



Avoiding the Unnecessary War. Myths and Reality of the West-Iran Nuclear Standoff

Riccardo Alcaro

Abstract

As Iran continues to defy international requests to produce guarantees of the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme, an ever more concerned Israel has been evoking the prospect of a pre-emptive attack. Given its sensitivity to Israel's security concerns, the West could eventually support the use of force. However, while Iran's nuclear activities are indisputably a matter of great urgency, there is no need for the West to rush into a military confrontation. The available evidence shows that a nuclear-armed Iran is neither imminent nor unavoidable. The notion that Iran's activities currently pose an existential threat to Israel as well as an intolerable danger to regional and global security hinges more on speculations than on a sober assessment of reality. Finally, whereas for Israel the costs of a strike could be outweighed by its benefits, such costs would hardly be affordable for the West. It is instead in the West's interest to seek a compromise, avoiding what would be nothing less than an unnecessary war.

Keywords: *Iran / Iranian nuclear programme / Nuclear weapons / United States / Israel / European Union / International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) / Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)*

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by Riccardo Alcaro*

Introduction

Iran's interest in nuclear know-how and capabilities stems back to the time of Shah Reza Pahlavi (1941-79). Just like today, at the time, Iranian authorities insisted that they only aimed to produce nuclear-powered electricity. The United States agreed to Iranian requests for technical assistance and provided Iran with a research reactor facility in Tehran. The Americans did not take the decision lightly, as they had deep reservations about whether the Shah's exclusive claims to nuclear energy were sincere. At the time however, Iran was the United States' closest ally in the Gulf, and in the end the White House opted to honour the US-Iranian friendship.¹

The 1979 revolution that toppled the Shah and resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic brought Iran's embryonic nuclear programme to a halt, but work had apparently proceeded enough for a respectable community of Iranian nuclear scientists to form. While they lacked the know-how to master the entire nuclear fuel cycle autonomously, Iranian nuclear scientists were sufficiently expert to gather the fruits of even sporadic and irregular foreign assistance on nuclear energy development. When, in the second half of the 1980s, the Iranian clerical leadership took the strategic decision to resuscitate the nuclear programme, it could therefore count on native human capital. Foreign assistance came in the form of secret transfers of nuclear know-how provided through black market channels.²

The secrecy of the endeavour, the Islamic Republic's relative international isolation, and the fact that years of lack of investment and emigration had depleted and impoverished the nuclear scientist community, hampered Iran's advancements. Progress was made, however. In March 2003, when UN inspectors were finally admitted into Iran's hitherto undeclared nuclear facilities, they confirmed that the Iranian programme was far more advanced than previously thought. The disclosure caused international alarm, with Israel and the United States dismissing Iran's assurances of the exclusively peaceful nature of the programme and calling for action to curb it. European Union member states were equally worried, although they were initially more willing to address the issue through diplomatic engagement.

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¹ The US's European partners followed suit, with Germany agreeing to build a nuclear power plant near the coastal town of Bushehr.

² More precisely, by a clandestine network run by the Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, active from the 1980s to 2004. David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, "Unraveling the A. Q. Khan and Future Proliferation Networks", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Spring 2005), p. 111-128, http://www.twq.com/05spring/docs/05spring_albright.pdf.

While European-Iranian talks ended in bitterness in late 2005, with the parties accusing one another of having spoilt the effort,³ Western powers have continued to urge the government in Tehran to give verifiable guarantees of the solely peaceful nature of the nuclear programme. In the face of Iran's steadfast refusal to halt sensitive activities and fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN nuclear watchdog, the West has taken a number of punitive measures on its own or in coalition with its partners in the Arab world and Asia, and has successfully pushed four distinct rounds of sanctions against Iran in the United Nations Security Council.

Thus far, sanctions and international isolation have failed to persuade Iran to meet Western concerns halfway. In fact, Iran has been making steady, if slow, progress on its nuclear programme, setting the stage for an escalation that might well involve an air strike by Israel, or by Israel along with the United States, against its nuclear facilities. As military confrontation looms large, it is imperative to pause and reflect on whether engaging in airstrikes and possibly triggering a protracted conflict in such a strategically crucial area is warranted by a sober assessment of the threats and interests underpinning the Iranian nuclear question. The cost of miscalculation could be nothing less than an unnecessary war.

1. Assessing the facts

1.1. *The IAEA report on Iran's military-related nuclear activities*

In November 2011 IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano attached to his regular report on Iran's implementation of its safeguard agreement with the agency an annex listing a number of alleged military-related nuclear activities carried out by Iran.⁴ The annex, based on evidence amassed by the intelligence services of ten unnamed IAEA member states and the IAEA itself, was widely received by the media as well as several Western governments as providing the strongest case thus far supporting the argument that Iran is invariably bent on building nuclear weapons.

