

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

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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.

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

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.

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 Responses

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 pursuing 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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- 4 James M. Acton, "Deterrence During Disarmament: Deep Nuclear Reductions and International Security," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, March 14, 2011.
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- 9 "CIA Official Warns Syria is Top Threat to U.S. Security," *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2013.
- 10 Colin H. Kahl, Melissa G. Dalton, and Matthew Irvine, "Atomic Kingdom: If Iran Builds the Bomb, Will Saudi Arabia Be Next?" *Center for New American Security*, February 2013.
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- 12 Victor Cha, "U.S. Extended Deterrence in Asia," seminar at the Brookings Institution, February 24, 2011.
- 13 Kahl, Dalton, and Irvine, "Atomic Kingdom: If Iran Builds the Bomb, Will Saudi Arabia Be Next?"