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The Iranian Nuclear Debate: More Myths Than Facts

Christopher J. Bolan

ABSTRACT: Much of the public debate surrounding US policies regarding Iran has been distorted by myths that obscure the actual status of Iranian nuclear programs. Similarly, discussions about the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran are often built on questionable assumptions requiring more thorough examination. This article dispels these myths, questions these assumptions, and draws important implications for US policymakers in this critical strategic debate.

International negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program are once again in limbo. At the conclusion of the February talks in Almaty, Kazakhstan, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi characterized them as a significant "milestone" that had reached a "turning point," and left him "very optimistic and hopeful."¹ Meanwhile, reactions from representatives of the so-called P5+1 (United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany) were notably more measured, but hinted at an optimistic assessment as newly confirmed US Secretary of State Kerry characterized the February sessions as "useful."²

As so frequently happened in the past, however, subsequent talks in April crashed against the reality of significant gaps in the substantive negotiating positions of the P5+1 and Iranian teams. The European Union representative to the talks, Catherine Ashton, cast a decidedly downbeat assessment of the April sessions observing that "the positions of the [P5+1] and Iran remain far apart on the substance. . . . We have therefore agreed that all sides will go back to capitals to evaluate where we stand in the process."³

This pause in negotiations offers American policymakers the opportunity to reassess strategic options regarding Iran's nuclear program. The recent election of Hasan Rouhani as President of Iran gives the Obama administration another reason to reconsider America's current approach. A coherent strategy requires the establishment of clear objectives and a design for employing the nation's instruments of power to achieve those objectives. In the case of Iran, the overriding strategic objective of current US policy has been made exactly clear by President Obama and Vice President Biden. In his speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee one year ago, President Obama said the objective of US policy is "to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon."⁴ Vice President Biden reiterated this position nearly verbatim to the same

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1 "Milestone Reached in Iran Nuclear Talks," *Reuters*, February 28, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/28/us-iran-nuclear-minister-idUSBRE91R1JY20130228>

2 Ibid.

3 "E3+3 Statement by EU HR Ashton Following Talks with Iran," *European Union @ United Nations*, April 6, 2013, http://www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_13363_en.htm

4 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, Washington Convention Center, Washington, DC, March 4, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aljac-policy-conference>.

audience on 4 March 2013 saying the goal of US policy is “to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.”⁵ While others outside the White House have suggested alternative US policy objectives ranging from preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons *capability* to ousting the current regime in Tehran, these statements by the President and Vice President have effectively ended this portion of the strategic debate. US policies under President Obama will be guided by the paramount objective of *preventing Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon*.

Nevertheless, the public and internal debates over *how* the United States can best marshal its diplomatic, economic, informational, and military instruments of power to accomplish this expressed policy objective will continue for some time. The default option would be to maintain the current US dual-track approach of offering negotiations while imposing ever-tightening economic and financial sanctions in the hope of compelling Iranian concessions on its nuclear program. Others have made the case for preemptive military attacks designed to destroy Iran’s existing nuclear facilities or facilitate a regime change in Tehran.⁶ Still others have advocated a strategy emphasizing a diplomatic approach exchanging United States and international recognition of Iran’s right to enrich uranium in return for commitments from Tehran to limit enrichment activities and subject them to an intrusive international inspection regimen ensuring nuclear materials are not diverted to military purposes.⁷

It is the contention of this author that the quality of these public and internal debates would be improved significantly by dispelling some of the most misguided myths surrounding Iran and clarifying the status of its current nuclear program. Additionally, this article examines some of the more questionable assumptions about a nuclear-armed Iran and offers some preliminary implications for US policymakers as they struggle to implement a coherent strategic approach toward Iran.

Mythbusting

Myth 1: Iran is an irrational actor.

This myth is especially popular among those pushing for immediate military action to attack Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. Their argument is that Iranian leaders are crazed, hot-headed, and messianic actors who do not respond to logic or reason; therefore, they cannot be negotiated with or trusted with weapons of mass destruction. These claims are based on cultural ignorance and prejudices that would be routinely dismissed as out of bounds in virtually any context outside US policy debates on Iran. Fortunately, several senior US and Israeli officials have

5 Joe Biden, “Remarks by the Vice President to the AIPAC Policy Conference,” *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, Washington Convention Center, Washington, DC, March 4, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/04/remarks-vice-president-alpac-policy-conference>.

