When Neorealism Meets the Middle East:
Iran's Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons in (Regional) Context

Emily B. Landau

More than "another neorealist," Professor Kenneth Waltz is the father of neorealism, or structural realism, which he introduced to the world with the publication of his book *Theory of International Politics* in 1979.[1] Since then, this theory has figured prominently in much international relations research. Some of the tenets of this theory have become so deeply entrenched among researchers and experts in the field that they are often assumed to be universal truths.

But the recent publication of Waltz's article "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb" in *Foreign Affairs*[2] demonstrates that when strict neorealist theoretical prescripts and assumptions are employed in the analysis of the real world scenario of Iran's drive to develop a nuclear weapons capability, they can come up dangerously short. Waltz's concise article provides an opportunity to see how the application of neorealist assumptions can be a problematic guide for sifting through the complex interstate relations and rivalries in the Middle East, which often proceed at cross purposes, and even in direct contradiction to what might be assumed. "Security," "stability," and "balancing" – conceptual building blocks of neorealism – take on meanings in this region that can defy the attempts to apply the neat and parsimonious neorealist theory in a conceptually pure manner.[3]

In one respect at least, Waltz's assessment of the nature of Iran's nuclear program is grounded firmly in reality. He does not pay lip service to those who are banking on Iranian assurances that its nuclear intentions are indeed peaceful. Rather, he relates in a matter of fact manner to Iran's

Dr. Emily B. Landau is a senior research fellow at INSS.

"pursuit of a nuclear weapon." His assessment of Iran's nuclear activity is shared by a growing number of analysts and pundits who over the past year or two have joined those who have embraced this position for years. The unfortunate conclusion of many of the latecomers, however, is that there is no longer anything that can be done about Iran's advances, and the world must instead begin focusing on how it will live with a nuclear Iran.[4] Many of them subscribe to the notion that nuclear states can be successfully contained (through deterrence); they emphasize that it is possible to adjust to the new reality, in the same way that the world grew accustomed to nuclear China, Pakistan, and North Korea.[5]

Waltz agrees, and then takes issues a step further: not only does he view the scenario of a nuclear capable Iran as inevitable and deterrable, but in his view this scenario is actually the best possible outcome of the decade-long crisis with Iran over its nuclear activities, because it will restore balance and stability to the region. Coming from a leading and highly influential international relations scholar who is an authoritative voice in the field, this is not a conclusion to be taken lightly or simply brushed aside.

The following analysis challenges Waltz's thinking on his terms by highlighting the relevant history of nuclear development and interstate relations in the Middle East, which raises questions with regard to many of his assumptions. It dwells on the reasons underlying the attempts by regional states to develop nuclear weapons programs; how these states have related to Israel's nuclear policy over the years, including steps Israel has taken to stop other states from going nuclear; and the overall importance of focusing on the nature of interstate relations in the Middle East in any attempt to explain their strategic calculations, including with regard to nuclear weapons development. Against this backdrop, it will become clear why the particular case of Iran becoming a nuclear state defies simplistic neorealist prescripts, and that the conclusions derived are certainly not the best solution for this ongoing crisis.

Waltz's Argument

The linchpin of Waltz's argument is the imperative of international (and regional) stability, and the supporting notion of balancing. According to this line of thought, once Israel upset the balance in the Middle East – when it presumably became a nuclear state – it was only a matter of time before one of the other states in the region would pursue the same route,

in order to restore the balance. Restoring balance in his mind is essential for restoring regional stability, and stability serves regional security, which is the driving force of international politics. Indeed for Waltz, the true puzzle is why Israel's monopoly – viewed by him as a clear source of regional instability – lasted so long. In his words, "It is Israel's nuclear arsenal, not Iran's desire for one, that has contributed most to the current crisis. Power, after all, begs to be balanced."[6]

In supporting the central importance of balancing, Waltz predicts not only that a nuclear Iran will redress the instability caused by Israel, but that the stabilizing effect of the new deterrence will then prevail and no other state in the region will have an incentive to acquire a nuclear capability. This assumption implies that for Waltz, politics in the Middle East pits Israel against all the other states, that these states are unified in a common strategic interest that focuses on a sole enemy, Israel, and that to restore the balance with Israel only one of these states need acquire nuclear weapons.

