Iran:
A Strategic Simulation

Yoel Guzansky and Yonathan Lerner



INSS
המכון למחקרי ביטחון לאומי
THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES
INCORPORATING THE JAFFEE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY
אוניברסיטת תל-אביב

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Institute for National Security Studies

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The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) received a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in the United States for a project to expand the group in Israel that deals with proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and arms control. As part of this project, which took place within the framework of the Arms Control and Regional Security Program at INSS, the Institute held an in-house conference on issues of nuclear proliferation and arms control, which included a simulation on the possible ramifications of an Iranian nuclear test. Researchers from INSS, as well as other academic experts and experts from the Israeli security establishment, took part in the simulation. The simulation had two main goals: to help create new insights on the issue and to increase the participants' knowledge through observation of the team discussions.

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Courtesy: Image Bank / Getty Images

Institute for National Security Studies
40 Haim Levanon Street
POB 39950
Ramat Aviv
Tel Aviv 61398

Tel. +972-3-640-0400
Fax. +972-3-744-7590

E-mail: info@inss.org.il
http://www.inss.org.il

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Principal Findings

Iran does not intend to forfeit the nuclear weapons in its possession, but will attempt to use them to reach an agreement with the major powers to improve its strategic standing. Iran assumes that even if the economic sanctions are strengthened it will be able to withstand them, and in any event, the international community will eventually agree to a dialogue with Iran in order to establish new rules of the game. These are among the principal insights to emerge from a simulation conducted at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) on the ramifications of an Iranian nuclear test.

In the simulation, the US administration exerted heavy behind-the-scenes pressure on Israel not to wage a military strike against Iran, with an implied threat that an Israeli action would harm US-Israel relations. In an attempt to persuade Israel not to take military action, the United States suggested examining the possibility of a formal defense pact and/or of including Israel as a member of NATO.

In response to the new situation, Russia proposed to establish a Russo-American defense alliance that would ensure the security of the Middle East states. Members of the alliance that are not currently in possession of nuclear weapons would make a commitment not to develop such weapons. However, states that already have a military nuclear capability would not be required to disarm. The United States was the chief opponent of the initiative because of its doubts concerning Russia's ability to provide security guarantees, and because of what it claimed are the difficulties in implementing the alliance and the ability in the framework of the alliance to prevent terrorist and subversive activity. The American solution in the short term is deterrence and containment of Iran through increased coordination and cooperation with US allies.

Israel made it clear to the United States that it opposes an outright rejection of the Russian initiative, and greater cooperation between the West and Russia is called for, if only so as not to undermine the front against Iran. However, Israel stressed consistently that it cannot accept a nuclear Iran, and that it will not commit to necessarily reject the option of military action against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, implying that this was the case even if it opposed Washington's position. Indeed, the Israeli military option is likely to be a significant and potent issue, if not for Iran then for some of

the main players. The simulation showed that this option, or the threat of realizing it, would also be relevant following an Iranian nuclear test.

An acceleration of nuclear proliferation in the region cannot be ruled out, even if it does not occur at a rapid pace, as has generally been envisioned. US allies, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have questioned the willingness of the United States to extend deterrent backing in the event that Iran acquires military nuclear capability. This in turn has led them to examine parallel options and/or to accelerate their own nuclear development. Iran's crossing the nuclear threshold will prompt Saudi Arabia to strive to reach a strategic balance with Iran, and the Kingdom will find it difficult to adopt a policy of denial. It appears that Saudi Arabia, perhaps more than any other actor in the Middle East, has the ideological-strategic motivation and the economic ability to examine the nuclear route, and it is reasonable to assume that it will do so by means of outside aid and/or acquisition of an off-the-shelf deterrent.

Preface

Iran is closer than ever to the juncture at which its leaders will need to decide whether to remain on the verge of a nuclear capability, which is a relatively comfortable position for Tehran, or alternatively, to "break out" and attain a nuclear bomb. Iran has an interest in postponing the decision whether to cross the threshold to a later stage. Nevertheless, regional and international developments are likely to cause Iran to decide to accelerate its nuclear development and break out, thereby realizing a nuclear capability.