6 See, for example, Matthew Kroenig, “Time to Attack Iran: Why a Strike is the Least Bad Option,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2012): 76-86.

7 See, for example, Dr. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, “Iran, the US and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 54, no. 5 (October 2012): 183-202; and also William H. Luers and Thomas R. Pickering, “‘Nixon Option’ for Iran Could Break Stalemate,” *The Japan Times*, June 5, 2012, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2012/06/05/commentary/nixon-option-for-iran-could-break-stalemate-allow-u-s-to-strengthen-security-without-war/>.

publicly dismissed this myth as false. America's senior military officer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dempsey, asserted in a television interview with Fareed Zakaria that "we are of the opinion that the [Iranian] regime is a rational actor."⁸ Israel's retired Mossad director Meir Dagan similarly opined that "the regime in Iran is a very rational one."⁹ Ehud Barak, Israel's Defense Minister, in a meeting with senior Obama administration officials elaborated on this basic point, stating "I don't think the Iranians, even if they got the bomb, [would] drop it in the neighborhood. . . . They are radical but not totally crazy. . . . They have a quite sophisticated decision-making process, and they understand reality."¹⁰ Moreover, the US Director of National Intelligence recently confirmed the rational nature of the regime in Tehran judging that "Iran's nuclear decisionmaking is guided by a cost-benefit approach."¹¹

Of course, even rational actors can make serious miscalculations with horrific consequences (witness Saddam Hussein's ill-advised invasion of Kuwait in 1990). This problem is exacerbated by the opacity of the decisionmaking regime in Tehran. Nonetheless, recognizing leaders in Tehran are rational actors has important policy implications: namely, that a negotiated compromise settlement is at least theoretically possible assuming a minimum degree of overlapping interests; and containment and deterrence are viable strategies should Iran at some date decide to acquire a nuclear weapon. In the meantime, it becomes critically important for senior US officials to continue to communicate clear "red lines" of unacceptable actions to those rational actors in Tehran. President Obama's observable and measurable policy objective of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon while eschewing calls for broader regime change in Iran or adopting the much more amorphous goal of preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapons *capability* is a positive step in this direction.

Myth 2: Iran is an existential threat to Israel.

This is a claim frequently accepted at face value in many American circles, but is vigorously debated in Israel. Israel is widely assessed to have several hundred nuclear bombs with the capability to deliver them anywhere in the region, and is demonstrably the region's strongest and most capable military power. Admitting to this basic reality, Ephraim Halevy, former Mossad Director, noted, "I think Israel is strong enough to protect itself, to take care of itself. I think ultimately it is not in the power of Iran to destroy the state of Israel."¹² Similarly, Dan Halutz,

8 General Martin Dempsey, "Martin Dempsey on Syria, Iran and China," interview with Fareed Zakaria, *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, February 17, 2012, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/02/17/watch-gps-martin-dempsey-on-syria-iran-and-china>.

9 Meir Dagan, "Ex-Mossad Chief: Iran rational; Don't attack now," *CBS News*, interview by Lesley Stahl, March 9, 2012, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560_162-57393715/ex-mossad-chief-iran-rational-dont-attack-now.

10 "Israeli Official Doubts Iran Would Nuke His Country," *USA Today*, February 26, 2010, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-02-26-israel-iran-nuclear_N.htm.

11 James R. Clapper, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 12, 2013, 7, <http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2013%20ATA%20SFR%20for%20SSCI%2012%20Mar%20213.pdf>.

12 "Iran Poses No 'Existential Threat' to Israel," *RT News*, February 6, 2012, <http://rt.com>.

former Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff, has concluded that “Iran poses a serious threat but not an existential one.”¹³

Busting both of these aforementioned myths allows policymakers and intelligence analysts to develop a more honest assessment of both the scale and urgency of any potential threat from Iran to either US or Israeli interests. For now, Iran is a middling regional military power with limited capability to threaten its neighbors. Furthermore, any Iranian attack on American or Israeli interests could be met quickly with a devastating blow from the superior conventional and unconventional military might of either the United States or Israel. A nuclear-armed Iran would change these calculations somewhat, but primarily by providing Iran a meaningful deterrent to a massive military intervention designed to overturn the regime in Tehran—something for which neither the American public nor the Obama administration would likely have any appetite.