In particular, the IAEA findings were contrasted with the conclusion reached in late 2007 by the US intelligence community that Iran had stopped all military-related

³ For an assessment of the EU3-Iran talks, see, among others, Riccardo Alcaro, "Learning from a Troubled Experience: Transatlantic Lessons from the Nuclear Standoff with Iran", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (December 2011), p. 115-136 Maurizio Martellini and Riccardo Redaelli, "A Strategy for Defeat? The Iranian Nuclear Program and the EU-3/EU Deal", in Ettore Greco, Giovanni Gasparini, Riccardo Alcaro (eds), *Nuclear Non-Proliferation: The Transatlantic Debate*, Rome; Istituto Affari Internazionali, February 2006 (IAI Quaderni English Series No. 7), p. 69-77; Shannon N. Kile, "Final Thoughts on the EU, Iran, and the limits of conditionality", in Shannon N. Kile (ed.), *Europe and Iran. Perspectives on non-proliferation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 122-123 (SIPRI Research Report No. 21), <http://books.sipri.org/files/RR/SIPRIRR21.pdf>.

⁴ IAEA, "Possible Military Dimensions to Iran's Nuclear Programme", Annex to *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (GOV/2011/65), 8 November 2011, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>.

nuclear work in 2003.⁵ In fact, there is much common ground between the findings. The IAEA report does not provide any new evidence that the main conclusion of the US intelligence agencies - namely, that Iran has yet to take a decision on whether to build nuclear weapons - should be reversed. According to news reports, the US intelligence's most recent assessment does not differ from the 2007 one concerning this crucial point.⁶

The IAEA report has confirmed many worrisome findings that had been leaked to the media over the years. There is now a widespread belief that the Iranian government ran a structured programme aimed at developing key aspects and acquiring crucial knowledge of a nuclear weapons capacity until 2003.⁷ The programme proceeded along three parallel, but related, tracks: the acquisition, through secret procurement from abroad and indigenous capability, of the equipment and know-how needed to produce uranium suitable for use in previously undisclosed nuclear fuel cycle facilities;⁸ studies and related experiments on high explosive devices and their components;⁹ and studies on how to miniaturize a nuclear warhead so that it could fit atop Iranian ballistic missiles.¹⁰ The IAEA report states explicitly that the evidence at its disposal indicates that these activities were halted rather abruptly in late 2003, although it also says that information passed on by some member states seems to point to some residual or resumed work afterwards.¹¹

Activities included in the latter two "tracks" have hardly any rationale other than a military one; as such, they are illegal under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran is a party as a non-nuclear-weapon state and provide strong evidence that Iran has been seeking to develop a nuclear weapon capability. Not less sensitive is work on the first "track", i.e. mastering the nuclear fuel cycle and in particular an industrial process known as "uranium enrichment", despite the fact that it fully makes sense in a civilian nuclear programme. In terms of industrial resources, human capital and technological expertise, the production of fissile material (enriched uranium or plutonium) is the most complex and difficult activity of any nuclear programme, civilian and military alike. The process is in fact the same, the difference being that, to be

⁵ The document, known as *National Intelligence Estimate* (NIE), is a regularly updated report that has the consensus of all sixteen agencies comprising the US intelligence community. See National Intelligence Council, *Iran: Nuclear Intention and Capabilities*, National Intelligence Estimate, November 2007, http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf. The publicly available section of the document is only the unclassified part of the estimate.

⁶ The last NIE on Iran was published in 2010 but its content was not leaked until early 2012. Contrary to the 2007 estimate, the 2010 document is an entirely classified file. See James Risen and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Agencies See No Move by Iran to Build a Bomb", in *The New York Times*, 25 February 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/world/middleeast/us-agencies-see-no-move-by-iran-to-build-a-bomb.html>.

⁷ IAEA, "Possible Military Dimensions to Iran's Nuclear Programme", cit., p. 3-4.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6-7.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 7-10.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 11-12. More specifically, the activities listed in the IAEA report include secret procurement; attempts at acquiring nuclear material; conversion of highly enriched uranium metal into hemispherical shape (the only known use of which is to be the 'core' of a nuclear weapon); studies and related experiments on a number of components that would only fit a nuclear weapon programme, such as detonators, initiation systems, hydrodynamic experiments, and neutron initiators; and further military-related nuclear modelling and calculations (see p. 6-12).

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

suitable for a bomb, uranium is to be enriched at a much higher level (90 percent) than what is necessary for use in a reactor (where 3-4 percent is sufficient). Plutonium is a by-product of the enrichment process, but Iran has undertaken no work on it yet.