In recent years, studies have been published about the possibility that Iran would acquire a nuclear capability, and have touched on the difficulties in deterring and containing this capability.[1] Several simulations that examined the processes leading up to Iran's acquisition of a military nuclear capability have also been held.[2]

The simulation conducted at INSS in late October 2011, which staged responses to a scenario of Iran carrying out a nuclear test, and the analytical discussions that followed were intended to add to the existing knowledge on this subject. This publication is devoted to the contents of the discussions.

According to the given scenario, an Iranian nuclear test was conducted without prior warning. Overall, detonation of the device did not bring about a fundamental change in the behavior of the main actors whose positions were examined: the United States, Russia, China, the European Union, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and of course, Israel. Moreover, the strategy followed by most of the players was in keeping with the conventional assessments concerning the policies they would adopt if and when Iran actually acquires a military nuclear capability. Naturally, the immediate actions following the event included attempts by various countries to better understand what had taken place and grasp Iran's capabilities. The assumption was that Iran carried out the test when it had a partial operational nuclear arsenal.

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1 Matthew Kroenig, "Time to Attack Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 1 (January-February 2012): 76-86. See also Danielle Pletka, Thomas Donnelly, and Maseh Zarif, "Containing and Deterring a Nuclear Iran," *American Enterprise Institute*, December 2011.

2 See David Ignatius, "An Iran Game, with Winners You Don't Want," *Washington Post*, December 6, 2009. See also Kenneth M. Pollack, *Osiraq Redux: A Crisis Simulation of an Israeli Strike on the Iranian Nuclear Program*, Brookings Institution, February 2010. The simulation held at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya in May 2011 was an exception, as it dealt with an Iran with a nuclear capability.

The Responses

Iran

The Iranian leadership has assumed that the United States and/or Israel will not attack it and that there is little chance of a naval blockade of Iran, which would prevent it from exporting crude oil and importing refined oil. Iran has assumed that even if the economic sanctions are intensified, it can withstand the pressure, and in any case, the international community would ultimately wish to achieve a dialogue with Iran in order to establish new rules of the game. Indeed, after the test was carried out, Iran did everything it could in order to leave open the door to negotiations.

The simulation showed that Iran will not forego nuclear weapons (the three to five devices presumably in its possession), but will attempt to use them to reach an agreement with the major powers to improve its regional position. Thus, for example, Iran conveyed messages to the effect that if the international community guarantees that it will not be attacked, it will make a commitment not to use nuclear weapons. It argued that in exchange for a "change in its behavior," the economic sanctions imposed on it should be lifted, including sanctions on receipt of spare parts for planes and new planes, and significant aid in development of oil and gas fields. The bottom line is that the test provided Iran with additional playing cards.

Even though the Iranian nuclear test had already occurred, the various actors dealt mainly with the issue of a possible military attack on nuclear facilities in Iran. Some examined the feasibility of launching such an attack and its possible implications, and others examined ways to prevent such an attack. Thus, for example, the United States and Israel both examined the possibility of establishing a defense alliance; Israel accelerated the Arrow missile project; and there were actors that urged the United States to attack. Only a small number of the discussions were devoted to issues related to the actual occurrence of the test and Iran's admission that it possesses nuclear weapons.

When all the discussions and steps that were taken are examined, the assessment is that they did not deviate from the framework of the discussions taking place today in most of the countries that are involved in this issue. The test did not cause the players to take immediate significant military steps (other than beefing up forces) or to explore steps that are not already

being considered today as part of the attempts to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear capability. The response that most – though not all – of the actors reached was that a wide scale military attack against Iran is not in order. The major powers even invested much effort in an attempt to prevent Israel from acting alone against Iran.

