which makes it impossible for them to strike a pinpoint target: the CEP (circular error probability) of the Shehab is over 2 kilometers, and even with the Ghadir, the CEP radius is hundreds of meters. Both missiles can carry a heavy warhead: 1 ton and 750 kilograms, respectively. Iran has dozens of launchers and about 300 missiles of each type threatening Israel.[6] Nevertheless, the experience of 1991 shows that missiles with such problematic accuracy are not effective in hitting specific Israeli targets, and that they are used as weapons of terror against large cities, where the damage is also limited by the advanced warning to the populace, the effectiveness of the Arrow system, and the improvement in passive civilian defense. Addressing this resource, in recent years the Iranians have released films documenting simultaneous launches of multiple missiles from different launchers, with the goal of saturating the Israeli missile defense system.

There are suspicions that the Iranians have the ability to arm their missiles with biological and chemical warheads, even though Iran is a signatory to the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits the possession and use of such weapons. However, because the missiles have a low level of accuracy and this nonconventional weapon is not effective in a missile attack, Iran's limited capability in this area and its leadership's understanding that the use of chemical weapons would damage Iran's legitimacy and lead to a military response on an entirely different level would likely actually prevent a nonconventional attack in response to a conventional attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Another possible form of Iranian response to an attack is a terrorist attack on Israeli and Jewish targets abroad. Over many years the Quds

Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards has developed the ability to carry out terrorist attacks around the world. The attacks in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994 against the Israeli embassy and the AMIA Jewish Center have been attributed to the Revolutionary Guards. Both the wave of attacks against Israeli diplomats in 2012 and the attempted assassination of the Saudi ambassador to the United States were perpetrated by the Iranians.[7]

Various scholars have warned that the response to an attack on Iran would also include attacks against Israeli and Western targets.[8] Iran has already tried to carry out terrorist attacks in retaliation for attempts to strike at its nuclear program through the Stuxnet virus cyber attack and the January 2010 and July 2011 assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. The failure of these attempts suggests that Iran has a limited ability to carry out wide scale terrorist attacks, and that the Western world has developed good abilities to thwart attacks since the terror attacks of September 2001. Iran's limited capabilities make it possible to contain its capacity for retaliation through the use of terrorism.

Other threats include attacks though planes and drones, although Iran's ability on this level is highly limited. Iran suffers from clear inferiority against the Israeli air force. Israel has two layers of aerial defense against aircraft penetrating its airspace: interceptor aircraft and anti-aircraft systems for aerial defense. The flight ranges of Iran's most advanced aircraft, the Sukhoi 24, make it impossible for them to attack and return to Iran without refueling in the air, which makes them vulnerable and open to air defense radar. The drones in Iran's possession do not appear very advanced compared to their Western counterparts, and they do not have serious operational flexibility once they are launched.[9] While the Iranians recently announced that they have succeeded in developing a Shahed 129 drone that is capable of carrying up to eight missiles with a range of 1,700 kilometers (which covers all of Israel), various assessments in Israel indicate that the capabilities of the drone have been exaggerated.[10] Yet even if the announcement is partially correct, it appears that Israel has an appropriate response to this threat and that the most relevant threat scenario is suicide drones being sent from Lebanon or Syria.

Theoretically Iran has maritime capabilities that would enable it to strike Israeli targets, but they are circumscribed. Iran has some Soviet-made submarines that are not permanently stationed in the

Mediterranean and are mainly used in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.[11] Their ability to embark on long missions without an escort appears limited. While Iran has a number of vessels that are able to reach Israel's shores, they would have difficulty passing through the Gulf of Suez during fighting, and ships sailing in the direction of Eilat would encounter Israeli vessels with advanced sea-to-sea missiles. Given these limitations, it would appear that the more relevant scenario is a naval terrorist attack, either using anti-ship missiles fired from a ship disguised as a civilian vessel or through the use of Iranian midget submarines carried by a civilian vessel for suicide attacks. The Iranians have a number of such submarines (the Ghadir), whose sailing range is very limited.[12] These submarines can carry a small number of soldiers and two torpedo missiles. Therefore, even though there is a certain capacity to hit targets in Israel, it is still a threat that Israel can meet. As for an attack using ground forces, the Iranian ground threat is not a relevant consideration, given the more than 1,200 kilometers between Iran and Israel.

Thus an interim summary of Iranian capabilities indicates that Israel can successfully deal with Iranian responses to an attack. These scenarios are far from large scale war, and their impact would be primarily psychological. The main Iranian military threat in the event of an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities is the missile threat, along with the threat of terrorist attacks against military and civilian targets. The following section examines Iran's willingness to respond using all its capabilities in the event that its nuclear program is subject to a Western military strike.

The main interest of the ayatollahs is to preserve their power. Thus, in a scenario involving a pinpoint strike on the Iranian nuclear program, the regime would seek to respond without causing escalation and significant American intervention in the crisis.

Assessment of the Iranian Response Strategy

There are two significant parameters for assessing an Iranian response. The first concerns the identity of the attacker: is it an American attack, an Israeli attack without US backing, or a combined attack (American backing for an Israeli strike would almost certainly be perceived as such a scenario by the regime in Tehran). The main Iranian interest is in regime survival, and therefore the regime would consider whether its response would enhance the threat against it. If the scope of the first attack had already threatened the regime, there would be fewer

inhibitions about a response. Thus with an Israeli strike, for example, the danger is that an Iranian response would drag the United States into involvement that would threaten the regime, while in an American attack limited to nuclear targets, the concern is that a response would lead to a counter-response that would threaten the regime. If in Tehran's assessment the United States had decided to use its full power in order to topple the regime, this would reduce Iran's inhibitions, and the scope of the Iranian response could be expected to increase. If Tehran's assessment is that the United States is limiting its attack to Iran's nuclear infrastructure and that it is likely to broaden its attack against the regime only in response to an Iranian response, the chances would increase of Iran's exercising restraint in order to avoid escalation that would threaten the survival of the regime.

The second parameter concerns the nature of the attack. The greater the force and scope of the Western strike – if it included economic assets such as the oil and gas industry or government and military assets such as government and religious buildings, headquarters, and strategic military forces – the more pressure Tehran would face to respond with significant force in order to deter its enemies from future strikes and restore its honor. The two parameters are connected, since an American response in the event of escalation would include a broader and more powerful attack on regime assets as well. For this reason, it would be a more credible and effective threat that would encourage Iranian restraint in response to a Western attack.

Against this background a scale of five possible Iranian strategies can be posited (from the limited and measured to the very massive):

a. Total military restraint: This is an extreme scenario in which the Iranian regime chooses not to respond immediately after an attack on its facilities. Two examples of this strategy are the lack of immediate Iraqi response following the Israel Air Force attack on the Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, and the absence of a Syrian response to the attack on the Deir ez-Zor nuclear reactor in 2007.[13] However, there is little likelihood of Iran adopting such a strategy. In contrast to Iraq and Syria, Iran is aware that the West knows about its nuclear program, and an attack would not be a strategic surprise. Even if the timing and nature of the attack are a surprise, Tehran has likely prepared a response in the event of a strike. Tehran would presumably decide to use this plan, even if it were partial and restrained, to show the

strength of the regime, deter Iran's enemies from additional actions in the future, and restore the country's honor after the attack on its nuclear project. In other words, there is a high level of certainty that there would be an Iranian response, and the question is about its scope.

b. Tit for tat:[14] This is the classic reactive strategy because it mimics the strategy of the attacker. Iran's response to a strike against the country's nuclear facilities would be an attack on Israel's nuclear facilities. In this scenario, a significant number of missiles would be launched from Iran and Lebanon in the direction of Dimona or any other target in Israel perceived as "nuclear associated," in order to convey a message of parity between Iran and Israel, and perhaps even to damage Israel's facilities. There is a high likelihood that this method of operation would be chosen, independently or as part of a broader Iranian response.

c. A response that is limited in scope but more significant: A broader Iranian response would include the use of terrorist cells and a restrained launch of missiles – one or two missiles volleys at Israel's cities, and perhaps also Saudi and Western targets in the Gulf. Suicide missions from the air and the sea are also possible in this limited response scenario. If the Western strike damages Iran's nuclear infrastructure but does not harm other regime assets, there is a high likelihood of such an Iranian response, because the regime in Tehran will seek to balance the need to respond to an attack with the fear of escalation that would threaten regime assets not directly connected to Iran's military nuclear program. Again, the main interest of the regime of the ayatollahs is to preserve their power. Therefore, it seems that they would not carry out an action that is perceived as likely to threaten the stability of the regime. Thus, in a scenario involving a pinpoint strike on the Iranian nuclear program, the regime would seek to respond without causing escalation and significant American intervention in the crisis.

d. The maximalist response against Israeli targets: Despite what has been noted thus far, it is possible that Iran would seek an aggressive, maximalist response to a strike against its military nuclear project and its national honor, while attempting to isolate Israel from the United States. It could launch dozens of missiles a day against Israeli cities in a number of volleys spread throughout the day. The strategic purpose

would be to punish Israel for the attack, paralyze life in Israel, exact as heavy a price as possible from Israel, and increase the psychological effect of the attack on the Israeli populace. Iran would attempt to achieve the maximum deterrent effect and deter Israel regarding a future conflict. The regime in Tehran likely assumes that such a response would lead to a significant Israeli response and could lead to escalation of the conflict between the two countries – which in turn could allow another strike against the nuclear infrastructure and a broad and comprehensive attack on Iranian economic and government assets. Such escalation could spiral out of control and encourage American military intervention, which could threaten the continued survival of the regime. Given this, the Iranian regime will likely refrain from such a response against Israel as long as a Western strike focuses on the nuclear program. If the Iranian regime feels that the attack reflects an effort to threaten its survival or that Israel and the United States are less willing to respond with force, it is liable to believe that it has less to lose from possible escalation. This scenario, in an extreme configuration, could also include Iranian use of nonconventional weapons. However, the operational limitations of Iranian weapons, together with Tehran's ambition to prevent a massive Israeli response and American intervention, would serve as deterrents regarding use of this type of weapon. Accordingly, there seems to be limited probability that Tehran would use nonconventional weapons at the start of a future crisis resulting from an attack on Iran, or in a scenario of conflict with Israel that does not develop into an all-out clash that clearly threatens the survival of the regime.

Every war is different from previous wars, and therefore the next conflict with Hizbollah will not be identical to the conflict in 2006. Damage to the home front would likely focus on the Gush Dan region and be more serious than in 2006, but a significant blow to the Iranian nuclear program justifies this price.

e. Regional escalation: Iran responds to a Western attack with full force and against all its enemies – the United States, the Gulf states, and Israel. In such a scenario, Iran could attack Israeli and American targets in the Gulf with all of its (limited) capabilities, including threatening to close or actually closing the Strait of Hormuz. However, an assessment that an attack on Iran's military nuclear facilities would necessarily

lead to a large scale, prolonged regional war is highly questionable.[15] A scenario of regional escalation would require the United States to intervene and would significantly change the regional balance of power. Therefore, Tehran would choose such a response only if it did not fear that such a move would lead to further significant harm to regime assets, because it would already feel a real threat to the survival of the regime, or as a last resort in an attempt to set the entire region ablaze in order to press for international intervention (apparently led by Russia) to achieve a ceasefire as quickly as possible, and before the regime loses a large portion of its assets. Since this would be a dangerous gamble, the assessment is that Iran would seek to avoid such a response, and hence at the start of the crisis this is a scenario with very low probability.

An interim summary on Iranian strategy: Unlike Iranian capabilities, which can be measured and evaluated with a high level of reliability, assessing intentions is more difficult and demands more caution and less decisiveness. However, the perception that the serious threat is the likely scenario is not grounded in a rational evaluation. The tit-for-tat and limited response scenarios appear more relevant, though they depend on many factors, mainly the type of Western strike against Iran and Tehran's assessment of the strength of the Israeli and American response to their response – the "third move." The spectrum of Iranian responses does not necessarily describe strategic options that stand on their own, but a hierarchy of possible responses that are not mutually exclusive and that could escalate in the event that the crisis deteriorates beyond the ability to arrest it. Thus, for example, it could be that the first Iranian response would be limited but would result in a powerful Israeli response and in its wake, an escalation to a more massive Iranian response. This hierarchy illustrates the greater effectiveness of a surgical first strike that is focused on the Iranian nuclear program and on the later use of steps to limit the scope of the conflict so that it will remain under control.

An Iranian response can be expected in any case; the challenge will be to limit and contain it.

Relevant Iranian Allies and Proxies

Three Iranian allies in the region are relevant to these response scenarios and pose a threat to Israel: Hizbollah (an Iranian proxy organization),

the Syrian military, and Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza that operate from Sinai.

Hizbollah's arsenal of rockets and missiles has grown significantly and improved since the Second Lebanon War, and there is no doubt that its firepower is longer and more accurate. Nevertheless, Israel's defensive, offensive, and intelligence capabilities have developed since 2006. Anti-missile systems such as Iron Dome, already operational, and the not yet operational David's Sling could be game changers in a future Israeli campaign against Hizbollah. A repeat of the Israeli strike against Hizbollah's strategic missiles early in the 2006 war would also be a significant factor in shaping the future battlefield. If the IDF succeeds in repeating its offensive success from the first day of the Second Lebanon War and its defensive success in Operation Pillar of Defense, it is highly likely that the horror scenarios described in the media will not be realized.[16] Every war is different from previous wars, and therefore the next conflict with Hizbollah will not be identical to the conflict in 2006. Damage to the home front would likely focus on the Gush Dan region and be more serious than in 2006, but a significant blow to the Iranian nuclear program justifies this price.

Furthermore, in recent months Hizbollah has been busy fighting in Syria alongside Assad. It is still not clear how this affects the organization's capabilities and its preparedness for a conflict with Israel. What is clear is that the events in the Middle East and the decision by Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to aid Assad in the war against the rebels have lengthened the list of Hizbollah's opponents, both within and outside of Lebanon. On the one hand, a war against Israel could be seen as an opportunity for Hizbollah to restore its prestige as the defender of Lebanon from the Israeli enemy. On the other hand, it could strengthen those who argue that Hizbollah is an Iranian proxy that is prepared to bring destruction to Lebanon in the service of the regime in Tehran. Given the organization's deteriorating situation internally in Lebanon, Hizbollah at the time of a Western attack on Iran would likely face conflicting pressure regarding possible action against Israel. If in the past it was clear that Hizbollah would attack Israel in response to a strike against Iran, now its willingness to do so prompts

> A credible military strike is an integral part of the general strategy toward Iran's prospective nuclearization – a strategy that prefers a diplomatic solution.

more doubts. Since the organization is budgeted by Iranian arms and training in exchange for an understanding that Hizbollah will act if it receives an order from Tehran, it might be unable to refrain from taking action, and internal Lebanese pressure would affect mainly the scope of the action, which would be more limited than what was possible before 2012 and the diversion of Hizbollah's efforts to Syria. In other words, Hizbollah would likely take part in an Iranian response, but the scope of its response may well be smaller than in the past.

Syria: the scope and quality of Syria's rocket and missile arsenal are a major strategic threat to the State of Israel. However, the Syrians, unlike Hizbollah, are not Iranian proxies, and their considerations are based on Syrian and not Iranian interests. A major consideration for Damascus is regime survival, and a conflict with Israel would certainly work against this interest. The fear of a massive Israeli response deters Syria. Indeed, it has not responded to the direct attacks against it in recent years attributed to Israel. In addition, over the past two years the Syrian army has invested major efforts in the Syrian civil war. Although it is difficult to assess how much erosion there has been in the army's capabilities vis-à-vis Israel, these capabilities have almost certainly been significantly damaged. It is likely, then, that the events in Syria have further reduced Assad's willingness to take part in a response against Israel in the event of a strike against Iran. It could be argued that Assad's increasing dependence on his Iranian patron and his desire to take revenge for the attacks attributed to Israel against military targets in Syria would encourage a Syrian response. However, Syria's restraint in responding to the direct attacks, in spite of Assad's threats, are a good indicator that the Syrian ruler does not wish to risk Israeli involvement in his country. Such involvement could change the balance of power in the Syrian civil war and, in the eyes of the regime, the positive dynamic that was created following its success in taking on the rebels in a number of key areas in the country. Therefore, even if Assad responds, it would be a minimal, token response, such as allowing terrorists to operate from Syrian territory, which would not drag Israel into an all-out war.