A closer examination of some salient facts and developments in the history of Middle Eastern politics reveals the tenuousness of these assumptions.

Nuclear Weapons Pursuit in the Middle East

The reality of Middle Eastern politics is that states in this region do not sport identical, interchangeable strategic priorities, nor is the overriding regional dynamic a story of "Israel vs. all the others." Each state in the region has its own set of interests and threat perceptions; moreover, interstate understandings and alliances that have emerged over the years are not static, rather shift in line with regional political developments. A recent illustration of this well established regional pattern is Turkey and Iran. Two years ago it might have seemed that these states were embarking on a closer relationship – perhaps a new alliance – that would pose a new threat to Israel. But the two states are also strategic rivals, vying for regional influence. With the rivalry simmering just below the surface, it is not surprising that their opposing positions on the civil war in Syria have lately brought their differences to the fore in a quite visible manner.

Israel itself became much more aware of the complex set of intersecting interests that characterizes the Middle East in the early 1990s, with the regional forums that were set up under the auspices of the

Madrid peace process. In the framework of those multilateral meetings, Israeli participants witnessed the different interests and concerns that came into play for the different Arab states. The fact that the Israelis were not facing a unified and monolithic Arab bloc also opened their eyes to unexpected opportunities for cooperation.

Zeroing in on the nuclear realm reveals that the states in the region that have attempted to develop military nuclear capabilities (all in defiance of their NPT commitment to remain non-nuclear) have not been focused primarily, if at all, on a need to balance Israel strategically. Prestige and regional politics have played a prominent role in their thinking,[7] and when security issues have arisen, they have focused on other states as well. Iraq's nuclear program was driven by a combination of prestige, a desire to deter Iran, and a drive to create a balance with Israel. The Gulf-specific dynamic impacting on both Iran and Iraq became more pronounced when Iran restarted its military nuclear program in the 1980s in clear response to Iraq's program, and in the context of their eight-year war in the 1980s.

As for Libya, in the 1970s Qaddafi was driven to buy or develop a nuclear bomb mainly for reasons of prestige and regional standing in the Arab world. While the Israel issue was mentioned in this frame,

> the strategic dimension of going nuclear was not particularly thought-through and, arguably...concerns about prestige and political ambitions initially weighed more heavily than military concerns in the regime's motives for pursuing nuclear weapons. Indeed, the nuclear project was one of several Libyan technological acquisition efforts that seem to have been driven by a desire to be perceived as a country possessing cutting-edge military technology rather than pragmatic assessments of specific security problems and military needs.[8]

By the mid 1980s Israel was even less of a factor in Libya's thinking, as its attention turned to maintaining its security in the face of US attacks. And by the 1990s Libya was beginning to reassess whether the nuclear effort was worthwhile in light of its dubious effectiveness as a deterrent to attack.[9]

Syria's nuclear program is still very much a mystery, but as far as Israel is concerned, for years Syria seemed to regard its chemical weapons as a sufficient deterrent. It is not known what the motivation

behind the nuclear program was, beyond the fact that it was carried out with the assistance of North Korea. But in light of Assad's close relations with Iran and Iran's ongoing cooperation with North Korea in the non-conventional realm, it is likely that the North Korea-Iran-Syria triangle was more relevant to this decision than a Syrian interest in balancing Israel.

The regional state that had the strongest motivation to go down the nuclear route in direct response to Israel, and in fact considered the option in the early 1960s when it set to work on a crash ballistic missile program with German assistance, is Egypt. By the late 1960s, however, Egypt had abandoned this missile project, and ratification of the NPT in 1981 underscored Egypt's decision not to actively pursue a military nuclear program. Thereafter, its fervent campaign to have Israel join the NPT indicated its strong interest in neutralizing Israel's assumed nuclear capabilities, but through a diplomatic campaign. Moreover, the rationale was not a security concern vis-à-vis Israel per se, as evidenced by Egypt signing a peace treaty in 1979 without conditioning it on Israel joining the NPT. Rather Egypt had regional leadership concerns that it perceived were challenged by Israel's qualitative strategic edge. In the 1990s, rather than balancing Israel, Egypt hoped to "cut Israel down to size" so that it did not interfere with Egyptian efforts to reassert its leadership vis-à-vis the Arab states.[10]