Israel

Emphasizing that it was not surprised, Israel stressed that is had been preparing for this day and would know how to cope with any threat. From Israel's vantage, the event proves that it was right to refuse to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Immediately after it became known that the test was conducted, the Prime Minister's Office asserted that Iran would not be in a hurry to attack Israel: "Israel is well protected by advanced systems and will know how to respond if necessary." In its dialogue with the United States, Israel made it clear that there is a narrow window of opportunity for military action against Iranian nuclear facilities before the initial nuclear capability proven by the test is translated into reliable operational capability. From Israel's perspective, the threat of such an action should be accompanied by a threat to senior officials in Iran that an attack on Iran's neighbors will impel the United States and its allies to overthrow the regime.

At the same time, Israel attempted to impress on the United States that barring a military option, a quickly implemented total political and economic blockade is in order. This would prompt Iran to reassess its policy. Furthermore, in contrast to its traditional position, Israel apparently will not reject out of hand a possible American offer – should the administration in fact make such an offer – concerning a defense alliance between the two countries. In the days following the test, Israel decided to accelerate the Arrow project and emphasize that Israel has second strike capability and the capability to afford the decision makers full physical protection, and that Israel itself is well protected. Israel stressed that the main threat from a nuclear Iran is to other states in the region, such as the Gulf states. The fact that Iran's territory is larger than Israel's does not make Iran less vulnerable, since ultimately, in the event of a nuclear attack, the targets will be the large cities. Iran's cities are just as vulnerable as Israel's, and perhaps even more so.

The International System

The United States strongly condemned the Iranian test. The US response also included an attempt to reassure its allies in the Middle East and a declaration that any use of nuclear weapons against these allies would result in the strongest US counter-response against Iran. The Americans even leaked information to the media to the effect that they are considering instituting a naval blockade against Iran. At the same time, behind the scenes, the US administration exerted massive pressure on Israel not to take military action against Iran, with an implied threat that an Israeli action would harm US-Israel relations. In an attempt to persuade Israel not to take military action, the United States proposed examining the possibilities of a formal defense alliance and/or the possibility of including Israel as a member of NATO, and accelerating cooperation in the development of anti-missile defense systems. In the international arena, the United States promoted an initiative to pass a resolution in the UN Security Council condemning Iran's action and demanding that it disarm. It also sent senior officials to key relevant countries and transferred military forces to the Gulf region.

The European Union, Russia, and China likewise condemned the Iranian move, though with a different level of severity. They all called to work for a solution to the crisis, with a clear preference for diplomacy, mainly in the UN Security Council, through passage of a strong resolution on the issue of Iran. These principal actors urged Israel not to attack Iran's nuclear facilities and to wait for the international community's response. Along with submission of a draft to the Security Council with a strong proposed resolution concerning Iran, an attempt was made to persuade China and Russia of the importance of stepping up pressure on Iran. The European Union prohibited entry of representatives of the Iranian government to member states, and froze all economic and financial relations between the EU and Iran.

China also publicly condemned the Iranian move, but viewed the situation as an opportunity to profit from its insistence over the years not to level strong sanctions against Iran. Minded by its economic and political interests, China proved that it sees a nuclear Iran as a fait accompli that must be lived with. China voiced opposition to a military move against Iran, but it announced through discreet channels, especially to its oil suppliers in the Gulf, that it would be prepared to use its economic influence to a limited extent in order to restrain Iran. The following message was conveyed from

China to Iran: We will be forced to condemn the move and join in sanctions in the framework of the UN Security Council. However, we will work to tone them down and will not support strong sanctions.

The Russian response was particularly noteworthy. To address the new situation, Russia proposed establishment of a Russo-American defense alliance that would ensure the security of the Middle Eastern states that joined the pact. Members of the defense alliance that do not have nuclear weapons as yet would make a commitment not to develop them. However, states that possess a military nuclear capability would not be required to disarm. The alliance would guarantee protection for member states against subversive activity and terrorism. The principles guiding the Russian initiative were, first and foremost, prevention of both continued proliferation of non-conventional weapons and the outbreak of war in the region, deliberate or accidental. According to Russia's working assumption, if the international community has not succeeded in preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear capability, it will not succeed in persuading it to give up this capability.