At the same time, dismissing these myths does not mean that Iran has not or will not aggressively compete with the United States and Israel for regional influence. US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan eliminated two of Iran’s major regional competitors and have consequently provided Tehran a relative advantage. The misnamed “Arab Spring” has dislodged important American allies and created regional instability that Iran will undoubtedly seek to exploit to its own advantage. Iran will continue to foster its relationships with Hezbollah in South Lebanon and Syria; Shi’a political leaders and local militia forces in Iraq; Shi’a communities in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Gulf; and Hamas in Gaza as a means of extending its own influence at the expense of American and Israeli interests. However, such strategic gamesmanship is not unique to Iran and virtually every player in the competitive game of international politics seeks to extend leverage over other parties. It is worth recalling modern Iran has no history of invading its neighbors. Iran has thus far pressed its advantages primarily by exploiting its “soft power” relationships with regional Shi’a groups and by seeking asymmetric advantages through financing, training, and equipping nonstate actors such as Hezbollah (and more recently the Asad regime in Syria) as a counter to the superior conventional military forces of the United States and Israel.

Myth 3: Iranian civilian nuclear activities are a cover for nuclear weapons program.

This charge has been repeatedly dismissed by the best available US intelligence assessments. The 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate assessed Iran suspended its nuclear weapons program in 2003. Then Secretary of Defense Panetta confirmed the continued validity of this assessment in February 2013 saying, “the intelligence we have is they [Iranian leaders] have *not* made the decision to proceed with the development of a nuclear weapon.”¹⁴ Instead, the ultimate objective for Iran’s civilian nuclear program, according to US Director of National

13 Gil Ronen, “Former IDF Head Halutz: Iran Threat ‘Not Existential,’” *Arutz Sheva*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/152382>.

14 Leon Panetta, Meet the Press, interview of February 3, 2013, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/50666168/ns/meet_the_press-transcripts/t/february-leon-panetta-martin-dempsey-robert-gibbs-ralph-redd-ana-navarro-david-brooks.

Intelligence James Clapper, may be to develop “various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so.”¹⁵ He went on, however, to emphasize that “we do not know . . . if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.”¹⁶ In other words, Iran (like several other countries) may be seeking a latent nuclear capability or what is often referred to as the “Japan option”—the ability to produce a nuclear weapon on a relatively compressed timeline should the security situation warrant a nuclear deterrent. It is in this sense that repeated US and Israeli threats to attack Iran’s existing civilian nuclear facilities may well be counterproductive by underscoring the potential need for just such a deterrent. In fact, Britain’s former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw recently explained that the veiled military threat of keeping all options on the table “is a hindrance to negotiations, rather than a help.”¹⁷

Finally, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has formally and publicly renounced nuclear weapons in a binding religious ruling or *fatwa* that “considers the possession of nuclear weapons a grave sin.” Reversing such a pledge is, of course, not impossible. However, all available evidence confirms that Khamenei has thus far made good on his pledge to “never pursue nuclear weapons.”

Myth 4: Iran has sufficient nuclear fuel to make a bomb.

This claim has been advanced by sloppy analysts and others interested in hyping the urgency of an Iranian nuclear threat. However, there is no evidence Iran has produced *any* weapons-grade fissile material. All publicly available evidence suggests Iran is producing low enriched uranium at roughly the 5 percent and 20 percent levels (for energy production and medical treatments), but not to the 90 percent level required for weapons-grade fissile material. Moreover, while Iran is openly increasing its capacity to produce more of this low enriched uranium with additional centrifuges, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in February and May verified Iran is simultaneously converting some of its enriched uranium to fuel stocks thereby reducing the amount of fissionable material potentially available for a nuclear bomb.¹⁸ Iran is, therefore, deliberately limiting the amount of its enriched uranium stocks below that required for a nuclear bomb.

15 James R. Clapper, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 31, 2012), 5, <http://intelligence.senate.gov/120131/clapper.pdf>.

16 Ibid. This same language is repeated verbatim in the 2013 “Worldwide Threat Assessment” available at <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/130312/clapper.pdf>, page 3.

17 Jack Straw, “Even if Iran Gets the Bomb, It Won’t be Worth Going to War,” *The Telegraph*, February 25, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9892742/Even-if-Iran-gets-the-Bomb-it-wont-be-worth-going-to-war.html>.