The third relevant element is Palestinian terrorist activity in Gaza, the most important actors being Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The tension between Sunnis and Shiites over the civil war in Syria has pushed Hamas to distance itself from Syria, Hizbollah, and Iran, and has damaged Hamas's ties to Iran and Tehran's assistance to Hamas. Therefore,

Hamas will likely be reluctant to enter into a conflict with Israel and look like a collaborator with the regime in Tehran – in contrast to Islamic Jihad, which would take part in an Iranian response. That said, recent months have seen a certain warming of relations between Hamas and Tehran,[17] which could encourage the Hamas leadership to decide to lend its support, even if only token, to Iranian retaliation efforts, in an attempt to prove its loyalty once again. Nonetheless, the tension still existing between Hamas and Tehran would likely be manifested in a reduced response by the Palestinian terrorist organizations. The worse Hamas's economic and political situation, the more pressure its leadership will feel to return to Iranian patronage and participate in a response against Israel in the event of a Western strike against Iran.

For its part, Israel knows how to deal with the threat from the south, even if it includes hundreds of rockets fired at Israeli cities over a number of days, as occurred during Operations Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense. Israel has successfully dealt with a threat to the Gush Dan area using an integrated, comprehensive offensive and defensive response. Israel appears to have an appropriate response to the threat from the south, even if the terrorist organizations decide on large scale action, and certainly if they decide to restrict their operations.

Policy Recommendations

The analysis in this paper confirms the argument that for Israel, the main threat of an Iranian response to a Western or Israeli attack would be a volley of conventional missiles and rockets launched at Israel's cities and nuclear installations by Iran and Hizbollah. This is still far from the horror scenario of an all-out war between Iran and Israel or a regional war, which is highly improbable. Nevertheless, the risks of escalation to a broader conflict must be minimized through action on four fronts.

a. A surgical strike: If a decision has been reached to attack Iranian nuclear facilities, a surgical strike is preferred, or in other words, a pinpoint strike on the infrastructures that support Iran's military nuclear program over the course of a few days. In a pinpoint strike, it will be possible to maximize the damage to the Iranian military nuclear program but to leave Tehran with all the other assets that are important to the Iranian economy and the survival of the regime. In such a situation, the regime would have a great deal to lose from

escalation, and this would reduce the chances that it would opt for the strategy of a massive response.

b. A credible threat in an extensive, powerful "third move": Along with the surgical strike against Iran, a clear message must be conveyed to Tehran that a massive Iranian response would lead to escalation of the conflict and result in a comprehensive and powerful American and Israeli response, which would also include political, economic, and military regime assets. The combination of a limited attack scenario and a credible Western threat to expand the targets of the attack in the event of escalation serves a strategy of restraining the Iranian response and preserving the achievements of the attack at the lowest possible price. An Iranian response can be expected in any case; the challenge will be to limit and contain it.

c. A strengthened Israeli defensive pillar: Since there will likely be an Iranian response, even if it is limited in scope, Israel's ability to thwart the components of the response is critically important. Israel has advanced anti-missile and anti-rocket defense systems, such as the Arrow and the Iron Dome. If they are used together with passive means of protection, early warning, and public awareness and discipline, it will be possible to limit the damage from an Iranian response. This would not only save lives and reduce the damage, but would also lessen the pressure for an Israeli response that could lead to an exchange of blows and escalation. In the meantime, preparations must also be made to thwart suicide attacks from the air and the sea and attacks against targets abroad. If the Iranians nevertheless launch a massive response, Israel will need a wide ranging response against critical Iranian infrastructures so that the Iranians understand the need to end the conflict as soon as possible.

d. A plan for the day after: Planning for an attack on Iran must include a plan for the day after. The plan must ensure that international sanctions on Iran continue as part of ongoing pressure on Tehran to give up its military nuclear program. It must also guarantee that there continues to be a credible military threat. This is necessary to improve the conditions for reaching a diplomatic agreement between Tehran and the West in which Iran would be a number of years away from a nuclear bomb and agree to have the International Atomic Energy Agency monitor implementation of the agreement. Only this would prevent Iran from arming itself with nuclear weapons over time.

Many experts argue correctly that an attack, no matter how successful, cannot stop Iran's military nuclear program forever. Nonetheless, this does not justify inaction and passivity. If Iran does not agree to an acceptable settlement that will ensure that its breakout time to a bomb allows for detection and response in time, use of the military option could buy time until there is regime change. It could also send a very clear message to the Iranians that their attempts to arm themselves with nuclear military capabilities will be thwarted in the future as well.

A credible military strike is an integral part of the general strategy toward Iran's nuclearization – a strategy that prefers a diplomatic solution. Damage to Iran's nuclear program would prove to Tehran that the West is determined to prevent it from going nuclear. It would also signal readiness to make do with arresting progress on the nuclear front and not threaten the survival of the regime. When a nuclear bomb is not within Iran's reach and when the West proves its seriousness, the current regime in Tehran may become more flexible, agree to stop its military nuclear program, and accept close monitoring of compliance with the agreement. If it does not agree to do this today, the attack will actually allow more time to step up pressure on the regime through use of the existing sanctions in order to persuade it to accept such an agreement or face increasing domestic pressure that could threaten its survival. Either way, a strike should be seen as a tool to promote the goal of stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons through diplomatic means, to the extent possible, and not as a solution in and of itself.

The four recommendations above, which combine a limited strike scenario with a broad defensive arrangement as part of a long term diplomatic strategy that does not end on the day of the strike, are intended to minimize the risk of a Western strike against Iran if it does not display willingness to reach a diplomatic solution that guarantees it cannot develop military nuclear capabilities. They show that correct preparation and Western cooperation can significantly reduce the chances of a regional war in the wake of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Such preparation supports a long term diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis. Those who overestimate the threat of regional escalation damage the credibility of the military option and encourage a situation in which this becomes the only available option for preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

Notes

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9 See note 6.

10 For example, Tal Inbar, head of the Space Research Center at the Fisher Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies, believes that the range of the

Iranian drone is significantly shorter than what has been reported, but stresses that because of the drone's design, which is similar to the Israeli design, the aircraft could be a problematic threat if it is operated from Lebanon. In contrast, Danny Eshchar, deputy chief executive at Aeronautics, claims that photographs of the drone show an aircraft that could not carry weapons. See Barbara Opal, "Iran Boasts UAV Self-Sufficiency," *Defense News,* September 30, 2013, http://www.defensenews.com/article/20130930/DEFREG04/309300019/Iran-Boasts-UAV-Self-Sufficiency.

11 Ibid.

12 According to the INSS military balance files, the range of the submarines when they are on the surface is 550 miles, while their range of movement when submerged is 50 miles.

13 In response to a report on the attack, the Syrian President claimed on October 1, 2007 that "retaliate doesn't mean missile for missile and bomb for bomb. We have our means to retaliate, maybe politically, maybe in other ways. But we have the right to retaliate." See "Assad Sets Conference Conditions," *BBC*, October 1, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7021986.stm. For the purposes of this analysis, this response is within the scope of total restraint because it is the minimal response to which the regime is committed.

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An Israeli Attack on Iran: The International Legitimacy Factor

Yoel Guzansky and Ron Tira

In contemplating a possible military attack on Iran, the Israeli decision maker must weigh the element of international legitimacy. Though only one consideration among many and not necessarily the most crucial, legitimacy is nonetheless a major factor in the web of considerations accompanying any decision. There is currently diminished legitimacy for an Israeli attack on Iran, and therefore Israel must understand that building and maintaining a cloak of legitimacy is an integral part of the military effort.

Israel can take important steps to strengthen the legitimacy of an attack on Iran, at least among select key audiences such as the United States security establishment and the relevant committees in the Senate and House of Representatives. The same applies to parallel entities belonging to other leading actors, such as France, Germany, and Britain, which are important both in and of themselves and for their influence on the United States. This article will analyze what a legitimacy-promoting campaign can and must achieve, namely, understanding among others, as opposed to approval, regarding the attack. It sketches a framework for campaigns before, during, and after an attack to strengthen the perception of legitimacy for an attack among key and select target audiences. At the same time, since the Israeli decision maker must necessarily balance a sensitive set of considerations, under certain circumstances he might consider launching an attack on Iran even if it is endowed with only a low level of perceived legitimacy.

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What is Legitimacy?

In the context of military activity, legitimacy is a political consensus that a party that resorts to military force has justification for doing so. This matter, however, is more complex, as legitimacy is not a binary concept, i.e., it is not that legitimacy is fully present or entirely absent. Rather, legitimacy is a matter of degree, dependent on context and circumstance, that can wax and wane over the course of time. Legitimacy is not a measurable asset that can be stored, employed, or deployed at will or precisely according to plan. Legitimacy cannot be compared, for example, to national emergency fuel reserves, which can be stored long term and used during a crisis. When Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon and from Gaza, it earned legitimacy, yet this legitimacy was temporary and highly context-dependent. By the same token, Israel's current overall measure of legitimacy is contextually and incidentally linked to its engagement in a successful political process with the Palestinians. Legitimacy is also affected by local and media events that are not necessarily of strategic importance. For example, an operational shortcoming causing a number of civilian casualties as a result of the flawed judgment of a junior officer can disproportionately affect the level of international legitimacy.

Legitimacy can take the form of public consent, ideally among heads of state or other members of the senior political leadership. At the same time, a certain level of coordination is possible even if there is no public consent, but there is a certain acceptance of the move. Coordination can be minor, such as the avoidance of an incidental encounter between two friendly military forces operating in the same theater, or might include coordination in the areas of intelligence, logistics, procurement, and so on. In addition, coordination after an attack is possible, even if there was no coordination before it. Finally, it is possible that there will be neither public consent nor coordination, but there will be a tacit understanding of the motives and rationale for the attack.

The degree of understanding for an action may vary among various target audiences. The ultimate diplomatic goal is to enjoy the open and declared support of a political echelon, especially if it leads to public and media support, although here too the matter is not uniform, and what is described as legitimate by the *Wall Street Journal* will not necessarily be described as such by the *New York Times*. It is also possible to enjoy the support of publicly elected officials who do not stand at the head of the

executive branch. For example, the US Senate decision of February 28, 2013, which was approved by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on April 17, 2013 and co-sponsored by 79 senators, represents a symbolic yet important example of this sort of legitimization. According to the decision, the Senate recognizes Israel's right to rely on the principle of self-defense if and when it attacks nuclear installations in Iran. The Senate further calls for the administration to provide Israel with diplomatic, military, and economic aid in case Israel is compelled to realize its right to employ force for purposes of self-defense.[1]

A further dimension, less public but just as important from a strategic perspective, is legitimacy among the professional staff in security establishments in key countries. Here too there may be various shades, and professional echelons at the Pentagon may be of a different opinion than senior officials in the State Department regarding the legitimacy of an attack. Legitimacy among professional echelons may take the form of understanding or acceptance, and not necessarily justification or coordination. It may also change between the period prior to an attack and acceptance following an attack, stemming from a joint attempt to derive maximum benefit from the attack even if it was opposed beforehand.

Legitimacy in the Campaign against a Nuclear Iran

If Israel attacks Iran, the element of legitimacy will impact on the outcome of the conflict. In order to preserve the achievements of a possible Israeli attack against Iran's nuclear infrastructure in the long term and translate them from a tactical-physical achievement into a strategic-political achievement, there exists a vital need for an extended international campaign on "the day after," whose purpose would be to prevent Iran from rehabilitating its capabilities, enforce a change in policy, and subject Iran to a long term verification regime. Furthermore, in the period following an attack, the parties' staying power will be tested – from military, diplomatic, internal-political, and economic perspectives – and this resilience stamina is connected with the perception of legitimacy. A party whose moves and intentions are perceived as legitimate is capable of demonstrating higher levels of staying power, mainly in the areas of diplomacy and internal politics, but also in military and economic perspectives.

The challenge of legitimacy would be far easier if the United States supports an attack, whether openly or by implication, or if Iran behaves

in a provocative and blatant manner. The challenge is heightened and becomes more urgent if the United States disapproves of an attack, or approaches some sort of agreement between Iran and the West (if from Israel's perspective it is a "bad" agreement) as Iran pursues its charm offensive[2] (while the centrifuges continue to spin, the nuclear infrastructure continues to stand or even expand, and the weaponization processes progress). In such a complex situation, the challenge is the creation and preservation of legitimacy, even if partial and among limited target audiences. Israel would operate according to its own distinct schedules, threat perception, and particular considerations – which are chronologically earlier and measurably different than the timetables and benchmarks of the international community, and most important, those of the United States. From Israel's perspective, for example, the Iranian threat is more acute and its neutralization justifies a higher price than it does from the currently prevailing perspective of the United States and Western powers.

The legitimacy of military action should be connected more with the factual strategic reality underpinning of the attack, and less with specific circumstances. The casus belli from Israel's perspective is the mere existence of a concrete Iranian policy striving for a military nuclear option. However, the specific circumstances in which an attack takes place have substantive significance in legitimacy contexts. Indeed, there is a long list of circumstances relevant to the perception of legitimacy of an attack, including the position of the United States; the vacillating Iranian posture (from Ahmadinejad's provocations to Rouhani's sweet talk); the status of nuclear talks and the prospect of diplomatic progress; the status of sanctions; the actual progress of the nuclear program and its implications – namely, the ineffectiveness of sanctions and diplomacy; the general legitimacy of the relevant actors (for example, Israel's overall legitimacy in light of the Palestinian issue, and Iran's legitimacy as a terror-supporting state and its involvement in Syria); and even the "mood" of the international community, which during the Syrian chemical weapons crisis evinced a strong eagerness to avoid military conflict – to a degree that it went out of its way to interpret a few drops as a glass half full.

Indeed, opposition on the part of the international community to military engagement encourages a dovish interpretation of the facts. In other words, the international community goes out of its way to interpret reality in a way that does not warrant the use of military force. This was

quite evident in the decision of the British parliament to oppose Britain's participation in an attack on Syria during the chemical weapons crisis, the decision by President Obama to refer the question of an attack on Syria to Congress, and the opposition of many members of Congress from all sides of the political spectrum to a proposed attack. Similarly, of the entire international community, only France and Turkey expressed even a minimal willingness to employ military force against the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Given its general reluctance to endorse a military option, the international community is necessarily wont to embrace a positive interpretation of the state of nuclear talks and the effectiveness of sanctions. This tendency is fed by President Rouhani's tone, far different from his predecessor's, and ostensibly more moderate.

At the very least, this type of interpretation of the facts helps justify additional time to exhaust diplomatic processes. Moreover, the strong desire of the international community to avoid any military conflict enhances the motivation to arrive at some kind of agreement, even a "bad" agreement from Israel's perspective, meaning an agreement that does not meet the minimum requirements defined by Prime Minister Netanyahu: cessation of uranium enrichment in Iran, removal of already enriched uranium from Iranian soil, closure of the underground infrastructure sites, and suspension of the plutonium track.[3] In other words, an agreement in which Iran maintains its current policy of pursuing nuclear weapons and maintains all or most of its pertaining capabilities but only changes its behavior (and may change it again at will) is, from an Israeli perspective, a "bad" agreement. But a "bad" or partial agreement is likely to create a difficult problem for Israel on the legitimacy plane. In a situation where the United States leadership views any agreement as serving its interests and thus puts its weight behind it, or even behind negotiations described by it as efficacious, the presentation of an Israeli attack as legitimate is a difficult, and perhaps impossible, task. On the other hand, benefiting Israel on the legitimacy issue is the fact that as this article goes to press, despite the diplomatic progress, the Iranian nuclear program continues to progress steadily toward its goal – nuclear weapons – though with some tactical maneuvering and adaptations.

A Campaign to Strengthen Legitimacy

While the target audiences of a legitimacy campaign may include broad sections of the international community, in order to meet the

minimum level of achievement efforts should concentrate on a number of key Western nations, led by the United States, France, England, and Germany. Indeed, the chemical weapons crisis in Syria demonstrates that the European powers are important not only in and of themselves, but also because their position influences the political and public scene within the United States (as with the British parliament's opposition to an attack) – a fact that sheds light on the importance of legitimacy efforts directed at Europe.[4] Other countries share Israel's assessment as to the nature of the Iranian threat and the futility of the diplomatic process and sanctions – such as Saudi Arabia and the emirates – and support on their part (behind closed doors, of course) would contribute to Israel's legitimacy. If the countries most threatened by Iran present a coordinated and uniform position to the Obama administration, this would certainly contribute to the legitimization of an Israeli attack on Iran.

The legitimization efforts should focus on heads of state, relevant committees in the US House of Representatives and Senate and parallel bodies in other Western powers, the defense establishment and intelligence community, security think tanks, professional publications by the defense establishment, and newspapers whose editorial position is more attentive to Israel's arguments on this matter.