Under the NPT, uranium enrichment is legal as long as it is carried out under IAEA oversight. A corollary of this obligation is that any preparatory step towards enriching uranium should be notified to the agency. Iran's failure to do so until 2003, coupled with its inability to offer a persuasive explanation of ascertained as well as alleged nuclear-related activities, has prompted the agency to declare the Islamic Republic "in breach" of its obligation to transparency and cooperation.¹² In so doing, the IAEA has paved the way for the two main requests to Iran contained in six Security Council resolutions, namely that it suspend uranium enrichment and increase cooperation with IAEA inspectors.¹³

Iran considers the first of such requests as illegitimate since uranium enrichment is legal under the NPT. It has consequently carried on work on it, acquiring critical know-how and amassing a quantity of low enriched uranium (LEU) in theory sufficient, if further enriched, for four-to-five bombs. On top of that, the IAEA has regularly complained that the level of cooperation offered by Iranian authorities has been insufficient to dispel the agency's concerns on Iran's potential military work. At the same time, however, Iran has continued to grant the agency access to its nuclear facilities.

Against this backdrop, what can be inferred from the IAEA report concerning Iran's alleged intention to build nuclear weapons, and what with regard to the relevant work to achieve this goal?

For a nuclear weapons programme to be successful, a state (for only a state possesses the necessary industrial and technical resources necessary for such programme) needs three things. The first is the material, i.e. highly enriched uranium (HEU) or plutonium. According to the IAEA report, Iran's secret effort to acquire from abroad nuclear material or the necessary know-how to enrich uranium has had mixed results. While Iran has managed to acquire key information on how to build and run gas centrifuges - the most commonly used machinery for enrichment -, it has been less successful in acquiring the material itself. The report states that Iran's deceiving or misleading behaviour does raise concern about the possibility of undeclared nuclear material being stored or even processed somewhere in Iran, but so far no evidence to this effect has emerged. For the time being, Iran has only produced reactor-grade uranium, most of it consisting of 3-4 percent low enriched uranium plus a modest amount of 20 percent uranium, the last step before getting to the 90 percent threshold. If indeed all of Iran's uranium is accounted for, Iran could not get weapon-grade uranium without IAEA inspectors noticing it, or without previously barring them from accessing the sites where the enriched uranium is stored.

¹² The IAEA Board of Governors first declared Iran in violation of its safeguard agreement in September 2005: *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (GOV/2005/77), 24 September 2005, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2005/gov2005-77.pdf>.

¹³ United Nations Security Council resolutions on non-proliferation S/RES/1696 (31 July 2006), S/RES/1737 (23 December 2006), S/RES/1747 (24 March 2007), S/RES/1803 (3 March 2008), S/RES/1835 (27 September 2008), S/RES/1929 (9 June 2010): <http://www.un.org/documents/scres.htm>.

Second, is the capability to “weaponize”, that is, the ability to build a working nuclear explosive device. While there are some strong indications, and in some cases certainty, that Iran has produced certain equipment potentially usable for weaponization, the picture given by the IAEA report is fragmentary. Iran is said to have conducted research, preliminary studies, and experiments, but there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that it now masters all technological aspects of a weaponization programme.

The third thing needed for a nuclear weapon programme is a system of delivery, such as ground-based ballistic missiles, strategic bombers, or submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Iran has developed various generations of ballistic missiles, but so far no evidence has emerged that it is able to integrate a nuclear payload into the payload chambers of any of them. The alleged work on this front, tailored on Iran’s Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile, is said by the IAEA to have been conducted in 2002-2003.¹⁴

Wrapping up, on the basis of what is known or considered credible of Iran’s nuclear programme, the Islamic Republic is not close to acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁵ It has nonetheless made important achievements on uranium enrichment and might have mastered several, if not many, technical aspects of the process of weaponization. In addition, years of robust investments in the ballistic missile sector offer Iran a potentially suitable platform for delivering a nuclear warhead, if not now then in the not-too-distant future. The bottom line is that Iran is irregularly moving towards what is generally referred to as the “threshold” or “breakout” capacity, namely the acquisition of

¹⁴ IAEA, “Possible Military Dimensions to Iran’s Nuclear Programme”, cit., p. 11-12.