The Regional System

Egypt (the assumption was that the Egyptian regime was not Islamic) acted through quiet channels to explore the positions of the United States and Israel. It pleaded with them to advance a military action that would be perceived as a real and immediate option, and to prepare to carry it out if Iran did not change its policy. At the same time, a request was made of the United States to aid Egypt in accelerating the development of a civilian nuclear capability, and for a public US commitment to a nuclear umbrella as a deterrent and a response that will push Iran against the wall. The possibility of establishing a Sunni regional security regime as a counterweight to Iran, with Saudi and Turkish participation, was also examined.

Turkey responded more moderately because of its intention not to come into conflict with Iran, certainly not in a military conflict, and to preserve its economic interests in any response. Prime Minister Erdoğan declared: "Turkey opposes Iran's move, but it respects the desire of the Iranian people and calls for the renewal of the talks that were halted on a nuclear-free Middle East." Nevertheless, Turkey's messages to the United States through quiet channels included an implied threat to examine the nuclear option (even if Turkey had to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in

order to do so). Turkey also announced that it would review its membership in NATO if Israel joined the organization.

The Saudi response was perhaps the most dramatic. The Kingdom appeared more prepared than the other actors for the developments. When news of the Iranian test became known, Saudi Arabia announced that it had already seen to a nuclear deterrent, and it would not be deterred from defending its natural resources and Islam's holy places. The Saudis made clear to the United States that the recent developments constitute a real threat to the Kingdom, and that Saudi Arabia is no longer sure that it can continue to maintain its security and ensure Western interests in the region. In a conversation with the President of the United States, the King asked for clarifications regarding the immediate action the United States intended to take, and sought a nuclear guarantee. At the same time, he pleaded with the President of Pakistan to assist the Kingdom immediately and redeem the "nuclear commitments" that were formalized between the two countries over the years.

A New Regional Security Regime

Most of the actors were not prepared to embrace a proposal for a new regional order, namely, a comprehensive solution under the auspices of the major powers. The Russians pushed the initiative, while they conveyed secret messages to Israel not to attack Iran. They made it clear to Israel that joining the alliance would not require it to give up the nuclear weapons they believe Israel possesses. The Russians made it clear to Iran that the new arrangement, if accepted, would prevent interference in Iran's internal affairs as well as future economic sanctions and would eliminate existing sanctions.

Russia's proposal changed the way the game was conducted. Instead of having separate discussions for each team, all the players convened for a plenary session in which they were asked to respond to the Russian proposal. It was evident that all the participants were surprised by Russia's approach. The responses ranged from an attempt to reject it out of hand, with the United States leading the opposition, to a view of the proposal as a possible basis on which to establish a new order that would neutralize Iran's nuclear blackmail power. Iran itself saw the Russian move as an achievement and as recognition of Iran's new status, and announced that it was prepared to enter negotiations on the proposal. At the same time, Iran began to draft

its own conditions. For example, in Iran's opinion, a distinction should be made between terrorism and legitimate resistance of "peoples that are under occupation in Palestine, in Lebanon, and in Bahrain."

The United States led the opposition to the initiative because of its doubts as to Russia's ability to provide security guarantees. This was because of what the United States claimed to be the difficulties in implementing the alliance and the ability in the framework of the alliance to prevent terrorism and subversive activity. The American solution for the short term was deterrence and containment of Iran through increased coordination and cooperation with US allies. In the long term, the US goal was regime change in Iran, on the assumption that a different regime would be easier to contain, what perhaps in the future might even allow negotiations on Iran's rollback.