In a situation where Israel acts in spite of the opposition of senior echelons in the US, it must at least lay out before them in advance an informed, rational strategic thesis explaining the upcoming action. The minimal required achievement is for the United States to acknowledge the strategic thesis as rational, even if it does not agree with the planned operation. In order for a strategic concept to be recognized as rational it must (1) be based on agreed-upon facts, (2) work toward objectives and end states agreeable to the United States, and (3) present an argument explaining why there is a reasonable chance the planned operation will succeed in delivering these agreed objectives.

Presentation of the Israeli strategic thesis must highlight the distinctive nature of Israel's calculations. For example, the final point in time that an Israeli attack can still be effective is not necessarily the last date an American attack would be effective. Even senior American officials recognize that it is not self-understood that a country like Israel should ignore the last opportunity it is capable of attacking independently in order to face a reality where its national security rests solely in the hands of the United States. This would be a problematic outsourcing of

the handling of existential threats, especially for a country with a history like Israel's. The uniqueness of Israel's calculations also stems from the different levels of threat Iran presents to Israel and to the United States, resulting in varying degrees of readiness on the part of the two countries to incur risk in order to deal with the threat.

Israel is certainly entitled to take an independent stance regarding its vital national security interests, especially those it views as existential, but Israel must not surprise the United States or mislead it as to its intentions. Israel must be transparent with the United States as far as its general intentions (i.e., not necessarily regarding its precise schedule and operational plans) and strategic concept. The more the United States leans toward support for a "bad" agreement, the more Israel must lay out its arguments against such an agreement and be clear about its opposition, so that there is no insinuation of consent underlying a weakly-expressed opposition. Israel must also ground its opposition in intelligence revelations indicating the manner in which Iran's nuclear program is progressing despite the diplomatic developments. Intelligence information is a key tool in contrasting the diplomatic thesis with the facts on the ground, and the value in the information's exposure for diplomatic and legitimacy purposes must be balanced against the need for confidentiality for operational reasons. After the attack, this balance will lean toward revealing information for purposes of building legitimacy for the attack, and thus the intelligence information to be released should be prepared in advance.

The US defense establishment regularly engages in war games and discussions of contingency plans, and since the possibility of future American military action or an Israeli operation with American consent cannot be discounted entirely, there is a reasonable chance that the United States will agree to explore with Israel exit scenarios and mechanisms for a hypothetical military campaign against the Iranian nuclear program. Such a discourse can bring about proper design of an operational plan as well as coordination for "the day after" – even if the United States at disapproves of an actual, immediate attack. The Israeli defense establishment must aim to conduct war games on Iran with the United States as a routine exercise, as a tool for mutual learning and for the development of mutual understandings.

The campaign for achievement of legitimacy can be divided into three phases: before, during, and after the attack. The pre-attack phase must

focus on the building of legitimacy through clarification of the rationale for an attack: first, that despite diplomacy, sanctions, and President Rouhani's smiles, Iran has not abandoned its strategy to attain nuclear arms. The set of red lines already crossed and ultimatums already violated represent important arguments in clarifying the picture. Second is presentation of military action as a sound strategic thesis based on agreed-upon facts, objectives, and end states, and presentation of an argument explaining why there exists a reasonable chance the planned operation will yield the desired results and allow the said exit scenarios. The rationale must also point out the weaknesses of a partial or interim agreement, and underscore that such an agreement does not bring about the abandonment of Iranian intentions or incur significant harm to Iranian capabilities. It only influences behavior, and Iran may alter its behavior again at will. Third is clarification of the uniqueness of the Israeli calculation and how it differs from the American calculation, emphasizing the Israeli difficulty of being enmeshed in a reality where it waives its ability to deal independently with the challenge of the Iranian bomb, while relying exclusively on American considerations and handling of the issue.

The phase accompanying the attack (or more accurately, immediately after it) must include the revelation of sensitive intelligence information that was vital for the attack and became less sensitive in its wake. This intelligence information should cast new light on the attack, its motives, and the state of progress of the Iranian nuclear program, and thus provide new perspectives on the legitimacy of the attack.

The post-attack phase must focus on two issues: first, the message that whether the attack was consensual or not, it creates crucial opportunities that cannot be missed. Second, at this point focus should be on minimizing damage to Israel – which may be expressed in various ways, including: demands that Israel join the NPT, punishment of Israel, and possible creation of a narrative whereby Israel is once again drawing the United States into a war that it does not want (similar to the erroneous narrative regarding the Iraq War, prevalent in certain circles in the United States). Both in the pre-attack and post-attack phases, the campaign must prepare the military scenario that works in tandem with political efforts regarding the Iranian nuclear program, and should include, for example, overtures toward the Palestinians and Turkey.

"Overall" Legitimacy

The legitimacy of any possible attack is connected not only with a factual-strategic underpinning and with circumstances, but also with the general legitimacy of the actors involved. Iran enjoys an overall low level of legitimacy, and since 1979 it is perceived in the United States as a hostile, terror-sponsoring state. Iran's actions in recent years – from Iraq, through Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa, to its involvement in the Syrian civil war – have all harmed its general legitimacy. On the other hand, the election of Hassan Rouhani and the Iranian President's charm offensive may represent signs of a change of attitude. Israel must therefore continue to emphasize Iran's ongoing involvement in fanning the flames of civil war, violence, and international terror, even while President Rouhani is smiling.

Another question regards Israel's general legitimacy. The government of Israel has rejected the concept of linkage between the Iranian nuclear program and resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, there is an argument waged by many in the United States and the international community (albeit still lacking proof) that progress toward a diplomatic settlement between Israel and the Palestinians would foster implementation of American policies in the Arab world generally, and against Iran in particular.[5] The creation of a link one way or another between the Israeli-Palestinian political process and the effort to prevent Iran's attainment of military nuclear capability is likely, in certain cases, to endanger Israel. Moreover, distinctions should be made between public diplomacy and real conduct behind the scenes. As revealed in Wikileaks documents, for example, the Arab leadership is much more worried about the Iranian issue than the Palestinian issue.[6]

However, despite the detachment of the Iranian bomb from the Palestinian question, in the political reality in which Israel operates, measured progress toward a political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians will provide more international legitimacy for Israel. Besides the advantages of the negotiations themselves, an authentic political process may change Israel's image as an opponent of peace, "lower the flames," and rein in potential negative reactions to any independent Israeli action against Iran, especially on the Arab and Sunni scene, but also in the international community. A political initiative vis-à-vis the Palestinians is a way for Israel to accrue political capital that can be invested in other

arenas, especially if the negotiations with the Palestinians are perceived as honestly oriented toward achieving an agreement.

Conclusion

Under current circumstances, only diminished legitimacy exists for an Israeli attack on Iran. Moreover, a full international consensus on this topic is not possible due to a host of conditions and circumstances, some of which are beyond the scope of this article, that are in part connected to the multi-polar structure taking shape in the international community, the state of the world economy (especially, but not exclusively, regarding the energy market and United States progress toward energy independence), the global mood as recently reflected in the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, Israel's general international standing, and the nature of the action under discussion.

The objective of the campaign is, of course, the achievement of maximum possible legitimacy. But the minimum objective would be achievement of an understanding for an attack, even barring actual consent, along with a certain measure of intelligence, technical, and logistical coordination. Israel must act to amass and preserve legitimacy – especially among key target audiences. But international legitimacy for Israeli military action is only one relevant consideration, and not the leading one. The consideration of legitimacy demands patience and the granting of extra weight to some of the slower "clocks" (such as diplomacy and sanctions), while strategic, intelligence, and operational considerations may actually calibrate the metronome according to the pace of the faster "clocks." Indeed, in this spirit Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that he will not wait with an attack on Iran until "it is too late." [7]

However, there are a host of variables that may contribute to an understanding, and even a certain support, for the employment of force against Iranian nuclear installations. This includes mainly the undisputed fact that despite diplomacy, sanctions, and President Rouhani's charm, Iran clings to the same nuclear armament policy objectives, holds on to its enrichment infrastructure, and continues the development of nuclear arms technologies and the development of missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads. In a situation where Israel succeeds in keeping these facts alive in the international discourse, or at least within the US and European defense establishments, and even in a situation where

sanctions and the diplomatic process are progressing but do not impede Iran from advancing toward nuclear weapons in terms of final objectives and capabilities, Israel may attain significant maneuvering room.

The launch of a complementary political process is a step that will challenge Israel if it lacks international recognition that the attack is a last resort, and that Israel took into account the interests of the United States and the international community. Nevertheless, diplomacy is a very pragmatic and adaptable field, and sometimes its tendency to recalculate its path under new circumstances is stronger than its tendency to settle past scores (even those from the recent past). In other words, even if Israel attacks without American consent, it is possible that the morning after the attack the United States will focus on recalculating its interests, and on the fact that its cold and judicious interest requires it to work toward exploiting the advantages of the attack.

Notes

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The Plutonium Option: Iran's Parallel Route to a Military Nuclear Capability

Ephraim Asculai

Since the first announcement in August 2002 that Iran was constructing a heavy water production facility at Arak, there has been little doubt in the minds of many people that in parallel with a uranium enrichment program, Iran has embarked on a plutonium route for the production of fissile materials for military use. With the approaching completion of the IR-40 heavy water natural uranium reactor at Arak, this scenario has commanded more public attention.[1] The potential for using plutonium in the core of a nuclear explosive device is serious, and indeed, this project has proceeded in blatant disregard of Security Council resolutions.[2] Although the estimated date of completion of this route is not imminent, the project is nevertheless nearing a so-called critical point. In contrast to the uranium track, the plutonium route will apparently soon usher in an environmental point of no return. This paper describes the general processes involved in the production of plutonium, and then considers the potential of the Iranian plutonium program, an estimated timeline and other aspects of the program, and prospects for the future.

The Basics of Plutonium Production

Stage 1: The Irradiation of Uranium in a Reactor

Unlike uranium, plutonium is not a naturally occurring element (for a definition of the technical terms, see the Glossary at the end of the article). In general, plutonium is produced in nuclear reactors. In the basic process of "fission" of uranium-235, the uranium nucleus that is "hit" by a particle known as a "neutron" is broken into 2-3 nuclei (known as fission

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products), emitting 2-3 neutrons and releasing a lot of energy. The neutrons emitted during the fission serve a dual purpose in the controlled process of the reactor: they can (after losing some of their energy in a moderator) a) hit another uranium-235 nucleus, thereby enabling a continuation of the fission process, commonly known as a "chain reaction," or b), hit a nucleus of another form (called "isotope") of uranium − uranium-238. If this happens, the uranium-238 nucleus will eventually turn into a completely new nucleus − the nucleus of plutonium-239. This material is also a fissile material, like uranium-235, from which a plutonium bomb can be produced. If emitted in a controlled process, the product can serve as a reliable source of energy, e.g., electricity. If uncontrolled, an explosion can occur. The fission products nuclei are mostly radioactive and are commonly designated as "radioactive waste."

The uranium found in nature is composed mainly of uranium-238 (~99.3 percent) and uranium-235 (~0.7 percent). Most nuclear power reactors are fueled by uranium enriched in its 235 component (with the respective reduction in its 238 component). Natural uranium is the preferred fuel for nuclear reactors designed for plutonium production. Because of certain traits, natural uranium reactors must be built with either heavy water or graphite as moderators − the materials needed to slow down the neutrons in the reactors so that the chain reaction can be maintained. In contrast, when enriched uranium is used, e.g., in power reactors, light water (regular water) can be − and usually is − used as the moderator.

Once the reactor has "gone critical," it enters a "zone of immunity," after which it is practically immune from attacks. Iran has the option of hastening the advent of the zone of immunity, and while this would contradict its obligations to the IAEA, the profit in doing so would be considerable.

Plutonium-239 is the preferred component for nuclear weapons production. Throughout the reactor's operation during its production, however, other forms (isotopes) of plutonium are produced, first and foremost plutonium-240. This isotope is an undesirable one since in nuclear weapons it can cause premature explosions, resulting in a much lower or even negligible yield. The production of this isotope is proportional to the duration of the irradiation of the uranium in the reactor where it is produced. Thus, the production regime becomes

a balance between the desire to produce more plutonium and the aim to have as low a proportion of plutonium-240 as practicable.

Stage 2: The Separation of Plutonium from the Reactor Irradiated Fuel

Upon completion of the fuel irradiation according to the pre-planned schedule, the fuel must be removed from the reactor and chemically processed to separate the plutonium from its other components. Since this irradiated fuel is highly radioactive, in order to be able to handle it with relative safety it must be "cooled." Because of the characteristics of radioactivity this can only be done by waiting – giving the radioactivity time to "decay," i.e., to reduce its levels of activity. Thus, the irradiated fuel is stored after it has been removed from the reactor for a long period of time in a cooled pool of water until its radioactivity reaches the preset level, whereupon it can be processed relatively safely.

Because of the high residual level of radioactivity, the "reprocessing" activity takes place in a separate facility, with appropriate shielding against radiation and with remote controls and handling capabilities. The process stages are as follows: removal of the fuel cladding; removal of the radioactive waste; and separation of the plutonium from the uranium.

Stage 3: The Processing of the Plutonium into a Nuclear Weapons Core

Plutonium is a highly toxic metal that is also pyrophoric (prone to spontaneous combustion) in air. Therefore, special safety precautions must be taken when dealing with it: it must be handled in special glove boxes with inert gas atmosphere, to prevent both outside contamination and combustion. The liquid plutonium solution produced by the reprocessing procedure is turned into metal, melted, and machined to turn it into the sphere (the "core") that can then be inserted into the explosive mechanism, which turns it into a nuclear explosive device. Special care must also be taken during the processing of the plutonium to prevent "criticality." If the amount of the fissile element is too large, an uncontrolled spontaneous fission chain reaction can occur, which is a hazard when handling fissile materials – plutonium and enriched uranium. The history of fissile materials production is replete with careless criticality accidents, some of which resulted in deaths of personnel and the destruction of process facilities.

The Iranian IR-40 Reactor

Less than a year following the release of the information concerning the construction of the heavy water production plant, Iran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that it was planning to construct a heavy water natural uranium reactor at Arak. Designated IR-40, it was to be a 40 megawatt reactor and dedicated to research and the production of commercial isotopes.[3] From the details of this reactor, both confirmed and assessed, it appears that its design is distinctive, employing some characteristics of known, mainly Russian, reactor designs, with some additional features unique to this reactor.[4]

From Iranian photographs of the nuclear fuel intended for use in the IR-40 and from additional information supplied by the Iranians, it was deduced that the basic nuclear fuel structure resembles the fuel of the Soviet-produced RBMK nuclear power reactors (one of which exploded in the Chernobyl accident in 1986).[5] The fuel itself is composed of uranium dioxide cylindrical pellets inserted into Zircaloy tubes, 18 of which are gathered into a fuel assembly.[6] It is estimated that some 150 fuel assemblies will comprise the reactor's core. Since this fuel design is not a natural choice for a heavy water reactor, the Russian design was likely copied as a matter of convenience, and the choice of uranium dioxide for the pellets was made because of its similarity to the Bushehr reactor fuel (even though the Bushehr fuel consists of low enriched uranium) so as not to need additional fuel designs and processes in Iran. Some of these choices make the reactor design less than optimal for the production of plutonium, and seem to have been made for the sake of easier construction.

When operational, what could this reactor produce? As a rule of thumb, one can estimate that a heavy water natural uranium reactor will produce about 1 gram of plutonium in one day for every megawatt (MW) of power. Thus, if we have a 40 MW reactor it will produce 8 kilograms of plutonium in 200 days.[7] When planning the reactor irradiation regime, additional considerations come into play: the 240 to 239 plutonium ratios, the considerable waste of uranium when a lower 240 to 239 plutonium ratio is desired, and the additional time given the frequent unloading of irradiated fuel and loading of fresh fuel.

A ratio of 2 percent plutonium 240 to 239 is considered to be super weapons grade. This is achieved when the nuclear fuel is irradiated for some three months and then removed from the reactor core. For

the production of the 6 percent 240 to 239 plutonium, considered to be weapons grade, some nine months of irradiation would be needed, which reduces the load/unload times but increases the chances of premature nuclear explosions when the plutonium is used in an explosive device. In the case of extended irradiation much uranium can be saved, which could be a consideration for Iran, a country with limited uranium reserves.