Significantly, states in the Middle East have also not necessarily been on the same page with regard to nuclear issues, and certainly not as a unified group opposing Israel.[11] Not only did states in the region not view Syria's nuclear program as a collective balance to Israel; many did not want to see Syria acquire a military nuclear capability any more than Israel. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others were silent after what was presumably an Israeli strike on the nuclear site in September 2007; while not openly supporting this move, their lack of condemnation of Israel was quite noteworthy. By now it is also well known that there is considerable opposition and fear regarding Iran's nuclear program among the Gulf states and beyond. Thus Iran becoming a nuclear weapons state is not deemed any kind of collective regional answer to Israel. Quite the opposite is the case –

Iran becoming a nuclear weapons state is not deemed any kind of collective regional answer to Israel. Quite the opposite is the case – it is viewed not only as a regional threat, but one that might require a response.

this is viewed not only as a regional threat, but one that might require a response, in a manner that has not proven to be the case with regard to Israel's nuclear option.

Israel's Nuclear Policy: Ambiguity and Deterrence of Existential Threats

Features of Israel's nuclear policy contributed to the ability of other states in the region not to feel pressure to create a balance against Israel's assumed capability, even though they were certainly not happy about Israel being a nuclear state. The most important of these is the fact that Israel (ambiguously) succeeded in communicating to them that its nuclear capability was designed solely as a deterrent against existential threats. Close examination of Israel's nuclear image until the early 1990s demonstrates that despite Israel's policy of ambiguity, the Arab states nevertheless came to an understanding of Israel's red lines in the nuclear realm. They learned that what Israel sought to deter was only a perceived challenge to its very existence.[12] The fact that Israel has been engaged in so many conventional conflicts since the time it is assumed to have crossed the nuclear threshold (late 1960s) is testimony to this.

Moreover, it could be argued that ambiguity itself − which is often attacked as a problematic lack of transparency on Israel's part − has actually served stability in the Middle East. Ambiguity did not interfere with the establishment over the years of rules of the game regarding Israel's nuclear deterrent, while at the same time it ensured that Israel maintained a very low profile in the nuclear realm and did not issue nuclear threats.[13] Transparency on Israel's part most likely would not have been interpreted as a confidence building measure, rather as a hostile move, raising regional tensions. But ambiguity enabled states to look the other way if they chose to, and as a result tensions ebbed surrounding the military implications of the nuclear issue. In the 1970s, Egypt's President Sadat said that if Israel issued a nuclear threat, it would force Egypt to respond. One can infer that if Israel remained low key, this would not force Egypt to go down the nuclear road itself. Egypt could live with it, or attempt to alter the situation by means of diplomatic pressures.[14]

"Made in Iran"

Finally, it is important to consider Iran's calculations. When neorealism replaced classic realism as the prevailing theory of international politics,

with it the concept of "security" (survival) overwhelmingly replaced Hans Morgenthau's concept of "power"[15] as the primary motivating factor for state behavior in the international sphere. But in contrast to the tendency today to assume that an essentially defensive security explanation is behind all moves in international politics, the story of Iran going nuclear is not primarily about the quest for security of a status quo state. Rather, Iran's quest for regional power and influence goes more to Morgenthau's earlier emphasis on power enhancement. Iran is a revisionist state with regional hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East, and nuclear weapons would significantly boost its ability to advance its regional aims without fear of a coercive response. No one will want to risk provoking a war with a nuclear Iran, at least not in a scenario that falls short of actual use of nuclear weapons by Iran. The danger in this regard is not that Iran might act irrationally, rather that precisely in a very rational and calculating approach Iran seeks nuclear weapons as a shield against attempts to counteract its hegemonic moves, which will necessarily come at the expense of other states in the region.

While Iran's rhetoric casts repeated aspersions on Israel, its nuclear advances have little if anything to do either with the fact that Israel is an assumed nuclear state or with an Iranian impulse specifically to balance it. What might look like an essentially Israel-Iran dynamic, especially in light of the current rhetoric on both sides, is not a bilateral nuclear balancing act. Each state is acting in accordance with its own agenda, but these agendas do not hinge in a symmetrical manner on each other.