¹⁵ According to *Iran Watch*, a programme run by the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control that tracks Iran’s nuclear advancements, in the worst-case scenario Iran might have enough 20 percent-enriched uranium for two bombs by the end of this year. Further enrichment would still be required, but one should recall that enrichment to 20 percent accounts for over three quarters of the work necessary to get to the 90 percent, weapon-grade level. Thus, enriching from 20 to 90 percent should not be considered a particularly time-consuming undertaking. *Iran Watch* seems to presume that Iran has the necessary know-how to weaponize the material, and assumes that Iran’s existing ballistic missiles are capable of carrying a nuclear payload in their payload chambers. The source for these assumptions is the IAEA report, which however does not lead to such a clear-cut conclusion on both matters. According to nuclear experts, much of the work needed to build a nuclear arsenal (*Iran Watch* says 90 percent) is related to uranium enrichment, while considerably less to weaponization and delivery systems. See Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Weapons, *How Close is Iran to Acquiring Nuclear Weapons and What Has the World Done to Slow Iran’s Progress?*, Remarks delivered by Valerie Lincy at the AIPAC Policy Conference, 5 March 2012, <http://www.iranwatch.org/ourpubs/speeches/aipac-policy-conference-030512.htm>. On the basis of these assumptions, taking the time needed for bringing 20 percent enriched uranium to 90 percent, weaponize it and assemble it into a warhead suitable for Iran’s missiles into account, Iran might have its first functioning nuclear bombs some time in 2013. An apparently more balanced scenario has been sketched by the experts from the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security, who consider Iran’s acquisition of nuclear explosive materials (not a finished bomb) by 2013 a low probability, and by 2014-15 a low-to-medium probability. See David Albright *et al.*, “Preventing Iran from Getting Nuclear Weapons: Constraining Its Future Nuclear Options”, in *ISIS Reports*, 5 March 2012, p. 22, <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/preventing-iran-from-getting-nuclear-weapons>. For a less alarmist view of Iran’s nuclear progress, see, among others Jacques E. C. Hymans, “Crying wolf about an Iranian nuclear bomb”, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists Web Edition*, 17 January 2012, <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/op-eds/crying-wolf-about-iranian-nuclear-bomb>.

the know-how and resources necessary to build a nuclear arsenal in a relatively short span of time.

The IAEA report offers a comprehensive, synthetic and admittedly worrying account of Iran's activities that can be compatible, or are only compatible, with a nuclear weapons programme. Moreover, the fact that the findings are considered credible by the generally respected IAEA has dispelled any lingering doubts that Iran has in the past developed aspects of a nuclear weapons programme and that it is still flirting with the idea.¹⁶ Arguably, this is no matter that can be underestimated. Nor can it, however, be presented as the 'smoking gun' piece of evidence that Iran has decided to acquire nuclear weapons at any cost, thus adding to the case for war.¹⁷

2. Assessing the threat

Although a nuclear-armed Iran is neither an imminent nor a certain development,¹⁸ in recent times the prospect of an impending military confrontation has been continuously evoked by the media all over the world, reflecting a number of public warnings by top figures from the government of Israel. Because Israel views Iran's nuclear programme as a grave threat, potentially warranting a military strike, its view is a key factor capable of determining the future trajectory of the dispute. As such, it deserves special attention.

2.1. Israel's view of Iran's nuclear policy

The Israelis have been keen to add a layer of urgency to the nuclear dispute, presenting it as a race against time. They claim to be terrified by the possibility that Iran could shelter its nuclear programme in heavily fortified, underground facilities, where no conventional bomb, however powerful, could inflict significant damage. In February Defence Minister Ehud Barak spoke of the risk of Iran's entering a "zone of immunity", referring to Iran's intention to move key equipment into the enrichment facility of Fordow, near the holy city of Qom in central Iran, which is built deep into a mountain.

¹⁶ IAEA Director General Amano has not escaped criticism for his alleged bias towards the West. See Julian Borger, "Nuclear watchdog chief accused of pro-western bias over Iran", in *The Guardian*, 23 March 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/22/nuclear-watchdog-iran-iaea>.

¹⁷ The most recent US assessment that Iran's leadership has not taken any decision on whether to build a bomb is also based on the fact that, apparently, US intelligence agencies have not found compelling evidence that military-related nuclear work in Iran resumed after 2003. According to two experts from the ISIS, the new NIE has followed a sounder approach than its 2007 edition. While this should be reassuring as for the credibility of the assessment, the two experts point out that the level of confidence of the US intelligence in their 2010 findings is not known, implying it might be inferior to the "moderate confidence" of its 2007 evaluation. See David Albright and Paul Brennan, "The New National Intelligence Estimate on Iran: A Step in the Right Direction", in *ISIS Reports*, 22 March 2012, <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/the-new-national-intelligence-estimate-on-iran-a-step-in-the-right-directio>. For a more downbeat evaluation of the US estimate, see Ephraim Asculai, "The Iranian Decision on the Production of Nuclear Weapons", in *INSS Insight*, No. 324 (22 March 2012), <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=6286>.

¹⁸ This is the conclusion of, among others, the Arms Control Association, a US-based non-partisan organization specialized in non-proliferation issues. See Peter Crail, Daryl G. Kimball, Greg Thielmann, "The IAEA's Iran Report: Assessment and Implications", in *ACA Issue Briefs*, Vol. 2, No. 15 (8 November 2011), http://www.armscontrol.org/issuebriefs/The-IAEAs-Iran-Report_Assessment-and-Implications.