Additional Facilities

In order to use the plutonium produced by the IR-40 reactor, both a reprocessing plant and metallurgical facilities would be needed. So far, based on open source information, nothing is known about additional facilities that would be needed in Iran for the production of the cores for plutonium-based nuclear explosive devices. Following the irradiation and removal of fuel from the reactor, the next stage of the process is the interim cooling storage of the fuel. This can take place at the reactor facility itself, thereby reducing the need for moving a highly radioactive fuel until necessary. Should the authorities consider the moving of this fuel to be necessary, it would take a heavy radiation shield and many trips of the shielded material to transport a full reactor load of irradiated fuel to another site. This interim storage could take place at the reprocessing plant or at an independent site, thereby requiring another transport once the fuel is ready for reprocessing.

Reprocessing is a messy activity. If reprocessed too soon, the radioactive waste includes many gaseous components, which would probably be released into the atmosphere and become a hazard to the environment. The longer the reprocessing is delayed, the smaller this hazard becomes. A reprocessing plant is a relatively large facility. Therefore, if a reprocessing plant is to be constructed in Iran it would be rather hard to conceal, and its operation would be easier to discover than that of a uranium enrichment facility.

The final stage in the production of the plutonium-based nuclear explosive core will take place at metallurgical facilities, very specialized but much smaller in scale than the two previous facilities. These laboratories do not have to be in close proximity to the reprocessing plant and can be constructed in parallel with the reprocessing plant.

Possible Iranian Timelines for the Production of a Plutonium Nuclear Explosive Core

The IAEA May 2013 periodic report to its Board of Governors and to the Security Council stated that Iran confirmed the following commissioning schedule for the IR-40 Reactor: "Phase 1 – pre-commissioning (using dummy fuel assemblies and light water) in the fourth quarter of 2013; Phase 2 – commissioning (using real fuel assemblies and heavy water) in the first quarter of 2014; expected to become operational during the third quarter of 2014."[8] If the above Iranian information is taken at face value, and if all goes well for Iran in the commissioning and operation of the reactor, the earliest that Iran could expect the completion of the first plutonium production is sometime in the spring of 2015. If Iran wants to retain a plutonium ratio of 2 percent, it would need three complete irradiation cycles of 90 days for each cycle; the load/unload time that could take a few weeks extends the time for the production of plutonium for one nuclear explosive core to around a year. One also should take into account a prolonged first operation of the reactor following its commissioning, since one has to test the reactor at all stages of its power increases, up to full power operation. This would bring the completion of the first production of plutonium in the reactor to late 2015. Note that the IAEA report of late August 2013 included a notification by Iran regarding a possible delay in the timetable for inaugurating the reactor.[9]

If we consider a minimal cooling period of 180 days before the irradiated fuel can be reprocessed, we have to calculate the beginning of reprocessing from either the completion of the first 90 days of irradiation, in the case of the 2 percent ratio, or from the completion of the 200 days of the first 8 kilogram production, a difference of more than three months.

We should assume an optimized plan for both the irradiation and the reprocessing operation, so that the time length of reprocessing should be on the order of the irradiation time, in order that the time length of one process should not be significantly different from the other, negating the possibility of the formation of a bottleneck. This would bring the estimate of the reprocessing time to about 200 days for the first eight kilograms.

It is difficult to simulate the processing of plutonium into a nuclear core for an explosive device. High enriched uranium (HEU) is similar to natural uranium in all mechanical, chemical, and metallurgical properties. As such, all preparations for manufacturing an HEU nuclear warhead, including the manufacturing of "dummy" warheads, can be simulated

with natural uranium. Therefore, when one has a sufficient quantity of HEU at hand and all preparations have been made, one can produce a nuclear warhead without any delay in a very short time. This, however, is not the case for plutonium. It is difficult to simulate this highly toxic and flammable material. Iran will have to wait for a sufficient first quantity of plutonium before it can master the processing into a first nuclear core for an explosive device. Although arguable, one should assume at least six months for this to be completed.[10]

Table 1 summarizes the time estimates for the completion of one plutonium core for a nuclear explosive device under different scenarios.

Table 1: Estimating the Timelines for the Plutonium Route

The Product Activities	2% Pu-240/239	8 Kilogram Pu Production	6% Pu-240/239
Start of irradiation	End of 2014	End of 2014	End of 2014
Completion of first irradiation batch	90 days	200 days	270 days
Cooling period	180 days	180 days	180 days
Reprocessing of the 1st irradiation batch*	90 days	200 days	270 days
Completion of 1st 8 kilograms**	180 days	No extra time	No extra time
End of metallurgical processing	180 days	180 days	180 days
Estimated date of completion of 1st plutonium core	Late 2017	Early 2017	End of 2016

* Assuming the readiness of the reprocessing plant

** From the end of the 1st cooling period

The Bushehr Nuclear Power Reactor

Nuclear power reactors, fueled by uranium, produce plutonium, even if enriched to a low enrichment level. A characteristic of these reactors is that the fuel is irradiated for a very long period of time and to high irradiation levels for the sake of power production efficiency. In these reactors the ratio of plutonium-240 to 239 (denoted as "reactor grade plutonium") is much higher than is applicable for nuclear weapons

production. Therefore, on the face of it, the Bushehr power reactor does not pose a proliferation threat. However, there is a caveat to this statement. If so desired, the Bushehr power reactor could be operated for a short period (weeks or very few months), possibly at low levels, and then its full or partial load of fuel removed and reprocessed. In this way, the 240 to 239 ratio would remain at weapons grade levels. An additional benefit would be that the amount of plutonium so produced in one batch would be considerable, because of the large amount of irradiated uranium. Admittedly, this is an awkward choice of procedure, not least because the fuel belongs to Russia, and Tehran has committed to return it to Russia – but can Iran be trusted to abide by its commitments under all circumstances?

The Rationale of Pursuing the Plutonium Route

Most of the states that embarked on a military nuclear weapons program did so at first in one way, either HEU or plutonium, and later went on to achieve a military nuclear capability in both routes. Such was the case for the five nuclear weapons states, as well as for India, Pakistan, Iraq, and North Korea. Although much more difficult to produce, plutonium has certain advantages, mainly the smaller quantity of plutonium needed to produce the same nuclear explosion yield, and consequently the smaller size of the warhead. This is immediately reflected in the size of, e.g., a missile payload, and the distance it can reach with a plutonium warhead, as compared with an HEU warhead.

Besides being more difficult to achieve, plutonium has several other drawbacks. Plutonium emits more radiation than HEU, it is more difficult to contain the process and thus the emission of radioactive materials to the environment makes the activity easier to discover, and the extensive stages of operation make this route more vulnerable to external intelligence surveillance.

Discussion and Conclusions

A program for the indigenous development and production of nuclear explosives is never short term. The UN Security Council did well when it consistently took note of the fact that Iran was developing not only its uranium enrichment route toward the potential nuclear weapons development, but also embarked on the plutonium potential development route. Although Iran insists that its IR-40 is part of its

peaceful nuclear program, the choice of a natural uranium, heavy water reactor is not the natural one. Iran declares the intended use of this reactor to be radioisotope production. Iran's Tehran Nuclear Research Reactor (TNRC), partially fueled with its indigenously produced 20 percent enriched uranium nuclear fuel, produces medical isotopes. Thus looking at the IR-40 reactor on its own, there is some logic to its construction, yet within the overall picture of Iran's nuclear project, one cannot dismiss the horrifying potential of this reactor. Most nations of the world do not see the need for, and do not produce the medical and industrial radioisotopes for their needs but purchase them freely on the world market.

An issue that cannot be answered unequivocally is that of the length of time needed for the construction of a nuclear reprocessing plant. There are many answers to this question. A 1978 US GAO report brings several different estimates by several institutes, ranging from several months to two years.[11] Many of the estimates in the case of Iran depend on the availability of materials and equipment. Much could also depend on the availability of a detailed design of this installation. The time estimates about the Iranian project in the present paper are very rough ones. There are many unknowns at present that could tip the scales one way or the other. Still, these estimates serve as guidelines for neither pessimistic nor optimistic scenarios, and should be seen as midpoint estimates that offer useful information for the decision makers.

There can be no doubt that should Iran produce its first plutonium core, this would not be sufficient for any practical matter. While there can be arguments considering the minimal number of warheads (cores) that Iran would want, it is only reasonable to assume that once Iran would have the capability, it would attempt to accumulate as many warheads as possible in the shortest time. One factor to consider is the quantity of plutonium needed for a fission weapon. It is assessed that for a 10 kiloton TNT equivalent yield, a quantity of 3-5 kilograms would be needed, depending on the technical capabilities of the weapons developers.[12] Thus, following its first core, Iran could produce 2-3 cores per year.

One cannot ignore the history of military action against nuclear reactors. It is usually accepted that once the reactor has "gone critical," it enters a "zone of immunity," after which it is practically immune from attacks. This results from the possible environmental consequences of the release of radioactive matter, as exhibited by the Chernobyl and

Fukushima accidents. No doubt, a much smaller reactor and a very short irradiation time would cause much reduced damage, but still the "zone of immunity" is an internationally accepted benchmark. Iran has the option of hastening the advent of the zone of immunity by foregoing the first phase of commissioning, introducing uranium fuel and heavy water, and starting up the reactor. Although this would contradict its obligations to the IAEA, the profit in doing so would be considerable.

In conclusion, Iran is proceeding slowly but surely toward acquiring a plutonium production capability suitable for military purposes, although some important components have not yet been detected. There should be no doubt that Iran is capable of obtaining these components. In any agreement with Iran concerning the nuclear project, the plutonium route must be adequately covered.

Glossary

Enrichment – the process by which the natural composition of an element is changed to give preference to one or more isotopes. In the case of uranium, enrichment refers to higher concentrations of uranium-235.

Explosive device – the combination of a nuclear fissile core and the explosive mechanism that surrounds it.

Fission products – the atoms produced by the fission process; the vast majority of these are radioactive.

Fission – the process by which a heavy nucleus (e.g. uranium or plutonium) is split into two or more atoms, emitting neutrons and energy.

Fuel – nuclear material inserted into a reactor, which can undergo fission and carry out a controlled chain reaction.

Glove boxes – large boxes, with transparent walls, through which protective gloves can be inserted, facilitating safe work on equipment and materials inside the boxes. The atmosphere inside the boxes can be air or, in the case of sensitive materials, inert gases (e.g., argon).

Heavy water – water enriched with "deuterium" or heavy hydrogen. For utilization in a reactor a purity of 99.75 percent is required.

Irradiation – a process by which materials are "bombarded" by radiation or by particles. In a reactor, the fuel is irradiated by bombarding it with neutrons.

Isotopes – different forms of the same element, differing by weight and possibly some physical properties, such as radioactivity.

Metallurgy – the science and technologies dealing with metals.

Moderator – in most reactors, the neutrons involved in the fission process have to be slowed down in order to sustain the reactor. This is carried out by a moderator, usually composed of water, heavy water, or graphite.

Plutonium (Pu) – a heavy, man-made, highly toxic metal, produced in reactors. Of the many Pu isotopes, the high-purity Pu-239 is the important one for use in nuclear explosive devices. For this purpose a low (below 6 percent) concentration of Pu-240 is essential.

Reactor – the facility where a controlled fission process takes place. A reactor, which is a complicated technical facility, utilizes nuclear fuel composed of fissile materials. Power reactors, research reactors, and marine propulsion reactors are the most important among the many types of reactors.

Reprocessing – the process by which the plutonium is separated from the irradiated fuel.

Uranium (U) – the heaviest naturally-occurring element, composed of several isotopes. It is a heavy metal of relatively low radioactivity. The important isotopes for the present purpose are the fissile uranium-235 and the most abundant uranium-238.

Weapons-grade – materials suited for the production of cores for nuclear weapons. For uranium-based weapons, uranium-235 should be enriched to about 90 percent. For plutonium-based materials, composed mainly of plutonium-239, the concentration of plutonium-240 should be kept to below 6 percent.

Notes

1 See, e.g., Jay Solomon, "Iran Seen Trying New Path to a Bomb," *Wall Street Journal*, August 5, 2013, and Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov, "Iran's Plan B for the Bomb," *New York Times*, August 8, 2013.

2 See, e.g., Security Council resolution 1803 of March 2008, which denotes the "heavy-water related projects" that require full and sustained suspension, http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iaeairan/unsc_res1803-2008.pdf.

3 The energy released during the operation of a reactor is measured in thermal megawatts (MW(th)) – the heat energy released by the fission process. The output of power reactors is usually measured in electric megawatts (MW(e)) – the electric energy produced. The value of the MW(e) output of a power reactor is usually around a third of its MW(th) value.

4 Many of the descriptive portions of the IR-40 reactor and calculated characteristics come from the extensive work by Thomas Mo Willig,

"Feasibility and Benefits of Converting the Iranian Heavy Water Research Reactor IR-40 to a more Proliferation-Resistant Reactor," Norwegian University of Life Sciences, December 2011, http://brage.bibsys.no/umb/bitstream/URN:NBN:no-bibsys_brage_29337/1/master.pdf.

5 "Update on the Arak Reactor in Iran," Institute for Science and International Security, September 25, 2009, http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/Arak_Update_25_August2009.pdf; and David Albright, Paul Brannan, and Robert Kelley, "Mysteries Deepen Over Status of Arak Reactor Project," August 11, 2009, http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/ArakFuelElement.pdf.

6 Zircaloy is a zirconium metal alloy, used in nuclear reactor fuel cladding because of its advantageous mechanical, nuclear, and thermal characteristics.

7 The IAEA defines a "significant quantity" of plutonium as 8 kilograms, i.e., the quantity assessed to be necessary for the production of one nuclear explosive device. However, since some of this quantity will be retained as melting and machining waste, and may be recycled for the next device, this quantity could be true for the first device, but for the subsequent ones a lower quantity would be needed. See also note 12 below.

8 Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran; IAEA report GOV/2013/27, May 22, 2012, http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/IAEA_Iran_Safeguards_report_–_22May2013.pdf.

9 IAEA report on Iran of August 2013, http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2013/gov2013-40.pdf.

10 It should be recalled, however, that the Soviet Union, in its crash program and in the rush to carry out its first nuclear test, accomplished the feat in a month. They had, however, the technical information gathered by its espionage system in the US.

11 "Quick and Secret Construction of Plutonium Reprocessing Plants: A Way to Nuclear Weapons Proliferation?" Report by the Comptroller General of the United States, 1978, http://archive.gao.gov/f0902c/107377.pdf.

12 Thomas B. Cochrane and Christopher E. Paine, "The Amount of Plutonium and Highly Enriched Uranium Needed for Pure Fission Nuclear Weapons," (Washington, DC, Natural Resources Defense Council, 1995), http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/fissionw/fissionweapons.pdf.

A Nuclear-Armed Iran and US Extended Deterrence in the Gulf

Mark Doyle

Nowhere is any consideration of extended nuclear deterrence more pressing or more complex than with respect to US extended deterrence to Saudi Arabia and other US allies in the Gulf. The urgency of this theater for US extended deterrence is the prospect of a likely soon-to-be nuclear-armed Iran. That this debate is yet to be sufficiently had is in large part due to the previous and almost exclusive focus of national and international actors on preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons in the first place. While the prevention of a nuclear-armed Iran cannot yet be categorically precluded, continued Iranian progress has led many observers to conclude that it is now largely a matter of *when* Iran achieves nuclear arms capability, rather than *if* it does so. For example, one significant study records the "consensus that Iran will soon have the feedstock, the know-how and the machinery to make enough highly-enriched uranium (HEU) to build a nuclear weapon."[1]

This paper considers some of the complexities of US extended nuclear deterrence to Saudi Arabia and other US allies in the Middle East following Iran's attainment, presumably soon, of its first nuclear weapon. Options to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon seem all but exhausted; sanctions are failing and debate around any remaining red lines now appears to be merely a semantic distraction. It is highly debatable if air campaigns using conventional weapons could do anything but delay an Iranian nuclear arms program. Additionally, any

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such air campaign might rally the support of the Iranian people for the regime and strengthen the nuclear arms hand of the Supreme Leader and his fellow clerics, whatever the future economic and political cost to Iran.

The New Iranian Threat

Since the end of the Cold War, the focus of US extended deterrence policy in the Middle East has shifted over time from the Soviet Union toward regional threats. A defining moment was the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which focused US strategic thinking in the direction of a policy of containment with respect to Iraq and Iran, and to the threat these two countries posed to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states friendly to the US:

> Saddam's invasion of Kuwait fundamentally re-oriented America's perception of extended deterrence in the Middle East, as the United States and its regional allies perceived a lesser but far more immediate threat from Iraq and Iran, regional powers which vied for dominance in the Gulf. Such fears...also obliged the Clinton administration to proclaim the "dual containment" of Iraq and Iran.[2]

The administration of George H. W. Bush led the 1991 Gulf War and effectively destroyed Iraq's offensive military capability. Since then, the policy aims of US extended deterrence with respect to Iran remain unchanged; that is, the main goal is to constrain Iran from pursuing an aggressive foreign policy by military or other means in the region, particularly vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies allied with the US.