18 Fredrik Dahl, “U.N. Report May Show Slower Growth in Iran Nuclear Stockpile,” *Reuters*, February 20, 2013, [http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/21/us-iran-nuclear-iaea-idUSBRE94K0LI20130521](http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/20/us-nuclear-iran-iaea-idUSBRE91J1AH20130220;FrederikDahl, 'Iran acts to Expand Sensitive Nuclear Capacity,' Reuters, 21 May 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/21/us-iran-nuclear-iaea-idUSBRE94K0LI20130521).

Myth 5: Iran is on the brink of producing a nuclear weapon.

US, Israeli, and other western intelligence agencies have been predicting an imminent Iranian nuclear bomb since 1979. A *Christian Science Monitor* article summarizes the lengthy history of these assessments:

Breathless predictions that the Islamic Republic will soon be at the brink of nuclear capability, or—worse—acquire an actual nuclear bomb, are not new. For more than a quarter of a century Western officials have claimed repeatedly that Iran is close to joining the nuclear club. Such a result is always declared ‘unacceptable’ and a possible reason for military action, with ‘all options on the table’ to prevent upsetting the Mideast strategic balance dominated by the U.S. and Israel. And yet, those predictions have time and again come and gone.¹⁹

This long and inconvenient trail of errant predictions is not likely to persuade those who are absolutely convinced Iran is bent on acquiring nuclear weapons. After all, in Aesop’s fable *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, the wolf is real and it does attack the shepherd’s flock. However, equally plausible explanations for the fact that Iran has thus far failed to acquire a nuclear weapons capability include: (a) Iran has no intent of doing so; or (b) existing policies, sanctions, and other activities including suspected covert operations (assassinating Iranian scientists and infecting Iran’s nuclear facilities with computer viruses) have effectively deterred, delayed, or prevented Iran from producing a nuclear weapon.

Myth 6: Iran’s enrichment activities are a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

One could readily find talented lawyers who persuasively argue either side of this case. Former Secretary of State Clinton publicly claimed Iran violated the terms of the NPT. However, the international watchdog responsible for monitoring nuclear developments stops short of describing Iranian actions as a formal violation of its NPT obligations.

The confusion on this score is a direct result of the ambiguity of the deal struck by the NPT and deserves an extended treatment here since these divergent interpretations of the treaty explain the essence of the current disagreements between Iran and the P5+1.

Article IV of the NPT explicitly states, “Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with articles I and II of this Treaty.” This article provides the statutory basis for Iran’s insistence any negotiated outcome must, as a minimum, recognize Iran’s unquestionable right to enrich uranium for civilian purposes. Recent polling suggests the Iranian public continues to endorse this view despite the current pain of sanctions.²⁰

19 Scott Peterson, “Imminent Iran Nuclear Threat? A Timeline of Warnings Since 1979,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 8, 2001, <http://www.csmonitor.com>.

20 Mohamed Younis, “Iranians Feel Bite of Sanctions, Blame U.S., Not Own Leaders: Most Support Nuclear Program Despite Sanction,” *Gallup World*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com>.

However, Article III of the NPT simultaneously requires non-nuclear-weapons states to also accept safeguards as negotiated by the IAEA to verify and prevent diversion of nuclear energy from peaceful uses to nuclear weapons. US negotiators can cite this article and Iran's failure to comply fully with IAEA demands as a basis for claiming Iran has violated the NPT. Moreover, the IAEA does expressly criticize Iran for failing to implement its Additional Protocol. This bilateral agreement was negotiated between the IAEA and Iran in 2003 and provided for more stringent safeguards including expanded access by IAEA inspectors to nuclear facilities beyond the original terms of the NPT. Iran suspended its implementation in 2005 to protest continued sanctions despite its cooperation with the Additional Protocol.