He forcefully advocated action to prevent this from happening, including military action. "Those who say 'later'", he added, "may find that later is too late".¹⁹

While the Israelis have never shared the US assessment that no military-related nuclear work took place in Iran after 2003, they do not necessarily dispute that Iran might indeed have yet to take the decision to build the bomb (although in Israeli official statements, Iran's yearning for the military option is taken for granted). At any rate, in their view this difference is ultimately irrelevant, because they see a nuclear-capable Iran as no more acceptable than a nuclear-armed Iran. Israeli leaders have nonetheless been careful not to insist too much, at least publicly, on blurring the difference between these two scenarios. This is because they do not want to be perceived as unduly pressing the US administration, which is apparently more willing to weigh the implications of that difference. Thus, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Washington in early March, he refrain from using wording from which meaningful gaps between the Israeli and US views could be inferred. However, this was also the only element of relative moderation the Israeli prime minister inserted in his public speeches.

Netanyahu expressed deep scepticism that a combination of diplomacy and sanctions, known as the "dual track" approach followed thus far by the Barack H. Obama administration, could solve the nuclear dispute - a not-too-subtle way to imply that an attack would.²⁰ While playing down the chances of success of a negotiation, the Israeli prime minister pumped up the threat. To President Obama Netanyahu reiterated that his Iran policy was premised on the assumption that the clerical leadership in Tehran aims to annihilate Israel.²¹ Speaking at the annual Washington meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the influential hard-line pro-Israel lobby, he conjured up apocalyptic images of a nuclear Armageddon. As it has become customary for Israeli political leaders, he drew parallels between Iran and Nazi Germany, and between Israel's current predicament and the conditions of Jewish inmates in extermination camps.²² Netanyahu also insisted that an Iranian "nuclear umbrella" would embolden anti-Israel armed groups such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon (both of which the Israelis consider terrorist organizations) to carry out devastating attacks not only against Israel but also the United States.²³ His words echoed the speech delivered by Israel's President Shimon Peres the previous day. Depicting Iran's clerical regime as "an affront to human

¹⁹ Harriet Sherwood, "Israel defence minister warns it may soon be too late for Iran military strike", in *The Guardian*, 3 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/02/iran-israel-ehud-barak-strike>.

²⁰ Mark Landler, "Obama Presses Netanyahu to Resist Strikes on Iran", in *The New York Times*, 6 March 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/world/middleeast/obama-cites-window-for-diplomacy-on-iran-bomb.html>.

²¹ Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu tells Obama: I have yet to decide whether to attack Iran", in *Haaretz*, 6 March 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/netanyahu-tells-obama-i-have-yet-to-decide-whether-to-attack-iran-1.416711>.

²² During his intervention Netanyahu waved a document stemming from the 1940s containing the official rejection by the US War Department to bomb the death camp of Auschwitz, where over a million European Jews were executed or died of inhumane treatment, diseases, and starvation. See Barak Ravid and Chemi Shalev, "Netanyahu in AIPAC speech: Israel cannot afford to wait much longer on Iran", in *Haaretz*, 6 March 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/netanyahu-in-aipac-speech-israel-cannot-afford-to-wait-much-longer-on-iran-1.416757>.

²³ *Ibidem*.

dignity”, Peres warned against considering it a foe of just Israel and America. In fact, he said, Iran is a “danger to the entire world” because it aims to “control the Middle East” and thereby “a major part of the world’s economy.”²⁴

Against the backdrop of such a catastrophic threat assessment, Israel’s urgency to act on Iran, including by bombing it, is understandable.²⁵ The United States and its EU partners are still wary of the military option. At the same time, they systematically mention Israel’s security as one of their main concerns in the nuclear dispute with Iran, implying that they could envisage the use of force to defend it. But to evaluate whether a preventive strike would really be justified, it is necessary first to scrutinize Israel’s threat assessment.

2.2. Threat to Israel’s existence?

Much as anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism belongs to the ideological foundation upon which the fabric of the Islamic Republic is built. It reflects a widespread perception that Israel and the United States would not tolerate any challenge to their interests and influence in the Middle East and the Gulf; a half genuine, half opportunistic contempt for the Palestinians’ plight under Israeli occupation; and an understandable concern about the US’s tacit flirting with (forced) regime change in Iran. The clerical regime has tightened links with actors that fight or are otherwise opposed to US and Israeli clout in the region, such as Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shi’a groups. Iran’s hostility towards Israel and America is at its most bitter when played out on the rhetorical field, with Iranian leaders portraying the United States (“the Great Satan”) as an imperialist power and Israel (“the Little Satan”) as an illegitimate state.

The war of words underpinning the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Israel provides plenty of arguments to speculate about catastrophic scenarios. Add to this the highly politicized climate permeating the debate on Iran in both Israel and America (and to a lesser extent Europe), and the idea that Tehran’s clerical leadership consists of nothing less than a clique of unpredictable, hate-consuming fanatics bent on Israel’s destruction becomes plausible.²⁶ In fact, in Iran, anti-Israel utterances are a constitutive part of the

²⁴ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *President Shimon Peres addresses AIPAC Policy Conference*, 4 March 2012, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2012/President-Shimon-Peres-addresses-AIPAC-Policy-Conference-4-Mar-2012.htm>.