Interestingly, Israel stressed to the United States that it opposes an outright rejection of the Russian initiative, and greater cooperation between the West and Russia is called for. However, Israel stressed consistently that it cannot accept a nuclear Iran, and that it will not make a commitment that it will not take military action against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, implying that this applies even if it opposes Washington's position.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt did not reject the initiative, but in their responses they expressed doubts concerning the extent of its implementation, and also raised the need to examine the crisis "within existing frameworks." They aligned themselves with the United States, but they urged the United States not to abandon the military option regarding Iran. Like Israel, they too made it clear to the United States that it would not be appropriate to reject the Russian initiative out of hand, if only because of the need to present a united worldwide front vis-à-vis Iran. Turkey was left disappointed by the US failure to make a commitment to guarantee its security. In response, it announced through quiet channels that it would not commit not to develop nuclear weapons, since it does not trust an outside defense umbrella.

The European response was more balanced. Europe, unlike the United States, welcomed the Russian initiative and declared that it was worthy of consideration and an in-depth discussion for the long term, especially considering that the Russians had announced that they were prepared to be flexible and discuss the conditions for the agreement. However, most EU members were of the opinion that the initiative was not a substitute for an immediate solution to the crisis that was created by the threat of an Iran

with nuclear capability. Perhaps surprisingly, China opposed the initiative because in its view this was no less than a return to the Cold War, and it announced that it opposes any activity by the major powers that is likely to create spheres of influence in the Middle East.

Insights

Simulations yield many significant benefits, but their limitations must also be considered when the results are examined. The great advantage of these simulations is the creation of a dynamic between the participants, which differs from what takes place in discussions in a research panel or position papers. The behavior of the participants as "players" should differ from their normal behavior, and therefore, results are likely to be achieved that would not be obtained in the normal frameworks for discussion and thinking.

On the other hand, the development of the simulations and their results are dependent to a very large extent on the rules of the simulation, and even more so, on the team members. The worldview of the expert who is representing one country or another is the chief explanation for the position of a particular team. Thus, with the same opening story and the same rules of the game, different situations can develop when teams have different members. However, the possible differences in the results obtained in various simulations do not from the outset nullify the validity of each of them. As long as the positions of the players are viable, that is, it is possible that the state or organization that they are supposed to be representing would adopt the same positions, the development of events in the course of the simulation is worthy of being presented, and its significance is worthy of examination.

In the simulation presented here, which examined the possible developments on the day after an Iranian nuclear test, Russia spearheaded a move whose main thrust was acceptance of Iran's nuclear capability and building a new order that would prevent Iran from exploiting its new capability to achieve regional political and military goals, including through terror by proxies. What emerges, therefore, is that the starting assumption that Iran will achieve nuclear capability cannot remain the preserve of outside, non-official players (if this is, in fact, the common assumption outside the simulation as well), and any response that develops for the day after demands examination within the various establishments. How reasonable is the scenario that developed in the simulation, and if it is reasonable what its possible implications are, should be examined.

Several additional insights came up in the course of the simulation. The first is the issue of the military option. The simulation showed that Israel's military option continues to be a significant lever, if not vis-à-vis Iran,

then for some of the main players. Furthermore, this option, or the threat to use it, is also relevant after an Iranian nuclear test, at least according to the response of some of the players. In this context, it is not clear to what extent the simulation reflects the future reality. In our assessment, the actual likelihood of an attack on Iran once Iran is in possession of proven nuclear capability decreases dramatically, although not entirely eliminated. The simulation also reflected the continuity of current trends. For example, in Iran's assessment, the United States does not intend to take military action against Iranian nuclear facilities and will even pressure Israel, together with other players, not to attack.

The second issue concerns nuclear proliferation. Accelerated nuclear proliferation in the region cannot be ruled out, even if it does not take place at a fast pace, as many of the experts have predicted. US allies, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have cast doubts on American willingness to provide them with extended deterrence in the event that Iran acquires military nuclear capability, which has caused them to examine parallel options and/or accelerate their own nuclear development. The simulation showed that Saudi Arabia would find it difficult to adopt a policy of denial. It appears that Saudi Arabia, perhaps more than any other player in the Middle East, has the ideological-strategic motivation and the economic capability to consider the nuclear path, and it is reasonable to assume that it would do so through outside aid and/or purchase of off-the-shelf nuclear weapons.