So who has the better side of the argument? On balance, Iranian nuclear activities appear largely consistent with its NPT obligations, although Tehran could do more to remove existing doubts about prior activities and improve transparency with IAEA inspectors. The latest formal IAEA report on Iran never uses the word *violate* in assessing Iran's compliance with the NPT. In fact, repeated IAEA reports specifically explain "the Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of declared material."²¹ Additionally, the IAEA continues to actively monitor and inspect Iran's declared nuclear facilities with a system of installed cameras and through physical on-site inspection teams. The IAEA report of 22 May 2013 expressly confirms that "all of these [enrichment related activities] are under Agency safeguards, and all of the nuclear material, installed cascades, and the feed and withdrawal stations at those facilities are subject to Agency containment and surveillance." *In other words, after literally thousands of hours of international inspections there is absolutely no evidence that Iran is diverting enriched uranium for a weapons program.*

More recently, disputes over IAEA access to an Iranian military facility at Parchin have added to international concerns about a lack of full transparency. These conditions, along with Iran's suspension of the Additional Protocols, have left the IAEA ultimately unable to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material. These uncertainties provide the immediate basis for recent UN Security Council resolutions sanctioning Iran.

This situation is eerily reminiscent of that confronting international inspectors and Iraq in the aftermath of Desert Storm throughout the 1990s. At the conclusion of this war, the United Nations demanded the disarmament of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and created an international inspections regime (the United Nations Special Commission and its successor United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission) to ensure the destruction of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons and to coordinate with the IAEA to eliminate Iraqi nuclear weapons facilities. Although much verifiable progress was made in dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) stocks and facilities, there were disagreements between Iraqi officials and international inspectors over the extent and degree of access required. These frictions

21 International Atomic Energy Agency, Director General, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Vienna, Austria: International Atomic Energy Agency, February 21, 2013), 12, <http://www.iaea.org>; <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2013/gov2013-6.pdf>. This assessment was confirmed in the IAEA's report of 22 May 2013, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/gov2013-27.pdf>.

multiplied over time and resulted in occasional stand-offs as inspectors were delayed or altogether denied permission to enter certain sensitive facilities. These delays and obstructions were used as justification for both imposing increasingly harsh sanctions and for limited bombing attacks by the United States and Britain in 1998 (Operation Desert Fox). It was this lack of transparency and what came to be characterized as a cynical game of “cat and mouse” between Saddam and inspectors that ultimately provided the rationale for the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. US leaders and intelligence officials assumed Iraq’s failure to cooperate in the face of stringent sanctions could only indicate Saddam was actively maintaining WMD stockpiles that would eventually target American interests. In hindsight, of course, we know that the combination of international inspections and sanctions had effectively contained Saddam and prevented him from reconstituting his WMD programs.

The present IAEA stand-off with Iran over access to Parchin is a close parallel with the situation of Iraq in the 1990s. International inspectors are demanding renewed access to a facility within the Parchin military compound based on unattributed intelligence claiming that Iran at one time conducted nuclear tests with possible military dimensions. Iran has denied the IAEA access noting that IAEA inspectors had conducted a successful visit to the facility in 2005 without incident. Iran further asserts this complex has no connection to nuclear programs and is used only for conventional military purposes. Without renewed access, however, the IAEA argues it cannot confidently conclude that Iran is not conducting illicit nuclear activities. Essentially, this places Iran in the extremely difficult position of having to prove a negative. In other words, it is not enough that the IAEA finds no concrete evidence of illicit nuclear weapons activities. Instead, Iran must provide the IAEA unrestricted and immediate access to any and all Iranian facilities for an undetermined amount of time before the IAEA will give Iran anything resembling a clean bill of health. Of course, it is precisely the extent of the cooperation required of Iran that has been and will continue to be the focus of ongoing negotiations with the IAEA and P5+1. US policy-makers must decide what levels of uncertainty regarding Iran’s nuclear activities they are willing to tolerate. Iran is simply unlikely to provide international inspectors *carte blanche* to inspect everywhere at any time.

Finally, Iranian leaders make use of these disagreements over NPT obligations to attack US policies as imposing a double standard that unfairly targets Iran. Leaders in Tehran frequently point out that while the United States is leading the charge to punish Iran for its [peaceful civilian] nuclear activities, America simultaneously offers substantial military, economic, and political support to nuclear-armed states such as Israel, India, and Pakistan who are not signatories to the NPT and do not allow international inspections of their nuclear facilities. This apparent double standard fuels concern among Iranian politicians that America’s true aim is to curb Iranian power and to foster internal domestic dissent that will ultimately lead to the overthrow of the current regime in Tehran. These leaders also observe that several other countries with advanced civilian nuclear programs, including Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Israel, Pakistan, Syria, and Venezuela, refused to agree to the Additional Protocols; however, these countries are not subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny as Iran.