What might look like an essentially Israel-Iran dynamic, especially in light of the current rhetoric on both sides, is not a bilateral nuclear balancing act. Each state is acting in accordance with its own agenda, but these agendas do not hinge in a symmetrical manner on each other.

In Iran's case, the source of its extreme antagonism toward Israel is grounded not in territorial claims or other historical grievances with Israel, rather in factors that Israel cannot affect: Islamic ideology and religious fervor that came to the fore with the revolution in 1979. It is not a function of the nuclear issue as such. For Israel's part, a nuclear Iran would bring neither balance nor stability. Israel fears Iran's nuclear intentions, and the fear is significantly exacerbated by the virulent rhetoric spouted regularly by the current regime. Israel's threats to use military force against Iran's nuclear installations result from that

fear. Amid extreme Iranian hostility and the significant differences in size between the two states (population and geography), the situation between Israel and a nuclear Iran would not be balanced. Moreover, in the absence of any lines of communication, the new reality would be anything but stable. Rather, it would be rife with risks of miscalculation and potentially devastating escalation.

Other states across the Middle East do not seem to subscribe any more than Israel to the prospect of a nuclear Iran bringing stability. If Iran goes nuclear, there is good reason to believe that a few additional states in the region will be strongly motivated to go down that route as well.[16] In contrast to their demonstrated lack of interest in balancing Israel, the threat perception from Iran is pronounced. During the Mubarak years, very clear statements were issued by Foreign Minister Abul-Gheit and Mubarak himself about the danger that Iran poses to the region with its tendency to meddle in the affairs of others, while working on a nuclear capability. The turmoil in Egypt over the past two years has introduced a more tempered tone regarding Iran, but Morsi too does not project a sense that he plans to rush into Iran's open arms. The basic rivalry between the two states over regional prominence is not likely to disappear. Similarly, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was quoted in exposed Wikileaks cables several years ago urging the US to use military force against Iran's nuclear facilities in order to "cut off the head of the snake."[17]

Conclusion

Waltz's assumptions about nuclear development in the Middle East and the implications for balance and stability do not hold up to historical examination and analysis, nor do predictions about enhanced stability in the Middle East if Iran becomes a nuclear state. Israel's assumed nuclear capability, while opposed by its neighbors, has nevertheless not constituted a source of instability, nor is it the cause of the current crisis regarding Iran. Israel's low profile and policy of ambiguity in the nuclear realm, coupled with its message of existential red lines, has actually helped reduce tensions, and was generally more favorable than unfavorable to regional stability. The actual attempts to advance nuclear programs by other states in the region reflect and underscore that balancing Israel was not their top priority.

There is a lesson to be learned about applying theories of international relations to the actual strategic dilemmas that states face. Leaving

aside problems related to their predictive power – which is something that Waltz recognizes[18] – theories can also engender misinterpretation of current dynamics, particularly when they draw upon theoretical assumptions about past behavior without serious consideration of the relevant historical facts. Employing theories as analytical frameworks that help conceptualize reality is certainly important for the study of international relations. But strict adherence to parsimonious theories can be problematic. The assumption that nuclear weapons are acquired solely for security reasons and their appearance on the global or regional scene necessarily requires reciprocal action to balance the situation must be reassessed. These assumptions have led Waltz to unwarranted and unsubstantiated observations about the reason for Iran's nuclear drive in the Middle East and the significance of this development for states across the region.

There are some broader lessons to be learned with regard to WMD arms control in the Middle East as well. Indeed, the fact that Iran is not driven primarily by defensive security considerations in the nuclear realm has implications not only for thinking about Iran as such, but also in the context of the upcoming conference on a WMDFZ for the Middle East, scheduled to take place in Helsinki in late 2012. The previous multilateral arms control process in the region in the early 1990s – the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group – focused on regional security issues, especially the notion of Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs). These measures have a role to play when states have a mutual interest to cooperate on some common goal, but cannot realize the cooperation because of the level of tension, hostility, and distrust in their relationship. The prevailing assumption in regional arms control efforts is that states are equally threatened and defensively oriented with regard to WMD, and that their fears in this regard can be overcome if they are able to better communicate, clarify intentions, and reduce uncertainties. However, this assumption is challenged by the fact that Iran is driven primarily by its regional hegemonic ambitions, not concerns for its security per se. If Iran is offensively oriented, there is no real basis for efforts directed

> Israel's low profile and policy of ambiguity in the nuclear realm, coupled with its message of existential red lines, has actually helped reduce tensions, and was generally more favorable than unfavorable to regional stability.

to forging common ground among states on the basis of symmetrical security concerns.