²⁵ For an overview of Israel’s views of Iran’s nuclear issue, see Jim Zanotti *et al.*, “Israel: Possible Military Strike Against Iran’s Nuclear Facilities”, in *CRS Report for Congress*, No. R42443 (27 March 2012), p. 9-20, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R42443.pdf>.

²⁶ It is doubtful, for instance, whether Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s infamous remark in 2005 that Israel “must be wiped off the map” was more the result of improper translation than a Hitleresque declaration of intent, but few have made an effort to investigate the matter. Farsi-speaking Iran experts, such as Juan Cole, a University of Michigan professor of Modern Middle East and South Asian History, claim that Ahmadinejad was quoting a speech by great ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini which reads as follows: “the Zionist occupation of Jerusalem would vanish from the page of history”, and that militarily threatening the state of Israel was not Ahmadinejad’s intent. Other commentators, among them the *New York Times* Jerusalem bureau chief Ethan Bronner, disagree with the softening of the comment’s meaning. The fact that Ahmadinejad’s remark was followed the following year by an Iranian government-sponsored, highly publicized conference on the Holocaust in Teheran that was also attended by Holocaust deniers only added to Israel’s concerns. International news agencies picked up Ahmadinejad’s infamous utterance from the English-language website of the Iranian IRIB news agency (see [web.archive.org/web/20070927213903/http://www.iribnews.ir/Full_en.asp?news_id=200247](http://www.iribnews.ir/Full_en.asp?news_id=200247)).

narrative used by the regime to strengthen its legitimacy both domestically and in the wider Middle East. It is therefore necessary to move beyond rhetoric and check whether the Iranian regime's deeds can really match its words.

From this perspective, there is scant evidence substantiating the hypothesis that the Iranian leadership is bent on dropping an atomic bomb on an Israeli city out of hatred for the "Zionist Entity" ("they mean it", Netanyahu felt compelled to remind an apparently sceptical Obama).²⁷ The Islamic Republic's hazy ambition to foment an Islam-rooted revolutionary wave in the Gulf has since long turned into a pragmatic search for national security, regional influence, and consolidation of the clerical regime.²⁸ An unprovoked nuclear attack against Israel would destroy the premises on which those objectives are pursued: it would trigger a devastating retaliation not only by Israel but also by the United States, potentially including the use of nuclear weapons, and it would compromise Iran's international standing, including among Muslims.

Indeed, a nuclear attack would probably destroy the regime's legitimacy also domestically. Although few in the West have bothered to notice, the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has declared nuclear weapons to be contrary to Islamic beliefs.²⁹ While few outside Iran think that this official prohibition by Iran's highest authority is worth much consideration, it definitely counts for Iranians, whose support is arguably an even more critical issue for the regime than avoiding an attack by foreign powers. The clerical regime could perhaps justify the production of nuclear weapons in the face of an international predicament extremely hostile and threatening to its survival, but it would probably be unable to gather domestic consensus for an unprovoked use of such weapons. It is difficult, if not impossible, to trace the roots of such an irrational behaviour in the Islamic Republic's thirty years of history - an assessment shared also by the Pentagon's top brass (as acknowledged by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey).³⁰

Doubts about the plausibility of an Iranian nuclear attack exist in Israel as well. This is why Israeli leaders also recall the regional and global implications of a nuclear Iran. The argument here is straight and simple: a nuclear Iran would be able to deter foreign attacks and therefore extend its regional influence. The shift in the strategic regional balance brought about by Iran's yearning for hegemony would exacerbate tensions with its regional competitors, first and foremost Saudi Arabia but also Egypt and Turkey, with the risk of a regional nuclear arms race becoming a realistic prospect. All these potential developments entail an element of plausibility, although with a varying degree of probability. Hence, again an effort is needed to separate what can be considered likely from what remains purely speculative.

²⁷ Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu tells Obama ...", cit.

²⁸ Volker Perthes, "Of Trust and Security: The Challenge of Iran", in Volker Perthes, Ray Takeyh, Hitoshi Tanaka, *Engaging Iran and building peace in the Persian Gulf region*, A report to the trilateral commission, Washington, Trilateral Commission, 2008 (Triangle Papers No. 62), p. 35-119.

²⁹ *The Supreme Leader's View of Nuclear Energy*, The Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, 13 April 2011, http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1442&Itemid=13.

³⁰ "Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: We are of the opinion that the Iranian regime is a 'rational actor'", *CNN Pressroom*, 21 February 2012, <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2012/02/21/chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-we-are-of-the-opinion-that-the-iranian-regime-is-a-rational-actor>.