Questionable Assumptions About the Consequences of a Nuclear-Armed Iran

Beyond these misleading myths about Iran and the current state of its nuclear activities, American policymakers would be well advised to examine fully all assertions about the potential consequences of Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. The net effect of these dubious assumptions is a worst-case analysis that exaggerates the likely consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran and thus increases prospects for an American overreaction leading to military confrontation.

Assumption # 1: A nuclear-armed Iran will lead to regional proliferation.

While it is possible that a nuclear-armed Iran could spur other regional countries to acquire nuclear weapons of their own, policymakers should not simply assume this will be the case. Recent analysis by the Center for New American Security challenges “conventional wisdom that Iranian nuclearization will spark region-wide proliferation,” observes that historical cases of reactive proliferation are “exceedingly rare,” and ultimately concludes that “neither Egypt nor Turkey, [nor Saudi Arabia] is likely to respond . . . by pursuing the bomb.”²² A recent study from the War Studies Department of King's College London draws similar conclusions noting Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia “have little to gain and much to lose by embarking down such a route.”²³ Moreover, there is ample historical evidence both inside and outside the Middle East that one nation's possession of nuclear weapons does not necessarily lead to further proliferation among presumed competitors. For instance, China conducted its first nuclear weapons tests in 1964 and neither Japan nor South Korea have yet opted to “go-nuclear” although both countries certainly have long possessed the technical capability to do so. Ironically, the most powerful incentive for nuclear proliferation among Arab nations has been Israel's undeclared nuclear weapons capability since the late 1960s. Nevertheless, despite several Arab-Israeli wars, neither Iran nor any Arab state has developed nuclear weapons in the subsequent 50 years. Finally, there are any number of deliberate actions US policymakers could take to minimize prospects for further regional proliferation including providing friendly militaries with capable defensive missile systems and perhaps even extending America's nuclear umbrella to threatened allies.

Assumption #2: A nuclear-armed Iran will destabilize the region

As with the previous assumption, the prospect of further destabilization of the region in the wake of Iran's development of a nuclear weapon cannot be ruled out. However, Kenneth Waltz, a prominent American international relations scholar, in a recent provocative *Foreign Affairs* article entitled “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb” makes precisely

22 Colin Kahl, Melissa G. Dalton, and Matthew Irvine, *Atomic Kingdom: If Iran Builds the Bomb, Will Saudi Arabia Be Next?* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, February 2013), 7, http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_AtomicKingdom_Kahl.pdf.

23 Straw, “Even if Iran Gets the Bomb, It Won't be Worth Going to War.”

the opposite argument.²⁴ Waltz argues the overwhelming preponderance of historical evidence suggests nuclear weapons have been a stabilizing influence on international politics imposing a tremendous degree of rationality and caution on the part of nuclear powers. The most obvious case in point: The US-USSR nuclear arsenals contributed to what diplomatic historian John Lewis Gaddis aptly dubbed *The Long Peace*—a period of history uniquely characterized by the *absence* of violent conflict between the major powers. Indeed, since the advent of nuclear weapons there has not been a single major armed confrontation between nuclear powers. The same logic would likely apply to Israel and Iran.

Assumption #3: A nuclear-armed Iran will destroy the global nonproliferation regime.

There is little doubt that the immediate impact of Iran becoming a member of the nuclear club would represent a setback to global nonproliferation efforts. However, it would be a huge distortion to suggest this single event would cause the collapse of the entire nonproliferation enterprise. By any reasonable historic measure, international nonproliferation efforts have been successful. In his third presidential debate with Nixon in 1960, John F. Kennedy predicted that “10, 15, or 20 nations will have a nuclear capacity . . . by the end of the Presidential office in 1964.” Despite this alarming prediction, only 9 nations currently possess a nuclear weapons arsenal (Britain, China, France, Russia, United States, Israel, Pakistan, India, and North Korea). Not a perfect record over the span of more than 50 years, but a substantial record of accomplishment nonetheless. The addition of Iran would not upset this remarkable record.