The current threat presented by Iran, however, extends beyond the rivalries of nation states, even those with antagonistic political systems, and represents a significant additional threat vector in the rivalry between two religious pan-national power blocs: the Sunni Muslim association of Arab nations in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) versus Iran and its Shiite allies and proxies across the Middle East.

In the past the Sunni Arab Gulf monarchies appeared willing to remain without their own independent nuclear arms, perhaps feeling sufficiently protected by US extended deterrence, albeit informally. That willingness will be severely tested should the US fail to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. It is anathema to the conservative Sunni Arab monarchies to contemplate a Shiite rival power having access to nuclear

weapons while they have none of their own. Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Gulf monarchies likely perceive that in the eyes of the world this would make Shiite power preeminent among Muslim countries. "Riyadh would face tremendous pressure to respond in some form to a nuclear-armed Iran, not only to deter Iranian coercion and subversion but also to preserve its sense that Saudi Arabia is the leading nation in the Muslim world."[3]

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies probably feel more pressure to obtain an independent nuclear deterrent in the face of a nuclear-armed Iran than they did when facing a newly nuclear-armed Israel, as they had confidence the US could keep Israel in check. The US appears to have been able to persuade them that despite its own independent nuclear arsenal, Israel presents no first strike threat to US allies in the region. Assuring the Arab states that overwhelming US extended nuclear deterrence forces make a nuclear-armed Iran no more of a threat is a significant challenge for US policymakers, now and in the future. This may be in part a feature of the noted asymmetry between deterring potential aggressors and the more difficult task of assuring allies.[4]

The US faces a significant challenge in projecting extended deterrence to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab allies in a way to make them feel sufficiently protected in the face of a nuclear-armed Iran. Some of the Gulf states have already indicated that Iranian possession of nuclear arms will trigger the pursuit of their own independent nuclear deterrent.[5] The question then appears to be, does Saudi Arabia in fact intend to pursue its own independent nuclear deterrent, or is the suggestion it will pursue such a course of action employed to pressure the US into formalizing the extension of the US nuclear umbrella to the Saudi kingdom?

Strategic Challenges of a Nuclear Iran

A significant strategic challenge facing Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states is the potential for an emboldened nuclear-armed Iran to undertake quick conventional forays into their territory and valuable oil fields. Iranian "lightning strikes" could be conducted before the distant US machinery of government has had time to assess and plan a suitable response and calibrate any response with both allies and rivals. The US would still have to react with sufficient deterrent action – diplomatic, military, or otherwise. This tactical game has already been played successfully in the region, most recently in 1990, when Saddam

Hussein's Iraqi forces launched a lightning invasion of neighboring Kuwait, achieving initial tactical objectives in occupying substantial Kuwaiti oil fields before the US and its allies could react.

This Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is likely to loom large in the memories of the Sunni Arab monarchies as an example of the limitations of solely relying on the extended deterrence of a distant ally, even one as powerful as the United States. Viewed from this perspective it is understandable that the kingdom and other Gulf allies of the US will press for their own independent nuclear deterrent in the face of a nuclear-armed Iran.

A second significant strategic challenge facing the Sunni Arab states in the face of a nuclear-armed Iran is protecting and keeping open the Strait of Hormuz, allowing Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to continue to export the crude oil that is the lifeblood of their economies. Currently a conventionally armed Iran presents a limited threat to the Strait of Hormuz because Iran is fully aware that an attempt by its forces to close the Strait would be met by an immediate and overwhelming response from the significant US forces in the region. The likely resulting "hammer blow" provoked by such action from conventional US forces would probably destroy a significant proportion of valuable Iranian sea and air capability, potentially leaving Iran vulnerable to its Arab enemies.

The best option from the US perspective is to build on recent defensive cooperation with Saudi Arabia and other GCC states in an effort to convince these allies – and Iran – of the sincerity of the US commitment to protect the kingdom and the other Gulf states from acts of Iranian aggression.

With Iran in possession of nuclear weapons, however, the balance of power with regard to the Strait of Hormuz will shift considerably in Iran's favor, a significant issue of concern for the Arab oil producing states and the wider world. In this circumstance the US would have to factor in Iran's possibly escalated response to the use of significant American conventional military power to defeat Iranian forces seeking to close the Strait. The US would have to calibrate its response in a potentially more measured way than currently, seeking not to use excessive conventional force that, in destroying significant Iranian military resources, would risk the escalation of hostilities to the point where Iran might resort to nuclear options.

An additional aspect to this threat vector is that the actions of Iranian proxy non-state actors are not merely limited to acts of terrorism,

problematic enough though they are, but also involve subversive activity aimed mainly at Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. Some informed commentators assess that the kingdom and other Sunni Arab monarchies perceive subversion as the greatest element of the wider Iranian threat:

> In its determination to drive America and Israel out and eliminate the conservative Arab regimes allied with the United States, Iran has supported all manner of insurgencies, terrorist groups, dissidents and internal oppositions... For the conservative Arab states of the region, this—not the Iranian armed forces—is the greatest threat posed by Tehran.[6]

On a related note, Iran has been working to diversify its potential options for delivery of nuclear weapons in readiness for when it attains a usable device. In preparation for acquiring a usable nuclear device Iran continues to expand its missile program, and there are growing international concerns with regard to Iranian covert use of its developing space program for military purposes.[7] In addition, Iran continues to cultivate or support proxy forces. Traditionally Iran has preferred the deniability of proxy attacks, but these have the disadvantage of taking weeks, if not longer, to plan and implement, thereby reducing their tactical and strategic utility. The significance of these proxy actors to a nuclear-armed Iran is likely greatly diminished. Nevertheless, in situations of domestic upheaval on the western side of the Gulf, Iran could activate these actors, perhaps simultaneously with direct Iranian action intended to exploit perceived vulnerabilities. The use of Iranian missiles in conjunction with a large barrage of less sophisticated rockets by proxy forces is an effective rapid response option that would likely inflict greater damage on Saudi Arabia or other Iranian rivals than using missile attacks alone.[8]

The deteriorating situation in Syria and the spillover of the conflict to Lebanon and probably beyond, especially to Iraq, adds to the complexities and the risk. The collapse of the Syrian state into civil war, and the parallel proxy conflict that has resulted between Hizbollah and elements of the Iranian Republican Guards Quds forces on one side and Arab Sunni backed opposition forces on the other has fanned the flames. So great is the concern on the part of the US with regard to events in Syria that retiring CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell has publicly stated that he believes the civil war in Syria poses the single greatest threat to

US national security.[9] In retrospect these views appeared prescient, as the recent larger scale chemical attacks by the Syrian regime expanded international focus on the conflict and drew the US closer to direct military involvement.

Given the added burden on relations between Iran and the Gulf monarchies following Iran's acquisition of nuclear arms, even those who doubt the immediacy and inevitability of a slide to a Middle East nuclear Armageddon still perceive the inherent danger of the situation. The dithering of the Obama administration on a military response to Syria's escalated use of chemical weapons has done little to reassure Saudi Arabia or other Gulf monarchies of the strength of the US commitment to safeguard their territory and interests. Following Syria's blatant infringement of international weapons norms and the crossing of a specific and publicly drawn US presidential red line, they may question, if the US fails to act militarily in even a limited capacity, what confidence ought they to have in the US that it will respond in kind to an Iranian nuclear first strike.

Alternative Reponses

How these doubts will translate into action following Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons has yet to be seen. Many commentators see it as inevitable that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states will pursue their own independent nuclear deterrent, perhaps rapidly, should Iran become a nuclear-armed power. Other commentators judge that the kingdom and other Gulf monarchies will alternatively seek shelter under a much reinforced and extended US nuclear umbrella, perhaps codified more formally in a new treaty arrangement. This is likely the preferred US position, rather than the kingdom and others becoming independently nuclear-armed Middle East actors.

A third alternative, and for many commentators a seemingly likely one, is that Saudi Arabia will develop its strategic relationship with Pakistan and seek shelter under a Pakistani nuclear umbrella against a nuclear-armed Iran. This third alternative has come to be taken by many to be "conventional wisdom," particularly in Washington. However, not all informed commentators agree with the inevitability, or even likelihood, of some of these alternatives playing out:

> Despite rumours of a clandestine nuclear deal, there are profound disincentives for Riyadh to acquire a bomb from

> Islamabad – and considerable, though typically ignored, reasons for Pakistan to avoid an illicit transfer. Instead, Saudi Arabia would likely pursue a more aggressive version of its current conventional defense and civilian nuclear hedging strategy while seeking out an external nuclear security guarantee from either Pakistan or the United States. And ultimately, a potential U.S. nuclear guarantee would likely prove more feasible and attractive to the Saudis than a Pakistani alternative.[10]

These "profound disincentives for Riyadh," coupled with US financial leverage with Pakistan (in terms of substantial US aid), provide Washington with significant leverage to guide Saudi Arabia and Pakistan away from some form of Pakistani-Saudi nuclear extended deterrence arrangement and toward a US nuclear guarantee, perhaps codified in some form of new treaty arrangement.

In response to the multifaceted Iranian missile/rocket threat, US policy advises a combination of both offensive and defensive tactics. Bitter lessons learned from the 1991 Gulf War (where postwar assessments indicate that not a single Iraqi Scud missile was destroyed by air strikes or US Special Force operations) appear to have been learned by the US and its allies, and advance planning may well incorporate the approach adopted by Israel in its 2006 campaign against Hizbollah, when the Israel Air Force reportedly knocked out 90 percent of Hizbollah's medium range and long range rockets and rocket launchers on the first day of the conflict.[11]

With respect to defensive measures, the positive steps taken by the US to better integrate missile defenses with Saudi Arabia and other GCC allies in the region have had the threat from Iranian rocket and missile attacks clearly in mind. However, Iranian acquisition of a nuclear device could render most of these positive steps meaningless. To achieve its strategic aims, the threat of just one nuclear-armed Iranian missile getting through to a Saudi or other Gulf target, among the multitude of missiles and rockets it could launch in a coordinated attack, would suffice. This threat provides a substantial challenge to US extended nuclear deterrence to the kingdom and the Gulf monarchies.

Extended Deterrence

The US has faced different challenges to its extended nuclear deterrence policies in different regions in the past and found ways to adapt. US extended deterrence in Europe during the Cold War, for example, was different from the extended deterrence it offered to its allies in Asia, for a number of reasons. Chief among these is that US allies in Asia do not face the significant conventional land force threat that NATO allies did during the Cold War. As a result of these different challenges, the US adapted the extended nuclear deterrence offered to allies in different regions and under different circumstances. For example, the US placed significant numbers of nuclear weapons with NATO allies in Europe and operated limited joint "dual-key" custody, something it has not done with its allies in Asia:

> At the height in the early 1970s, there were as many as 7,000 American nuclear weapons deployed in Europe...you had in Europe programs of cooperation, also referred to as dual-key systems, where the United States maintained custody of the nuclear weapon but there were agreements that in the event of war that weapon might be made available to an ally.[12]

The US now has to similarly adapt the extended nuclear deterrence it offers to the kingdom and other Gulf Arab allies, as the extended deterrence environment in the face of a nuclear-armed Iran differs from that in Europe during the Cold War and Asia since 1949.

It may be that the most attractive US option to the Saudis would be to place some US nuclear weapons under some form of joint US/Saudi control, in a similar fashion to the arrangements with NATO allies in Europe during the Cold War, where the US operated limited joint dual-key custody of some nuclear weapons. This option is likely the one that would most persuasively steer the kingdom away from the path of an independent nuclear deterrent or an extended deterrence arrangement with Pakistan. However, this is likely not the option that Washington would prefer. The US will remain highly reluctant to relinquish even limited control (on a dual-key basis) of any of its nuclear weapons to another power, especially a state without a democratically elected government.

The best option from the US perspective, then, is to build on recent defensive cooperation with Saudi Arabia and other GCC states and

significantly develop joint exercises and operations in an effort to convince these allies, and Iran, of the sincerity of the US commitment to protect the kingdom and the other Gulf states from acts of Iranian aggression.

The apparent imminent failure of US extended deterrence (along with its other diplomatic and economic levers) to prevent Iran from continuing to develop a nuclear weapon seriously undermines the credibility of US extended deterrence in the region among both allies and adversaries after Iran becomes a nuclear-armed state. US failure to respond immediately, collectively, and in a politically unified way to chemical weapons use by the Assad regime has added to these credibility concerns. The US must thus quickly further adapt the extended deterrence it offers the kingdom and its Gulf Arab allies in the Middle East in order to specifically address these credibility concerns, and to further reassure these partners in the region.

One way the US could quickly respond to such concerns in the face of a newly nuclear-armed Iran is to significantly upgrade the military hardware it supplies to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab allies. Such significant upgrades could involve the direct supply of advanced aircraft and other military hardware to these allies. For example, the new F-35 stealth aircraft is scheduled to be delivered to the Israeli military in 2015. Should Iran get close to testing a nuclear device, the Pentagon could also supply F35s and/or other stealth aircraft to Saudi Arabia and Gulf allies. This would strongly signal to Iran the immediacy and greater scale of the response likely engendered by any significant Iranian aggression.

At the same time, despite the significant cost in treasure to the US government in times of increasingly pressurized defense budgets, the US must maintain the "on hand" nuclear deterrent to Iranian aggression provided by the US Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Arabian Sea. Perhaps a public statement of the extent of US nuclear forces present in the Fifth Fleet in direct response to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would not only deter Iranian aggression but also reassure the kingdom and other Gulf allies.

The trick for the US in pursing such an approach is to manage the nuclear ambitions and fears of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies and prevent further nuclear proliferation in the region, which most commentators see as gravely dangerous:

> The risks of the worst-case Saudi proliferation scenarios are lower than many contend, but they are not zero. Even a small risk of a poly-nuclear Middle East should be avoided. Moreover, the most likely means of preventing a future Saudi bomb involve external nuclear guarantees that are themselves costly and undesirable in many respects.[13]

There is some doubt that the US can balance these goals effectively and prevent further nuclear proliferation in the region following Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. What is without doubt is that the Middle East presents the most challenging extended nuclear deterrence environment in which the US has ever had to operate.

Notes

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Alone at the Top: Bashar al-Assad and the Struggle for Syria

Eyal Zisser

Introduction

On March 18, 2011, the Arab Spring reached Syria. Overnight, the nation was engulfed in flames heralding the outbreak of the Syrian revolution destined – so it seemed at the time – to topple the Syrian regime within the next few days, or at most, weeks. But what seemed to present as a "lightning revolution" soon turned into a prolonged, blood-soaked, and above all inconclusive war. Faced with a challenge to its stability and very existence, the Baathist regime headed by Bashar al-Assad has demonstrated unity and strength that have surprised the many who thought it was in its final throes. This unity and strength are evidence of the robust nature of the regime and its pillars of support, namely, the party and the army, as well as the regime's base of support among different segments of Syrian society, especially its minorities – Alawites, Druze, and Christians – and the Sunni middle class in the large cities.[1]

But above and beyond this, the fact that the Syrian regime has managed to stay on its feet for the last two and a half years testifies to the personal strength of Bashar al-Assad, who stands alone at the apex of the regime. Bashar's conduct in August 2013 vis-à-vis the United States in the crisis resulting from the regime's use of chemical weapons against the rebels is a fine example of the regime's art of survival: using an iron fist domestically while showing restraint to the world – even a certain acknowledgement of guilt – as long as this serves the viability of the regime in Damascus. Bashar has managed to survive despite the many premature eulogies for him, to the point where many are now starting

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to wonder if he will not emerge victorious from this fight to the death after all.

Over the war's many long months, Bashar proved fairly surprising, not only among those who followed him and his regime blindly and chose to see him as a Westerner, or at most, an enlightened despot determined to bring progress and prosperity to his backward nation. Before their eyes, an ostensibly refined man of the West turned into a mass murderer, turning his military, armed with chemical weapons and surface-to-surface missiles, on his own people. Rather, the real surprise was Bashar's personal show of determination and strength when challenged, and above all, his decision to fight for his life and the life of his regime.