2.3. Invulnerability to external attacks?

Nuclear weapons are generally credited with a state's international status, as they are associated with power and power constitutes the ultimate source of influence. In addition, few people would contest that a nuclear arsenal provides, at least potentially, a formidable deterrent against foreign aggression. However, nuclear weapons do not necessarily work as effectively if the aim of the attacker is more limited than a full-scale invasion and the conflict area is circumscribed. China, for instance, sent a million troops to tackle the American counter-offensive against Communist forces in Korea during the 1950-53 Korean War being fully aware that the United States would consider the use of nuclear weapons; and Egypt and Syria, in an effort to regain territory and prestige lost during the 1967 Six Days War, attacked Israel in October 1973 counting on the fact that their limited goals would not provoke an Israeli nuclear response.³¹ Deterrence may render a country (or a regime) more secure, but only relatively.

2.4. Increase in regional influence?

The same logic applies to the notion that greater influence automatically comes when a country crosses the nuclear threshold. Nuclear weapons can be seen as part of the wide array of assets from which a country draws its international influence, but they are hardly a decisive factor. Conventional military might is at least as important, while political and diplomatic relations, financial resources, societal links and cultural affinity are definitely more important in measuring international influence. Evidence of this abounds: in spite of its massive atomic arsenal, Russia's clout derives more from its huge energy resources and, as far as the former Soviet space is concerned, to political links and cultural and linguistic affinity; India owes its recent ascendancy to the restricted club of global players to several consecutive years of spectacular economic growth rather than to its forty years old nuclear arsenal; and Pakistan may have reached a level playing field with its arch-rival India after detonating its first nuclear bomb in 1998, but has not increased its regional influence by any significant measure (actually, Pakistan's regional influence has hardly extended beyond Afghanistan, where its nuclear arsenal plays no role).

Historical and comparative experience thus offers little support to the argument that a country can successfully compel another to act (or abstain from acting) by way of nuclear pressure - what nuclear experts refer to as "nuclear compellence" (as opposed to nuclear deterrence).³² Nuclear aggression - for whatever exercise in nuclear compellence has to be presented as a credible threat of aggression to be effective - is one of the few international taboos which has remained unbroken since the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.³³ An Iranian attempt at exerting nuclear

³¹ Israel went nonetheless on nuclear alert; Egypt and Syria had been informed about Israel's secret nuclear weapon arsenal by the Soviets. See Seymour M. Hirsch, *The Sampson Option. Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy*, New York, Random House, 1991, p. 243, footnote.

³² On this matter, see the seminal work by Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1966 (new ed. 2008).

³³ See Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo. The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

compellence would probably trigger an international response, involving several if not all major players, that would nullify whatever benefits it wished to obtain.

Equally flawed is the argument that a nuclear Iran would get more leeway to press its neighbours because they would refrain from responding to an Iranian conventional attack or other kinds of coercive action (including through actions pursued by its allies) for fear of a devastating counter-retaliation. This strategy would only postpone the moment in which the Iranian government would have to take the decision to threaten to use nuclear weapons and face the consequences.

More credible is the argument that the Iranian clerical regime longs for a deterrence capability and the prestige generally associated with nuclear weapons. This might not be as catastrophic a scenario as many fear, but still entails dangers so great that preventing it remains an urgent priority. These dangers revolve around the potential of a nuclear arms race in the Gulf and the Middle East and the endurance of the international non-proliferation regime.

2.5. Collapse of the non-proliferation regime?

There are at least three countries that might feel compelled to catch up with Iran: Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. However, no automatism should be presumed.

Turkey is part of a nuclear-armed military alliance, NATO, hosts US nuclear weapons in its bases, and has recently agreed to install parts of a US-built and NATO-run ballistic missile defence system on its soil. These are all good reasons for Turkey to remain a non-nuclear-weapon state.³⁴

Saudi Arabia has developed over time a deep relationship with the United States - ranging from counter-terrorism cooperation to Saudi massive presence in American financial markets - which would work as a US-imposed brake to Saudi potential nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, the nuclear dispute with Iran has prompted the United States to undertake a military build-up in the Persian Gulf, coupled with pledges of US military aid packages not only to Saudi Arabia but also to the smaller Gulf states. On one occasion, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton even went as far as to predict the extension of the US "nuclear umbrella" over its allies in the Gulf if Iran indeed went nuclear.³⁵ Similarly to Turkey, Saudi Arabia has at least as many good reasons to forgo the nuclear military path than do otherwise.

Egypt is a more complicated case. The Egyptians have historically struggled to resist the temptation of the atomic bomb. A key factor behind their restraint has been massive US assistance (worth over one billion dollars a year, most of which in military aid), which is to continue to have a moderating effect even on a post-Arab Spring

³⁴ Sinan Ülgen from the Carnegie Europe centre rightly contends that Turkey's reluctance to embark on a military nuclear path also descends from its strong commitment to define the rules of international civilian nuclear governance. See Sinan Ülgen, "Turkey and the Bomb", in *The Carnegie Papers*, February 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_bomb.pdf.

³⁵ James Rosen, "Clinton: U.S. Will Extend 'Nuclear Umbrella' Over Gulf if Iran Obtains Nuclear Weapons", in *FoxNews.com*, 22 July 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/07/22/clinton-extend-defense-umbrella-gulf-iran-obtains-nuclear-weapons>.