The nature of Iran's nuclear ambitions may call into question many of the assumptions that have long prevailed with regard to WMD capabilities and their implications in the Middle East. A fresh approach to regional arms control efforts could well be warranted − and indeed may be sorely needed.[19]

Notes

1 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

2 Kenneth N. Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/August 2012): 2-5. Shortly after the publication of his book on neorealism, Waltz made a controversial case for the slow spread of nuclear weapons. See Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better," *Adelphi Papers*, Number 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

3 In his theoretical writings, Waltz notes the gap between simple theories and complex realities − see Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 913 − but his point is that theories must be simple. It remains unclear why the attempt to explain a specific instance of complex reality through a simple theory, which can lead to problematic conclusions, is not addressed.

4 On this prospect see Robert D. Kaplan, "Living with a Nuclear Iran," *The Atlantic,* September 2010. For a discussion of the prospects for extended deterrence in this scenario (although the author has not resigned himself to the outcome of a nuclear Iran), see Carlo Masala, "Extended Deterrence in the Middle East: A Fuzzy Concept that Might Work?" *Strategic Assessment* 14, no. 4 (2012): 115−22.

5 See Fareed Zakaria, "Deterring Iran is the Best Option," *Washington Post,* March 15, 2012. For an answer to Zakaria about the differences between US-Soviet deterrence and what would likely be the case regarding a nuclear Iran, see Charles Krauthammer, "The 'Deterrence Works' Fantasy," *Washington Post,* August 31, 2012.

6 Waltz, "Why Iran should Get the Bomb."

7 On the additional motivations beyond security for seeking nuclear weapons, see Scott Sagan, "Why do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996/97): 54-86.

8 Maalfrid Braut-Hegghammer, "Libya's Nuclear Intentions: Ambition and Ambivalence," *Strategic Insight* VIII, issue 2, Center for Contemporary Conflict, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, April 2009.

9 Ibid.

10 Emily B. Landau, *Arms Control in the Middle East: Cooperative Security Dialogue and Regional Constraints* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), pp. 146-52.
11 At the time when Track II discussions relating to the Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security talks were taking place in the 1990s, there were even off-the-record hints that for a state like Jordan, Israel's nuclear capability perhaps had an umbrella effect that extended over them as well (private communication).
12 Ariel Levite and Emily Landau, *Israel's Nuclear Image: Arab Perceptions of Israel's Nuclear Posture* (Tel Aviv: Papyrus Publishing House, 1994).
13 Emily B. Landau, "Being Clear About Ambiguity," *Haaretz,* May 13, 2010.
14 Levite and Landau, *Israel's Nuclear Image,* pp. 77-78.
15 For Morgenthau's earlier theoretical thinking see Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5th ed. (NY: Knopf, 1973). The book was originally published in 1948.
16 See Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov, "A Nuclear Iran: The Spur to a Regional Arms Race?" *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 3 (2012): 7-26.
17 For a report on statements by Abul-Gheit about Iran's meddling in the affairs of Arab states, and Mubarak referring to new dangers emerging from the Gulf and threatening stability, see "Iran Should Keep Out of Affairs of Arab States: Egypt FM," *AFP,* November 26, 2010. On King Abdullah, see Ross Colvin, "'Cut Off Head of Snake' Saudis Told US on Iran," *Reuters,* November 29, 2010. The article also refers to cables that exposed similar concerns from Bahrain.
18 "Success in explaining, not in predicting, is the ultimate criterion of good theory," Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," p. 916.
19 On this last point see Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, "Israel and the WMD-free Zone: Has Israel Closed the Door?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* September 27, 2012, http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/op-eds/israel-and-the-wmd-free-zone-has-israel-closed-the-door.