It is not inconceivable that the Russian initiative presented in the simulation is in fact based on realistic assumptions about what is known to be the Russian point of view. Nevertheless, it is possible that in reality, Russia would formulate a position calling for establishment of a regional arrangement with broader international coordination (not just with the United States), which would also include Security Council members and perhaps even other powers that share Russian concerns (India, for example). The simulation also showed that most if not all the parties were caught unprepared for such an initiative, and it diverted attention from immediate handling of the issue on the agenda, which indirectly benefited Iran. In addition to the need to take possible spoilers into account, the immediate need to add substance to the general call for closer Israeli-American coordination was raised.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to present key issues concerning Iran that arose during the simulation, with an understanding that they may be valuable if and when Iran chooses this course of action. The essay is intended to stimulate a discussion about several questions, chief among them the issue of a US-Israel defense alliance, the military option, and even possible international and regional arrangements for "the day after."

There is value in examining various scenarios, including a scenario in which Iran goes nuclear, even at the cost of one party or another interpreting this as acceptance of Iranian nuclear capability. This is especially true if the required preparation necessitates alliances and other regional arrangements that are not taken into account today. If any of the situations described in the simulation are possible and Israel might need to confront them in the future, their validity and pertinence should be examined today.

Appendix 1: The Scenario

January 2013: In spite of ongoing intelligence monitoring and repeated denials by Iran, at 6:35 A.M. today (Iranian time) Iran conducted an underground nuclear test. The test took place after the last of the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors were expelled from the country, a step that led, inter alia, to imposition of sanctions on the Iranian oil economy. The official Iranian news agency claimed that the test, which was carried out north of Yazd, in the area of Dasht-e Kavir, was completely successful, and called it "an historic event . . .an achievement for the revolution and a contribution to regional peace and stability." The local Iranian dailies claimed that this was an achievement of the "hidden Imam" and of the Supreme Leader [Khamenei], and celebrated the event as follows:

- *Kayhan*: "Iran's First Nuclear Bomb Tested."
- *Jomhouri Eslami*: "Iran Successfully Carries Out Nuclear Test."
- *Iran* (government daily): "By Presidential Decree, 100 Percent Iranian Nuclear Bomb Tested."
- *Ettela'at*: "Iranian Nuclear Bomb, which we have been Trying to Obtain for Years, is Detonated."

Iranian leader Ali Khamenei released an announcement praising the technological and scientific capabilities of the Iranian nation: "The test today has placed us on a par with the leading nations of the world as befits our status...This is a sign of peace and stability...Henceforth, Iran will gain the status in the region that it deserves."

In the period preceding the test, Iran's defiant declarations in the Gulf region increased, including repeated calls for sovereignty over Bahrain, a call to redraw the border with Iraq, and provocations by Revolutionary Guard naval vessels and aircraft against the forces of the US Fifth Fleet in the Gulf.

Appendix 2: The Actors

Administration: Shlomo Brom, Yoel Guzansky, Yonathan Lerner, Gallia Lindenstrauss, and Erez Striem
Israel: Yehuda Ben Meir, Giora Eiland
United States: Eytan Gilboa, Zaki Shalom
Russia: Yaakov (Yasha) Kedmi
Iran: Sima Shine, Meir Litvak
Saudi Arabia: Sarah Yizraeli, Yoel Guzansky
Turkey: Alon Liel, Gallia Lindenstrauss
Europe: Mark Heller, Nadav Kedem
China: Yoram Evron
Egypt: Kobi Michael

About the Authors

Yoel Guzansky joined INSS as a research fellow in 2009 after coordinating work on the Iranian nuclear challenge at the National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office (2005-2009). He was part of a group of experts to devise a public diplomacy strategy with regard to Iran, and he coordinated a team for a national security assessment vis-à-vis Iran. He was also part of a team that dealt with integration of intelligence assessments.

Yonathan Lerner specializes in management of strategic processes in business corporations and organizations in various sectors. He is a retired colonel who served in Israel Air Force intelligence and served as head of strategic planning in the IDF General Staff (1990-1998). He has worked with INSS on simulation games.