Thus Bashar emerges from the quagmire of Syria's civil war as the man who carries the entire weight of the Syrian regime on his back, who stands starkly alone at the top, and who makes fateful decisions affecting him and Syria by himself. Bashar is surrounded mostly by army and security personnel whom he promoted to their current positions against the backdrop of the upheaval; they consequently depend on him and derive their power and status from him alone. It seems that never before has the identification of the Syrian regime with its leader been as pronounced as it is today. Bashar is responsible for dragging Syria into this devastating civil war, but he may well be the one who will also drag it out – or as much of it as possible – if he manages to defeat his opponents.

Bashar's Rise to Power

There was nothing in Bashar al-Assad's training as a political leader that could have prepared him for the challenge he would face when the Syrian riots broke out in March 2011. In fact, there was nothing in Bashar's upbringing and education that prepared him for the job of president he assumed upon his father's death in June 2000. Until then he had dedicated the better part of his life to ophthalmology, the profession of his dreams. He attended medical school at Damascus University for four years, followed by a year-long ophthalmology internship at the Western Eye Hospital in London.[2]

It seems that in thinking about the battlefield against the rebels, Bashar brought something of his medical studies, though not necessarily from ophthalmology, rather from the field of surgery. In his speech to the Syrian parliament on June 4, 2012, he justified his use of force against the rebels by saying, "What sane person likes bloodshed? No one, obviously.

But when a surgeon goes into the operating room, he is often forced to open a bleeding wound, even amputate, cut, or extract an organ from the body. In those cases, do we claim the surgeon's hands are stained with blood? Or do we congratulate him on having saved the patient's life?"[3]

In his first years as president, Bashar was seen as an amorphous leader, almost a puppet: a wan, spineless figure lacking a powerbase and support, totally at the mercy of the regime's strongmen – the old guard left over from the regime of his father, Hafez al-Assad. Furthermore, Bashar found himself in a frontal confrontation with the American administration and isolated regionally and internationally because of his country's alliances with Iran and Hizbollah. Over the years, however, he managed to consolidate his standing, both domestically and internationally. In the summer of 2010, before the outbreak of the revolt, it seemed that Bashar had matured and amassed not only knowledge and experience but also political clout. His position and the status of his regime seemed to be at their peak.[4]

A look at the people at the top before the unrest started and a review of Bashar's conduct in the first decade of his tenure show that the upper Syrian echelon was composed of people reflecting the nature and essence of the Syrian regime, i.e., the personal, family, tribal, and communal-based regime that relied on the support of the Baath Party and especially on the army and security forces. Over the course of Bashar's first decade as president, however, the old guard that controlled Syria when he first assumed the position completely vanished, including Vice President Abed al-Halim Haddam and perpetual Defense Minister Mustafa Tallas. Replacing the old guard were power groups and people promoted or appointed by Bashar out of the blue and therefore perforce deriving their power and authority solely from him, among them: Abdullah al-Dardari, deputy prime minister for economic matters, who has dominated the management of the country's social and economic issues; Vice President Farouq al-Shara and Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem who have squabbled over the management of Syria's foreign affairs; and a long line of military personnel holding key positions in the army and security establishment.[5]

Also noteworthy is the restraint Bashar exhibited vis-à-vis Israel, for example after the bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007. His conduct earned him much credit in Israel and the West, and many analysts hurried to laud him as a mature, responsible leader, possessing

self-control and judiciousness not shared by many of the region's other leaders. This represented an about-face in the attitude of regional leaders toward Bashar, whom they had viewed as a young, inexperienced, often impulsive leader who acted without due calculation or judgment when he assumed the presidency.[6]

All this changed when the war broke out, which came as a surprise to Bashar, mostly because he was not aware of the vast gap between the regime and its former supportive masses based chiefly in the rural periphery. But despite the surprise at the riots, Bashar displayed steely resolve and embarked on an all-out war against his opponents, refusing to consider any compromise or concession liable to send him down the slippery slope to his regime's collapse. His determination has been distinguished by several features.

First, Bashar has repeatedly insisted that the majority of the Syrian people are squarely behind him and that his opponents are an insignificant minority without any real presence in the population at large. He has chosen to see the revolution as a conspiracy hatched by foreign interests, the result of a desire of America, Israel's lackey, to splinter the unity of the Arab world. This conspiracy has been helped by radical Islam in Syria and elsewhere – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – which has always viewed the secularism represented by the Baath Party as an abomination.[7]

Second, Bashar has viewed force as the only way to overcome the crisis and calm the nation. This outlook is presumably part of his father's heritage, seeing the conflict as a new version of the 1976-82 war against the regime, then launched as an Islamic rebellion. But the use of force has only escalated the crisis and caused ever-worsening brutality among the opposition and among the regime, which has in practice embarked on a war of eradication of the rebels.

Third, Bashar has tried to evade personal responsibility for events in Syria. At least at the start of the unrest, he frequently denied the claim that the repression and killing of demonstrators were the result of a decision of the upper political echelon, and he insisted that they were certainly not his own orders, rather a function of the inexperience and incompetence of the security forces and the police. He subsequently denied the massacres and the regime's use of chemical weapons.

An excellent example was the December 7, 2011 interview with Barbara Walters of ABC. Walters tried to corner Bashar with difficult detailed

questions about acts of repression and killings reported by Western media, but the President was steadfast in his answers. In response to Walters' question, "Do you think that your forces cracked down too hard?" Bashar answered: "They are not my forces, they are military forces [that] belong to the government…there is a difference between having [a] policy to crack down and between having some mistakes committed by some officials, there is a big difference." Walters' rejoinder "OK, but you are the government" was rebuffed with: "I don't own them. I am [the] president. I don't own the country, so they are not my forces." Walters persisted: "No, but you have to give the order." Bashar responded: "We don't kill our people, nobody kill[s]. No government in the world kill[s] its people, unless it's led by [a] crazy person."[8]

Initially Bashar's claims of innocence were accepted. When the riots broke out, a common assumption was that Bashar was different from the other Arab leaders because his goal was to introduce reforms and change a complex, sensitive reality, and that furthermore Bashar was not personally responsible for the repression because he wasn't a detail-oriented person and/or was unable to control his family members and close allies. Consider, for example, then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's statement that senators returning from a visit to Syria believed Bashar was a reformer.[9] In June 2011, before the volte-face in his policy, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed that the root of evil in Syria was Bashar's brother Maher rather than the Syrian President himself.[10] Yet as the crisis deepened, it became increasingly impossible to separate Bashar from his allies and subordinates and, as was the case in similar situations in the first decade of his presidency in a variety of areas, it became progressively clearer that the Syrian President was directly responsible for the use of brutal force against his opponents. He was nothing like the detached spectator he purported to be or a reformer hijacked by his closest associates. In this sense, the Syrian Spring has removed the mask from Bashar's face and revealed his true nature – a fitting son following in the footsteps of his father.

Bashar's Fight for Survival

From the moment the revolution began, Bashar became the cement holding the Syrian regime together and the symbol of his regime's fight to survive. The blows inflicted on the regime, such as the elimination of the top army brass in a terrorist attack in Damascus on July 18, 2011,

removed the protective layers enveloping him, and hence the reason for attributing such great importance to Bashar personally. All at once, he became the keystone supporting the entire structure of the regime and linking together the heads of the regime's institutions: the army, the security services, and the senior members of the party.

The changes in the composition and conduct of the Syrian leadership under Assad since the start of the unrest are significant. First of all, the top civilian leadership that rose to prominence during Bashar's first decade as president lost its stature. It remains in the regime's official showcase and no one questions its importance in terms of managing the socioeconomic affairs still functioning in those parts of Syria that are under the regime's control. But its importance to the survival of the regime at a time of a life-or-death fight is minimal. This leadership came from the rural Sunni population, a sector that in the past was one of the regime's fundamental sources of support but ultimately was responsible for taking up the rebel flag. This was true of Adel Safar, prime minister from April 2011 until June 2012, a native of the rural area on the outskirts of Damascus; Riad Hijab, a native of Dir al-Zor, who became the next prime minister and defected in 2012; and Wa'eel Halaki, the prime minister since September 2012, a native of the town Jassam in the Daraa province. They have mostly remained loyal to the Syrian regime. This is also true of Hilal Hilal from Aleppo, who was appointed as deputy secretary general of the Baath Party in June 2013, and Information Minister Omran al-Zouabi, likewise a native of the Daraa province.[11]

Second, members of the military and security establishment rose to prominence again, starting with Assef Shawkat, Bashar's brother-in-law, who served as deputy defense minister and was responsible for security in the regime, and after the July 18, 2012 attack, a new top tier emerged, headed by Ali Mamlouk, an Alawite, who heads the National Security Bureau and is in charge of Syria's security services. In the past, the heads of the different security services competed fiercely for prestige and proximity to the President, but they are now firmly under Mamlouk's control. They include Abdel Fattah Qudsieh, Mamlouk's deputy; Rastom Ghazaleh, a Sunni from the Daraa province, head of the political security administration; Mohammad Dib Zeytoun, the head of the general security administration; Rafik Shahada, the head of the army security department; and Jamil Hassan, the head of the air force security administration.[12]

When the riots broke out, the military establishment was headed by Defense Minister Ali Habib, an Alawite born in 1939 in Safita, in the Tartus province. For reasons of health and age, he was replaced in August 2011 by Daoud Rajha, a member of the Greek Orthodox community, born in Damascus in 1947. Rajha was one of the victims of the July 18, 2012 attack, along with fellow members of the crisis management team meeting at the National Security Center. Among the dead, along with Assef Shawkat, were the head of the crisis management team, Hassan Turkmani; and the head of the national security bureau, Hisham Ahtiyar. Interior Minister Muhammad Sha'ar was the only one to survive the blast. After the attack, Chief of Staff Imad Fahd Ghassam Farij, a Sunni born in 1950 in the village of Rahjan in Hama, was promoted to defense minister. His job as chief of staff was assumed by Ali Ayoub, an Alawite from the Latakia province, born in 1952.[13]

Thus, it is this group of generals, headed by Ali Mamlouk, and Defense Minister Fahd Farij, in charge of the army, that is leading the fight over Syria for Bashar. But it is equally clear that this group was appointed by, and therefore draws its power from, Bashar al-Assad himself. In addition, as a complement to the regular army and its elite spearheading forces (such as the Republican Guard division, where Bashar's brother Maher commands one of the brigades, or the Commando Units), the regime has also formed militias, some of which consist entirely of Alawites. The militias, officially known as the Popular Committees or National Defense Forces but also called *shabiha*, are supposed to bolster the military units alongside the combatants sent by Hizbollah and Iraqi volunteers coming at Iran's urging to help Bashar.[14]

Third, while Assad family members are not absent from the Bashar's close circle, they do not − just as was the case with Hafez − stand out. Notable exceptions are Maher al-Assad; Rami Makhlouf, a cousin and wealthy businessman who helps the regime in the economic sector; and Rami's brother Hafez, an officer in one of the security services.[15]

Internal Resolve, External Restraint

Throughout the long crisis, Bashar has demonstrated restraint with regard to his neighbors − Turkey, Jordan, and Israel, which is credited with a host of attacks in Syria. But domestically Bashar has shown forceful resolve. Perhaps unconsciously or unintentionally, and rather the result of the brutalization of the battles, he has turned the war he is waging on

his enemies into a war of extermination, designed to annihilate or exile the rebels and their supporters. It is otherwise impossible to explain the massive use of deadly force – concentrated aerial bombings, concentrated artillery fire, surface-to-surface missile barrages, and use of chemical weapons – against regions populated by rebel supporters or under rebel control. The result of Bashar's campaign is that four to six million Syrians have become refugees, some of them beyond Syria's borders. This represents 20-30 percent of the population, comprising Sunnis from the periphery which was the home of the rebels and their primary support base. Bashar might thus win the war over Syria by simply eliminating all the rebels and their supporters.

The crisis that erupted in the summer of 2013 over the use of chemical weapons against regime opponents on August 21 is a good illustration of this dynamic. For a brief moment it seemed that Bashar's fate was sealed and Washington was determined to act, perhaps even to topple him. But a compromise proposed by Russia and accepted by Bashar rescued him, albeit at the loss of some prestige and worse, the loss of his strategic assets, i.e., the chemical weapons caches. But Bashar, like his father before him, differs from Saddam Hussein who placed an all-or-nothing bet in order to avoid losing face. Thus, Bashar has, at least for now, saved his skin and bought valuable time for his real fight: not against the United States or Israel but against his enemies at home.

Conclusion

The Syrian regime's success in surviving the revolution is also – and especially – the personal success of Bashar al-Assad. The man is alone at the top of the Syrian regime, with underlings subordinate to him alone. They are not friends or ideological partners of the kind enjoyed by his father; they are simply military functionaries promoted not necessarily by virtue of personal connection or friendship but thanks to having risen through the ranks. Most have no independent source of power, and certainly do not represent a cohesive group. Bashar has shown resilience and personal fortitude as well as lasting power not many believed he possessed. After all, when he assumed the presidency the assertion often made was that he lacked the killer instinct, a necessity for anyone trying to rule Syria. But Bashar has emerged as an icy dictator willing to sacrifice an entire nation for the sake of his own survival.

Notes

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8 See interview with Barbara Walters for ABC television, December 7, 2011, http://abcnews.go.com/International/transcript-abcs-barbara-walters-interview-syrian-president-bashar/story?id=15099152&singlePage=true.

9 For more on Clinton's statements, see "Interview with Bob Schieffer" on CBS's *Face the Nation*, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/03/159210.htm, March 27, 2011.

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13 See SANA website, August 5, 2011, and July 19, 2012. See also *al-Jazeera*, July 18 and 19, 2012.

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The Hamas Predicament: Organizational Challenges in a Volatile Environment

Benedetta Berti and Anat Kurz

The (Brief) Hamas Ascent in Late 2012

Hamas emerged from the November 2012 confrontation with Israel in a position of relative political strength. The international and regional reactions to the armed clashes between Israel and Hamas following a period of escalation in rocket attacks originating from the Gaza Strip revealed that Hamas could count on new allies and boast an additional layer of regional legitimacy. In particular, the confrontation highlighted the importance of Hamas's new relationship with Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, President Morsi's response to the clashes involved recalling the Egyptian ambassador to Israel, labeling Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense "unacceptable aggression," and dispatching Prime Minister Hesham Kandil to Gaza,[1] marking a clear change from the far more "accommodating" attitude toward Israel displayed by President Mubarak during Operation Cast Lead four years earlier. Even though on the ground the new Egyptian administration did not substantially ease restrictions on Gaza, the Morsi government improved Hamas's standing by lending important political backing.[2] Egypt also played a key role in defusing the hostilities and brokering a ceasefire.

The substantive role Egypt played in the course of the November 2012 operation, together with the widespread perception that the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood was now a given in the Middle East as a whole, contributed to a firm perception that Hamas had emerged on the winning side of the Arab Awakening. To be sure, over the previous year

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the movement had substantially downgraded its relations with one of its historical allies, the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Moving the headquarters of Hamas's Political Bureau away from Damascus and refusing to support Assad's brutal repression of the internal opposition led Hamas to drift away from Syria and its main backer, Iran, and invest in creating a partnership with Egypt and Qatar. As such, the November 2012 confrontation between Hamas and Israel actually served as a test case to evaluate whether the strategic realignment constituted a sound choice. The answer was overwhelmingly positive.

While the Israeli operation significantly hurt Hamas's military apparatus and capabilities, weakening its ability to conduct armed operations against Israel, let alone risk an all-out confrontation, the movement's de facto control of the Gaza Strip was not challenged. On the contrary, the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, brokered by Egypt, confirmed the "open secret" that Israel in essence recognizes Hamas as the ruling power in Gaza and considers it the main address when it comes to the Strip. Indeed, the same terms set forth in the ceasefire confirmed this notion by setting the stage for indirect talks between the parties with the objective of gradually revoking the restrictions on the movement of goods and people in and out of Gaza.[3] In the weeks following the December 2012 ceasefire agreement, Israel took some concrete steps to relax its policy on Gaza, for example by extending Gaza's fishing zone from three to six nautical miles and by allowing civilians to resume agricultural activities in areas up to 100 meters from the fence separating Gaza and Israel. In addition, imports in the period immediately following the ceasefire grew: compared to the monthly average for 2012, January 2013 registered a 28 percent increase in total gravel imports (both for the private sector and for international organizations). Similarly, utility vehicles and construction material intended for the private sector were allowed into Gaza for the first time since the Hamas takeover in June 2007.[4] These steps were also complemented by Egyptian measures, with an overall − albeit modest − relaxation of the policy on Gaza.