Implications

Taken as a whole, the foregoing analysis strongly suggests there is room for a diplomatic resolution to the issue of Iran’s nuclear programs. Official US intelligence estimates indicate Iran suspended its nuclear weapons research program in 2003. Top US officials have publicly underscored their assessment that Iranian leaders have not yet made a decision to develop nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Iran’s Supreme Leader has issued a binding religious *fatwa* declaring the possession of nuclear weapons is a grave sin against Islam. In the meantime, international inspectors remain active at all of Iran’s declared nuclear sites and continue to verify enriched uranium is not being diverted to military purposes. All of these indications suggest there is a window of opportunity to convince Tehran to accept effective limits on its nuclear ambitions in return for a meaningful easing (and eventual lifting) of sanctions.

Just how long this window of opportunity will last is open to debate. Nevertheless, the long trail of erroneous assessments by Western intelligence services reaching as far back as 1979 that Iran will soon possess a nuclear weapon should cause policymakers to approach present-day alarmist calls with a high degree of skepticism. In any event, there is more to developing and deploying a nuclear weapon than assembling a sufficient number of centrifuges to produce an ample quantity of highly

²⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/August 2012): 2-5.

enriched uranium. According to a recent analysis by several former senior US officials and national security professionals, Iran would need several months to produce sufficient weapons-grade uranium for even a single bomb and then “up to two years, according to conservative estimates, would be required for Iran to build a nuclear warhead that would be reliably deliverable by a missile.”²⁵ The report further observes these activities would likely be detected by US intelligence providing policymakers a month or more to respond. The US Director of National Intelligence recently confirmed the ability of the intelligence community to give policymakers advance warning noting, “we assess Iran could not divert safeguarded material and produce a weapon-worth of WGU [weapons-grade uranium] before this activity is discovered.”²⁶

Clearly, there is time—perhaps years—to fashion a negotiated solution that serves both American and Iranian interests. The essential outlines of a negotiated deal are well known. The United States will need to recognize formally Iran’s right to enrich uranium while Iran will have to limit its enrichment activities and agree to an intrusive regimen of international inspections (something along the lines called for in the Additional Protocol previously agreed to in 2003 by both Iran and the IAEA) in exchange for the graduated lifting of sanctions.

As with any negotiation, the devil resides in the details. For the United States, however, a successful deal in the near term offers the best prospect Iran will willingly remain a nonnuclear weapons state. Serious negotiations now would take full advantage of the current international consensus behind sanctions—a consensus that history suggests will likely only fray over time. A diplomatic solution would also avoid the dangerous pitfalls of military strikes against widely dispersed, and in many cases well protected, Iranian nuclear facilities. Many military analysts are convinced these attacks would at best only delay Iran’s nuclear programs for two years or so while simultaneously strengthening the position of hardliners in Iran and bolstering their conviction that Iran desperately needs a nuclear deterrent against future military attacks.²⁷ For Iran, a negotiated resolution would ease the burden of sanctions and offer some degree of validation by the international community of nations.

US policymakers should also thoroughly scrutinize many of the worst-case assumptions about a nuclear-armed Iran. Disastrous outcomes are not preordained. In any case, the most significant of these could be mitigated through existing diplomatic, informational, economic, and military instruments. Allegations that other regional states will respond to a nuclear Iran by seeking their own nuclear weapons capability have been refuted by recent analyses. States have many reasons to eschew nuclear weapons (that is why only nine states have chosen to do possess them) and smart US policies could amplify those costs (sanctions) and provide additional political and military incentives to reassure threatened allies so they do not feel the need for an independent nuclear weapons capability. Policymakers should also derive comfort from knowing the history of the Cold War demonstrates that, by virtue of their massive destructive

25 Austin Long and William Luers, *Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action Against Iran* (New York: The Iran Project, 2012), 9, http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/IranReport_091112_FINAL.pdf.

26 Clapper, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (2013), 7.

27 For an example of this analysis, see *Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action Against Iran*.

power and the horrific scale of likely retribution, nuclear weapons are far more likely to impose a stronger sense of rationality and caution on states than they are to encourage reckless aggressive military action.

Finally, even as policymakers remain fully committed to a policy of prevention, they would be well advised to recognize that containment and deterrence remain viable strategic options should prevention fail. Iranian leaders have proven themselves to be rational actors primarily concerned with securing their own physical and political survival. Deterrence and containment successfully achieved US interests when confronting ugly, violent, and dictatorial leaders in Moscow and Beijing. There is little reason to suspect artful US strategy could not achieve similar results vis-a-vis a nuclear-armed Iran.