In the regional arena, Hamas now finds itself increasingly isolated, both politically and financially, as its new alliances have proved either feeble or fickle. Moreover, the regional isolation has hindered its capacity to rule Gaza effectively.

Hamas was therefore able to harness its regional support and the steps undertaken by Israel relaxing some of the economic restrictions on Gaza to maintain its position in the Strip. The organization was also able to save face in the November 2012 round of military hostilities by avoiding an Israeli ground operation in the Strip. Hamas leveraged the relatively quick nature of the war, which reflected Israel's reluctance to risk a prolonged confrontation, bound to result in many casualties, and Jerusalem's readiness to agree to a mediated ceasefire, to brand the three-week war as a victory. In turn, this led to a temporary rise in popularity of the Hamas government – and conversely, a dwindling of the already frail support for the PA, hurt by its spotty governance record as well as by the political stagnation on the Israeli-Palestinian front and the loss of momentum in its campaign in the international arena to garner support for Palestinian statehood. A December 2012 poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that "if new presidential elections are held today, and only two were nominated, [PA President] Abbas would receive the vote of 45% and [Hamas Prime Minister Ismail] Haniyeh 48% of the vote of those participating. The rate of participation in such elections would reach 69%. Three months ago, Abbas received the support of 51% and Haniyeh 40%."[5]

The post-ceasefire period, therefore, placed Hamas in an especially strong position, enabling it to benefit from regional backing, an easing of restrictions on Gaza, and an increase in the level of public support for the organization.

From Boom to Bust?

Hamas's ascent, however, was relatively short lived, and the initial improvements in the group's regional and domestic position dissipated quickly, leading Hamas from a position of strength to one of fragility. In the regional arena, the movement now finds itself increasingly isolated, both politically and financially, as its new alliances have proved either feeble or fickle. Moreover, Hamas's regional isolation has hindered its capacity to rule Gaza effectively.

First and foremost, the rocky political transition in Egypt spells significant trouble for Hamas. The Morsi government represented a welcome change for Hamas from the attitude displayed by Egypt during the Mubarak years, characterized by suspicion if not outright hostility toward the movement. Hamas greeted Morsi's presidential victory with

enthusiasm, with the group's spokesman, Sami Abu Zuhri, declaring: "Hamas and the Palestinian people express their utmost happiness over the results."[6] In the months following his victory, President Morsi and his government took steps to show political support for Hamas, including meeting with Hamas leaders Khaled Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh and discussing measures to "normalize" the border between Egypt and Gaza.[7] In April 2013, Hamas held its Shura council elections in Egypt, where then-Deputy Chairman of the Political Bureau Mousa Abu Marzouk relocated after vacating Syria.

With the ousting of the Morsi government in early July 2013 and the subsequent rise of the Egyptian military-backed new political authority, the relationship between Hamas and Egypt went from "excellent" to "disastrous" in a matter of weeks. Hamas has actually been punished for its close ties with the now disgraced Muslim Brotherhood, with a rampant anti-Hamas media campaign questioning the group's role and presence in Egypt. Even though such antagonistic reports are not new – Hamas was a prior target of criticism and anger due to alleged links with jihadist elements operating in Sinai – the tones and prominence of condemnation of Hamas have spiraled dramatically in the post-Morsi period.

The new political authority in Egypt has cracked down on the flows of goods and people, with the Rafah crossing operating under severely restricted conditions.[8] More important, the border restrictions imposed on Gaza by Egypt – even more severe than those in place during the Mubarak era – have been accompanied by an ongoing military campaign to disrupt the flow of goods through tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. Designed with the stated objective of securing the Sinai area, these measures have resulted in economic hardship for the Gaza population, while also putting significant pressure on Hamas.

A probable course for Hamas, under the present circumstances and particularly given its military and relative political weakness, is pursuit of a crisis management option.

The transfer of goods into the Gaza Strip has been coordinated and calibrated by Israel and Egypt, and while there has been no humanitarian emergency since Morsi's ouster, the restrictions have clearly been felt on the ground. Similarly, both the campaign against tunnels and the restrictions on the flow of goods and people have resulted in a loss of revenues for the organization and for its armed wing, the Qassam Brigades, which had directly benefited from the underground

tunnel economy over the previous years. The Hamas government thus finds it increasingly difficult to meet its budget and provide the badly-needed goods and services to the Gaza population. Whereas the average number of truckloads entering the Gaza Strip through Rafah in the first trimester of 2013 was 1,514, the number dropped to an average of 467 truckloads in the second trimester, with 283 and 252 truckloads entering Gaza in June and July 2013, respectively.[9] In the same period the average number of truckloads going into Gaza from the Israel-controlled Kerem Shalom crossing did not increase substantially, going from an average of 4,481 in the first trimester to 5,112 in the second trimester.[10] Moreover, the regular transfer of civilian goods from Israel into the Strip will not be enough to compensate for the cumulative loss of the tunnel revenues and the economic potential embedded in direct passage to and from Egypt.

Related economic difficulties have affected Hamas's support among the Palestinian public. Already by March 2013, the temporary boost in popularity was reversed. The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that if elections were held in December 2012 PA President Abbas would have been defeated by Hamas PM Haniyeh, yet four months later Abbas earned 52 percent against 41 percent of the electoral preferences, with Fatah gathering 41 percent (against Hamas's 29 percent) in hypothetical parliamentary elections.[11] This trend will likely only increase with the resumption of the political process between the Israeli government and the PA under American auspices. If – and if is of course the operative word – there were to be any significant advance on the political front, Hamas's position would be weakened further and its status would become more marginal.

> Internal conflict is not new to Hamas, which over the past two decades has repeatedly been characterized by intra-group tensions along political and military lines.

In addition, Qatar's role in supporting Hamas and Gaza politically and economically has been negatively affected by the political changes underway in the tiny emirate. Following the June 2012 transition in internal leadership, with Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani abdicating in favor of his son Tamim, the country's foreign policy adopted a far less involved and activist tone in general, and especially when it comes to support for the Muslim Brotherhood, including Hamas.[12] In this sense, it is highly telling that the new ruler did not mention Hamas in his inaugural speech and that his country did not

speak up against the early July 2013 ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood-led Morsi government by Egypt's military.[13] Turkey, another ally of the Palestinian organization in Gaza, seems preoccupied with its own internal problems and with the protracted, bloody civil war in Syria, and while Turkey likely intends to continue to support Hamas, such backing does not stand to be strategically significant. It is noteworthy that in August 2013 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the postponement of his much anticipated trip to Gaza, due to problems on coordinating the trip with the interim Egyptian authority that replaced the Morsi government.[14]

Looking Ahead: Choices for Hamas

Not surprisingly, the recent dramatic changes in Hamas's domestic and regional political and security environment have led the group to question its strategy, in turn heightening existing internal divisions. Indeed, internal conflict is not a new phenomenon within Hamas, which over the past two decades has repeatedly been characterized by intra-group tensions along both political and military lines as well as the internal and external leadership line.

In the aftermath of the November 2012 military confrontation between Israel and Hamas, the organization saw the emergence of two trends, first, the rise of the foreign policy and organizational strategy identified with Khaled Mashal. Mashal was instrumental in devising and implementing Hamas's realignment both toward Egypt during Morsi's government and Qatar. His role in forging these links contributed to his reelection in April 2013 as head of the political bureau.[15] The reelection was also seen as a sign that Hamas planned to channel renewed efforts toward reconciliation with Fatah, a policy pushed chiefly by Mashal. This perception was further strengthened by the fact that Mahmoud al-Zahar, the historic Gaza-based Hamas leader closely affiliated with Tehran and strongly opposed to Mashal's attempts at Hamas-Fatah reconciliation, was not reelected in the Shura council.[16] At the same time, the Gaza-based leadership, led by Prime Minister Haniyeh, maintained its position as the new strong center of the group's organizational power. The April 2013 elections confirmed this reality, with Haniyeh replacing diaspora-based Marzouk as Mashal's deputy.[17]

Yet with the subsequent difficulties engulfing the organization, both Mashal and the Gaza-based leadership have been challenged, leading

to an intensive internal dialogue on how to face the looming crisis. The organization seems to face two principal choices: pursue either a hawkish course or invest in crisis management.

With declining regional support and growing threats stemming from the official resumption of dialogue between Israel and the PA, Hamas could choose to harden its position. Internationally, it could try to revamp its strategic partnership with Iran. Some voices within the organization, such as al-Zahar, who has been in contact with Tehran even after Hamas and Iran drifted apart, were pushing precisely in that direction.[18] For al-Zahar, this would also be a way to reclaim internal status within Hamas, after his hardliner policies cost him his reelection in April 2013. In October 2013, Hamas announced that Khaled Mashal would be visiting both Turkey and Iran, in what seems an indication of the group's attempt to mend ties with the Islamic Republic. This gesture is especially important as it comes at a time when the Political Bureau's presence in Qatar is increasingly precarious.

To be sure, the rapprochement with Iran may not be so simple to achieve. Given Iran's current leadership change, its direct involvement in the Syrian civil war, and the serious impact of ongoing international sanctions on the Iranian economy, Tehran may not be able to fill the gap left by Egypt and Qatar, neither politically nor financially. In addition, given the relatively recent tensions between the Islamic Republic and Hamas, Iran may play hard-to-get, especially now that Tehran has decided to boost its relations with Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and enhance its assistance toward that faction.[19]

At the same time, if Hamas feels more isolated and marginalized, and if it perceives that there is no improvement in the current crippling restrictions on Gaza, Hamas could be tempted to act as a "spoiler" in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. It could do so simply by allowing other groups to resume attacks on Israel, or even by becoming directly involved as a strategy to preserve its position at the forefront of the struggle against Israel. This course of action, however, might well lead Hamas into a confrontation with Israel, which will inevitably cost the group in terms of its popular backing and economic as well as military infrastructure. Moreover, this option would presumably not help much in reinforcing Hamas's regional standing, and this could be the case even if such a confrontation would bring the talks between Israel and the PA to a halt.

A more probable course for Hamas, under the present circumstances and particularly given its military and relative political weakness, would be to pursue a crisis management option. Aware that the internal arena is fluid and keeping in mind that its main interest rests in preserving its control and power in Gaza, Hamas − following the line put forth by Haniyeh and the Hamas-led government in Gaza − could choose to wait and pursue stability and control of Gaza as its outmost priority. Accordingly, Hamas would not rock the boat: internationally, the group could work to preserve its relations with both Turkey and Qatar, while investing in forging better relations with Egypt. This seems unlikely to occur in the short term, but in subsequent months Hamas could try to create a working relationship with the new political authorities in Egypt aimed at lessening some of the restrictions on the border crossings. Certainly this would require some bargaining, with Hamas needing to agree to regulate the tunnels in exchange for the lifting of the restrictions in place at the border.

Managing the crisis would also require that Hamas continue to observe the ceasefire and, rather than becoming directly involved in efforts to sabotage the peace talks, opt for waiting for the process to implode on its own. At the same time, the group would continue to pay lip service to intra-Palestinian reconciliation, without, however, taking any substantive steps in this direction.

The more that domestic, Israeli, and international policies attempt to isolate Hamas, and the more it feels it is losing its grip on Gaza and on Palestinian politics, the more Hamas will have serious incentives to act in an unrestrained fashion.

It is also not completely unrealistic to assume that the group could consider moving from damage control to active involvement if it felt this could be to its political benefit. Thus, advancements in the peace process between Israel and the PA combined with economic incentives could push Hamas to invest more significantly in a political integration option, with the aim of establishing institutional coordination with the PA so as not to lose what remains of its political relevance.

In light of Hamas's regional and domestic weakness, the PA itself may remain reluctant regarding power sharing with Hamas. Particularly as long as no agreement with Israel is achieved, Fatah could have an incentive to delay the reconciliation process to make sure that any future concession obtained from Israel can be claimed as its own political

accomplishment. At the same time, a significant advancement in the peace process may empower Fatah, allowing the party to pursue Palestinian reconciliation from a position of strength. Under these circumstances, Fatah might be able to better dictate the terms of the reconciliation, while Hamas might be pushed into accepting them, for fear being marginalized and excluded from the political system.

Implications for Israel

Assuming that preventing Hamas from drifting back toward Iran or resuming violent attacks is unquestionably in Israel's interest, it is important to note that Israel can play a role in influencing Hamas's strategic decision.

The bottom line is that the more that domestic, Israeli, and international policies attempt to isolate Hamas, and the more the group feels it is losing its grip on Gaza and on Palestinian politics, the more Hamas will have serious incentives to act in an unrestrained fashion. Thus even though it is important for Israel to continue to reinforce its deterrence with respect to Hamas, it will be equally important to do so while making calculated efforts to avoid sliding toward an all-out confrontation. This is especially true since with Hamas facing this difficult predicament there is also an added risk that anti-Hamas Salafist factions will try to resume the violence against Israel and challenge Hamas while trying to drag it into yet another cycle of violence.

More fundamentally, insofar as cornering Hamas risks pushing it toward a resumption of violence, Israel could also follow up on the post-ceasefire terms and move to ease restrictions on Gaza further, while taking steps toward economically reintegrating Gaza with the West Bank.[20] In turn, this would provide incentives for Hamas to continue to observe the ceasefire. In this context, an arrangement between Hamas and Egypt to normalize the border in exchange for closure of the underground tunnels would also be a positive development from Israel's point of view. Furthermore, firm and serious advancement on the peace process front may well be the best way to weaken Hamas's position and popularity among both the West Bank and Gaza Strip populations, while providing the leadership of Hamas with a reason to pay more than lip service to inter-group reconciliation and institutional integration in the PA.

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Chinese Involvement in the Middle East: The Libyan and Syrian Crises

Yoram Evron

China's involvement in the Middle East has increased in recent years. Regardless of Beijing's assertions that it does not want to take active part in the region's political developments and it intends to focus solely on economic matters, a gradual shift on its part toward involvement in political and military processes is evident.[1] This shift in China's Middle East policy is not necessarily the result of any official decision, nor does it bespeak a formal strategic change. In fact, China's sincerity about its wish to distance itself from the complexities of the Middle East should not be doubted. The Chinese leadership customarily regards the Middle East as "a graveyard for great powers"; for China, the region is unfamiliar and incomprehensible. It finds it difficult to understand the key role of religion in Middle East politics. Aware of the strong interests of the other global powers, it fears becoming entrapped in the quagmire of internal conflicts in the Muslim world.[2] At the same time, given the growing Chinese involvement in global politics as well as its ambition to lead the developing nations, its increasing dependence on oil imports, and its growing need for foreign markets and raw materials, China cannot refrain from involvement in the region, and regional dynamics and internal forces operating in China will likely reinforce this trend. Furthermore, given China's rise in status to that of a global power, expectations are developing in the region and among other global powers that China will become more involved with the Middle East. When US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Beijing in April 2013, his talks with

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the Chinese President were not confined to East Asia-related questions or matters pertaining to Chinese-American relations; their discussions also extended to global issues, including "the challenge of Iran and nuclear weapons, Syria, and the Middle East."[3]

This situation raises significant questions about how China will deepen its involvement in the region. For example, in contrast to Africa, where China has been involved intensively over the past decade, the Middle East since World War II has been a theater of conflict between other large powers that to this day retain essential interests and important allies in the region. The question is what relationship there is between China's growing involvement in the Middle East and its relations with the other global powers.

In addition, growing Chinese involvement in the region at a time of severe conflict within and between the local countries puts two Chinese policy principles to the test: non-intervention in the affairs of other countries and refusal to take a stand on conflicts in the region. These principles are designed to promote China's standing as the leader of the bloc of developing countries, both by highlighting the contrast between it and the US (which is the leader in intrusive action in developing countries), and by maintaining good relations with as many countries as possible. The resistance to international intervention also derives from China's concern that such practices will one day be exercised against it. These principles reflect China's tendency to prefer to keep existing regimes in power, and to retain political unity over the promotion of values such as human rights. The question is, therefore, how China will maneuver between these principles and the constraints arising from its political activity in the region.

One of the main reasons for the uncertainty is not only the disparity between China's rhetoric and its actions in the region, but also the gradual, non-uniform, and at times also camouflaged shifts in its pattern of action. In an article that reviewed the change in China's stance on the imposition of unilateral sanctions, James Reilly asserted that "China rarely openly declares its economic sanctions. Instead, Beijing prefers to use vague threats, variation in leadership visits, selective purchases (or non-purchase), and other informal measures."[4] An assessment of China's approach to the region, therefore, requires looking at both small and large changes in its activity in the region, focusing not necessarily on the extent of any one measure or its results, rather the degree to which it deviates

from the standard pattern of behavior. To this end the article analyzes China's behavior in the crises in Libya and Syria – two countries included in the Chinese diplomatic region of Western Asia and North Africa.

China and the Libyan Crisis

China's relations with Libya were problematic even before the crisis of the Arab Spring. In 2009, Libyan Foreign Minister Moussa Koussa accused China of exploiting Africa's resources and people, and condemned its behavior on the African continent as neo-colonialism. China, whose opposition to imperialism and colonialism constitutes one of the fundamentals of its foreign policy, took this allegation very seriously, but its economic interests overcame other considerations and tensions were relaxed.[5]

Nevertheless, China's economic involvement in Libya was apparently not a single decisive factor, and when on February 25, 2011 President Obama announced the imposition of sanctions against the Qaddafı regime in response to the violence in the country, China expressed no opposition or protest. The following day, it joined the other UN Security Council members in passing Resolution 1970 banning the supply of weapons to the Qaddafı forces, and one month later abstained (as did Russia) on Security Council Resolution 1973, thereby enabling passage of the resolution. This resolution declared Libyan air space a no-fly zone, and announced that the necessary measures would be taken to protect Libyan citizens from attacks by Qaddafı. The resolution won the support of the Arab League, and while it did not provide a clear mandate for supplying military aid to the rebels, since Russia and China were expected to veto such wording, it was indeed possible under this resolution to conduct an air attack on Qaddafı's aircraft and against ground targets. This Security Council resolution conflicted with China's official policy, which opposed intervention by force in the internal affairs of other countries, but China did not block the resolution. The Arab world's opposition to Qaddafı was likely one of the reasons for this, and as China subsequently stated, Beijing did not expect NATO to use such heavy firepower.

Indeed, the implementation of the resolution deviated from China's policy. On March 19, 2011, a coalition of foreign forces led by NATO carried out an attack in Libya; 120 missiles were launched against Libyan air defense targets. French aircraft attacked forces supporting Qaddafı in Benghazi, and cruise missiles were launched against air defense targets

in the capital of Tripoli and in Misrata. Like Russia, China took a dim view of these attacks, noting on various occasions that it supported a peaceful resolution of the crisis, and expressing concern about the consequences of military intervention. Furthermore, for some time after the rebel forces set up an alternative government, China refused to recognize it. China later asserted that the Western powers had distorted the meaning of the Security Council resolution, and by using such extensive military force against Qaddafi had deceived the other countries involved in passing it.[6]

At the same time, in addition to its passive diplomatic line, China took several more significant actions. When the rioting in the country escalated, China took measures to evacuate its citizens from Libya. Before the uprising, there were 30,000 Chinese citizens in Libya; by February 25, 2011, Beijing announced that military aircraft and ships had evacuated 12,000 Chinese citizens from Libya and transferred them to China or to stable countries in the region. This was the first time that China evacuated such a large number of its citizens from a foreign country. In addition to highlighting China's new logistical and technological capabilities, however, the measure reflected the growing tendency in the ruling Chinese establishment to broaden China's activity around the world.

In effect, the argument on this question developed in the first decade of the 21st century, at a time when China was expanding its economic activity and certain parties in the leadership (including the military establishment) contended that China should develop its military capability beyond its borders in order to protect its interests. In contrast, others asserted that China should continue its foreign policy through economic and diplomatic means only, as it had done since the beginning of the reforms in China in 1978. Evacuating its citizens from Libya, which was one of the most significant steps taken, illustrated the growing acceptance of the former approach.[7]

In another dimension, already in June 2011, in contrast to its traditional policy of non-intervention, China hosted representatives of the Libyan opposition, who met with the Chinese foreign minister. China described the National Transitional Council as "an important partner for dialogue." Presumably the purpose of the meetings was to agree on measures with a possible new regime in order to ensure continuity of China's economic projects in Libya if the regime were to fall, particularly the continuation of oil supplies. Another factor that likely led China to conduct a public

meeting of this kind was the negative attitude of the Arab countries toward Qaddafi, which eased Beijing's concern about criticism of its conduct.[8]

Active Chinese involvement also occurred with aid to the respective warring parties. In September 2011, Beijing confirmed that representatives of NORINCO, one of China's leading arms corporation, had met in July with representatives of the Qaddafi regime to step up arms transactions for his forces totaling $200 million, including air-to-ground missiles. The meeting was conducted at a time when the international sanctions on the supply of arms to Qaddafi's forces, which China had also signed, were already in effect. The reports of the meeting sparked severe criticism of China, both in the international arena and from the new Libyan transitional government. The Beijing administration stressed that it had not known of the meetings, and that no arms were actually sold to the Qaddafi regime.[9]

Libyan rebel forces killed Qaddafi on October 20, 2011, and the head of the rebel forces council announced that Libya was now a "liberated" nation. A fresh situation thus arose in Libya, and China acted quickly to establish relations with the new government. Once the decision was taken to end international action in Libya, China announced that it would return its ambassador to the country. In addition, China declared its willingness to aid Libya in promoting bilateral relations on a basis of mutual respect, equality, and reciprocal benefit in order to advance joint projects between the two countries.[10]

To a large extent, this action was intended to restore economic ties with Libya, which were severely damaged by China's hesitation in transferring its support from Qaddafi's regime to the rebels. About 75 Chinese companies operated in Libya before the uprising, with the volume of their contracts estimated at $20 billion. In addition, more than 30,000 Chinese workers worked in Libya, and 3 percent of the crude oil imported to China came from Libya.[11] The Libyan market was not a significant target for Chinese exports, but it was important for China to protect and promote its investments in the country. In August, the deputy head of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce stated that China hoped that after the end of the upheaval in Libya and the restoration of governmental authority, Libya would continue to protect the interests and rights of the Chinese investors. This was probably a response to the statement by a representative of AGOCO, the Libyan oil company, that future cooperation between the Libyan oil industry and international

powers, such as Russia and China, was liable to be negatively affected by the latter's lack of direct support for the rebels when the conflict began and afterwards.[12]

Chinese Intervention in the Syrian Crisis

Perhaps even more than in Libya, Chinese economic interests in Syria were fairly limited. In 2011 Chinese exports to Syria totaled $4.2 billion, including communications equipment, heavy machinery, and other goods for industry. China was also involved in the Syrian oil industry. In particular, after the European embargo on the purchase of crude oil from Syria was imposed in 2011, China took the European place, thereby obtaining control of this sphere. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is a shareholder in the two largest oil companies in Syria, and signed transactions worth billions of dollars in exchange for research and development assistance in the sector. Another Chinese company, Sincochem, owns rights in one of the two largest oil fields in Syria. Armaments is an additional field in which China has interests in Syria, though the volume of activity there is likewise not large. On the eve of the outbreak of the rebellion in Syria, China, together with North Korea, was responsible for 30 percent of the weapons transactions signed with the Assad regime, while Russia accounted for 50 percent.[13]

Nonetheless, China's moves to uphold the Syrian regime were much more significant than in Libya. The popular uprising against the Assad regime began in March 2011, and the regime's forces quickly began to forcefully suppress the demonstrators – a pattern that spread rapidly around the country. Despite this escalation, Chinese special envoy to the Middle East Wu Sike met in Damascus with Syrian Vice President Farouq al-Shara a few weeks after the uprising broke out. Al-Shara told him that Syria was willing to step up bilateral relations and tighten cooperation in various areas. He added that he hoped that China would play an extensive positive role in the peace process in the Middle East. The Chinese envoy responded by saying that China was closely following the recent developments in the Middle East and their effect on the peace process, and since Syria had widespread influence on the international and regional theaters in general, especially on the peace process in the Middle East, Beijing wished to develop and tighten its ties with Syria in various spheres.[14]

China expressed more explicit support for the Syrian regime in late April 2011, when it joined Russia in vetoing an American and European initiative to condemn Syria in the Security Council. China explained its decision that a solution should be sought through dialogue, not imposed through force.[15] Referring explicitly to the veto, the Chinese foreign minister asserted that China had voted this way out of caution – an unsubtle reference to previous Chinese claims that the Western powers had cynically exploited the Security Council resolution on Libya to use increased force against the Qaddafi regime, and a declaration that China would not lend its hand to such an action again. Shortly afterwards, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mekdad visited China, where he met with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson claimed that they discussed bilateral relations and regional issues. A similar expression of support was reflected in October 2011, when China and Russia again cast vetoes in the Security Council on a condemnation proposed by Western countries. Two years later, when following the use of chemical weapons against civilians there was discussion of international intervention in Syria, China insisted that indications that chemical weapons had been used were not unequivocal.[16]

In contrast to the case of Libya, therefore, China has not conformed to the Western line. Clearly, support for the Assad regime and adoption of a joint position with Russia correspond to China's fundamental interests and principles: preserving stability in the Middle East, adhering to the principle of non-intervention, and providing a counterweight to Western influence. Keeping the Assad regime in power also obstructs a takeover of the country by Islamic forces – forces regarded negatively by Beijing, although this is presumably not the main consideration from its perspective.

Support for Assad, however, has put China in an uncomfortable position. The protection that Beijing has provided to the Assad regime has aroused internal criticism in China, given the existing dissatisfaction with the Communist Party's centralized rule and the complaints against Syria's violation of human rights. This is well reflected in China's lively blogsphere, where there are many condemnations by Chinese citizens of the support for the Assad regime.[17] Chinese support for the ruling regime in Syria has also drawn criticism in developing countries, especially Muslim countries – countries where Beijing aspires for leadership and whose interests it seeks to represent vis-à-vis the developed countries.

Finally, due to China's efforts to expand its global influence, following in Russia's footsteps has aroused concern in China that it will be perceived as a satellite with no independent policy. Based on these considerations, China has taken a number of steps to highlight its reservations about what is going on in Syria, and its willingness to initiate measures to solve the situation.

One example is the condemnation of the massacres by the Assad regime in villages of the Houla district in May 2011 following a bombardment of houses there. The official statement by China expressed appall at the number of civilians killed, and included a severe condemnation of the cruel massacre of innocent civilians. China demanded an investigation of the event and immediate implementation of a ceasefire by the warring parties, acceptance of the relevant Security Council resolutions, and implementation of the roadmap presented by the UN Special Representative for Syria, Kofi Annan, for an end to the conflict.[18] In December of that year, China voiced support for a Russian initiative to solve the crisis, which reflected a relatively tough attitude toward the Syrian regime through explicit mention of "the use of disproportionate force on the part of the Syrian authorities," and stated, "The Syrian government should be urged to end the suppression of those who are exercising their right to free expression, association, and organization."[19]

Characteristically, however, China balanced its criticism with support of the Assad regime. In July 2012, it refrained from taking part in the "Friends of Syria" Summit, attended by about 100 countries, which was designed to stiffen the international sanctions against the Assad regime.[20] The same month, together with Russia, China cast another veto against a new Western initiative in the Security Council, this time for the imposition of sanctions against the Assad regime in response to the prolonged warfare and bloodshed.

Another and far more unusual measure taken by Beijing with respect to the Syrian crisis was the publication of an independent initiative to solve the crisis in Syria. The first step in this direction was the issuing of a six-point statement in March 2012, whereby the Syrian regime would engage without delay in a political dialogue with the rebel forces through an impartial mediator on behalf of the UN or the Arab League.[21] What was new was not the initiative's content, but the fact that it had been

raised at all, since for the first time China deviated from the passivity it had hitherto exhibited and acted without Russia.

Another development occurred in October 2012, when shortly after the US declared that the Syrian opposition needed new leadership, China converted its six-point statement into an official initiative: a four-point plan for solving the crisis. As the first stage, the parties were called upon to halt the violence by themselves. In the next stage, they were to draft a roadmap for the process of political transition in the country, while the Assad regime would remain in place in order to ensure political stability until the talks were completed. In the third stage, the international community was to act in close cooperation with the UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria to implement the international resolutions on the subject that had been taken under UN auspices and by the Security Council. In the fourth stage, the international community was called on to bolster its efforts to solve the humanitarian problems caused by the crisis, in part by increasing its humanitarian aid, but without politicization or militarization – a hint at what China asserts was the West's cynical use of humanitarian aid. According to the plan, the UN-Arab League mediator would play a dominant role at all stages by sitting in on the talks, while receiving support and aid from countries in the region and from the major powers. On the other hand, the plan completely ruled out unilateral international intervention, pressure on the parties, and removal of the Assad regime by force.[22]

Finally, China took an active role in the Syrian crisis to protect its interests in the country. On a narrow and immediate level, it was prepared to take action in Syria in order to evacuate its citizens from the country if their security was threatened. In late April 2011, the Chinese ambassador to Syria stated that the preparations for this evacuation had already been made.[23] On a broader level, China also acted to safeguard its interests in Syria, should the regime fall. While China continued to express opposition to any international intervention in Syrian internal affairs or action against the Assad regime, the Chinese foreign minister met with representatives of the Syrian opposition in Beijing in September 2012. Another meeting of opposition leaders with official Chinese representatives occurred on February 5, 2013, when the Chinese ambassador to Egypt met in Cairo with the leader of the rebel forces. The ambassador emphasized that China supported implementation of a

regime change in Syria as early as possible on a format acceptable to both sides in order to avert continued bloodshed and to stabilize the region.[24]

Conclusion

As illustrated by China's actions in the two crises, the motive for its involvement in the Middle East remains pursuit of its own interests – first of all, the supply of oil, and in recent years, establishing its standing as a global power through offering an alternative to the American agenda. At the same time, it is evident that China is now willing to take an active role that incurs more risks than in the past in order to promote these interests, even if it is unwilling to invest resources for the sake of shaping the region according to its preferences.

China's responses to the crises in Libya and Syria shed new light on several common assumptions about China's motives and behavior in the Middle East. First of all, the accepted assumption about Chinese involvement in the Middle East is that China's interest in the region is basically economic, and that economic considerations dominate the nature of its involvement there. There can be no doubt about the first part of this assumption, but an analysis of China's intervention in the Libyan and Syrian crises does not support the second part. Were economic considerations responsible for steering China's actions in the Middle East, it could have been expected to invest more policy efforts in the Libyan crisis and take stronger action to consolidate its relations with the new regime, while more vigorously opposing the solidification of Western influence in the country. In fact, China is more involved in Syria than in Libya, and is showing its willingness to pay a political price for consolidating its relations with the current Syrian regime and its possible replacements despite its relatively limited economic interest in this country.

Another common assumption is that China is not inclined to intervene in political events in the Middle East, both because of its declared policy and due to concern about becoming entangled in the regional quagmire. This assumption is also not supported by an analysis of the two crises, since in each crisis China took actions for the purpose of shaping the course of events to some extent, mainly through its votes in the Security Council but also by being in touch with the rebel forces in both countries. Significant considerations in this context were the views of the countries in the region and the global powers involved, and

not necessarily diplomatic principles or economic calculations. Finally, due to concern about harm to its citizens, China took unprecedented operational measures in the region, while demonstrating its logistic and operational capability in coordination with other countries for the purpose of protecting its interests and evacuating its citizens.

In addition, these test cases cast doubt on the assumption of China's centralized control of its foreign policy. Assuming that the attempts by representatives of the NORINCO weapons corporation to sell arms to Qaddafi's forces after the crisis began in Libya – an act of enormous significance, given the violation of international norms and rules it involved and its possible effect on the development of the fighting – were carried out without the knowledge or approval of the authorities, an assessment of the government agencies responsible for conducting China's foreign policy is not sufficient for an analysis of China's acts in the Middle East.

With the common assumptions thus not entirely accurate, China's actions in the Libyan and Syrian crises give rise to a number of hypotheses concerning the pattern of its activity in the region. First, analyzing China's behavior requires addressing various non-economic interests, first and foremost its competitive and cooperative relations with the major powers. Second, China's votes in the Security Council conform to the Russian line, but as expressed by the Chinese initiative concerning Syria, Beijing's contacts with the rebel forces in Syria, and its efforts to consolidate its economic interests in Libya, China is gradually developing separate interests and policies in the region that are likely to lead to an independent line. This fits in with a broader trend in Chinese foreign policy – the designing of a leading independent position in the international arena.[25]

Finally, China's support for the Assad regime, despite international and regional criticism, is likely to indicate China's willingness to deviate from a neutral policy and adhere more decisively to positions aimed at promoting its regional and international interests. The Libyan case shows that even if its position arouses anger against it, China's economic power enables it to strike a new path in pursuit of the goals that it has set for itself.

Notes

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