Egypt. In fact, whatever government emerges from the unwieldy political process ongoing in Egypt would be ill-advised if it added yet another complication to the mountain of political and economic problems it is set to cope with. Egypt's dire need for foreign assistance, both political and financial, would not be well served if the new government in Cairo were to flirt with dreams of an indigenous nuclear arsenal.

In addition, all three aforementioned countries are compliant parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. US security guarantees, financial assistance, and "moral" persuasion are to be factored in when assessing the motivations that Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Egypt might have to remain committed to the treaty. But they are part of a broader strategic calculus extending beyond the bargain with the United States. The NPT has been an effective, if imperfect, means to avoid uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapon states for over forty years. While Iran's withdrawal would deal a severe blow to this fundamental pillar of international security, a nuclear arms race in the Gulf would all but vanquish its residual authority. Together with US pledges of aid and security guarantees, the unwillingness of Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to take responsibility for the near collapse of the international non-proliferation regime make a nuclear arms race an unlikely prospect.

Nevertheless, such a prediction is only plausible in the short- to mid-term. An Iranian atomic bomb would stimulate the debate in Ankara, Riyadh and Cairo (and elsewhere, for that matter) about the merits of emulation. As long as the strategic landscape does not change dramatically, that debate is likely to remain simply theoretical. But if the geopolitical predicament were to change for the worse, with these countries feeling more insecure, their nuclear calculus would be subjected to closer scrutiny. A breakdown in their relations with the United States or the latter's reduced power and engagement on the world stage, for instance, would be a major game-changer.³⁶ But at least in the short-to-medium terms, the critical and most tangible issue for these countries would probably be the assessment of the costs Iran would have incurred after going nuclear. Were such costs to outweigh the potential benefits clearly, then the Turks, Saudis and Egyptians could still deem remaining in the NPT in their best interest; if not, their withdrawal from the treaty would become a real possibility.

2.6. Appreciating the difference between nuclear-armed and nuclear-capable Iran

To complete the review of the threat assessment of Iran's nuclear plans, a word is needed on whether the Israeli claim that a nuclear-capable Iran is an undistinguishable menace from a nuclear-armed Iran is justified.

A nuclear-capable Iran would aggravate the anxieties not only of Israel, but also of its neighbours. It would consequently engender a demand for greater protection, which would likely take the form of enhanced military cooperation with the United States. In a worse scenario, countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey could eventually calculate that their best option of defence is to develop an autonomous nuclear weapons capability. Tensions between Iran and its contenders would heat up and the zero-sum game mentality, which already informs interstate relations in the Gulf, would

³⁶ Ülgen admits that such a development could change even Turkey's nuclear calculus. See Sinan Ülgen, "Turkey and the Bomb", cit., p. 4.

take even deeper roots. In sum, while less volatile than in the case of a nuclear-armed Iran, the strategic landscape that would follow Iran's acquisition of a breakout capability would still be deeply troubling.

However, "nuclear-capable" is a vague notion. It may indicate that all necessary personnel, facilities and materials as well as financial resources of a military programme are in place, with just a nod by Iran's Supreme Leader keeping Iran from building nuclear weapons. Alternatively, "nuclear-capable" can also mean that a country masters key technological know-how, such as uranium enrichment, and possesses the necessary knowledge for both weaponization and delivery systems, but has nothing like a "dormant" nuclear weapon programme. Clearly, the former option is so close to a nuclear-armed scenario to be considered nearly intolerable; the latter scenario, however, could be deemed acceptable if a proper system of international monitoring and verification on Iran's nuclear activities were established. The nuclear-capable scenario then differs from the nuclear-armed one in one crucial respect: it would leave greater room for prolonged crisis management. This is a key difference that should matter when considering the merits of a preventive strike against Iran.

3. Assessing the interests

A military strike is generally referred to, including by Israel, as the option of "last resort" should diplomacy fail. This seems to imply that, in spite of the political costs that may come with it, an attack would at least successfully address the Israeli and Western ultimate concern about putting an end to the nuclear standoff with Iran. This assumption, however, is highly disputable.

3.1. *The costs of a military strike*

Even the Israelis admit that an air operation can slow down, but not destroy altogether, Iran's nuclear programme. How far the slowdown can go is a matter of debate, the key factor being whether the air strike is carried out by Israel alone or in cooperation with the United States. Iran's nuclear facilities have been scattered across a country the size of Germany, France and Britain combined; some of them have been built underground, others close to crowded cities, and several of them are protected by air defences. By all accounts, Israel does not possess enough aircraft to hit all facilities and defences at the same time; it would have to concentrate on select targets,³⁷ which would reduce the attack's effectiveness. Even so, the magnitude of the undertaking is such that many analysts, including former CIA chief Michael Hayden, maintain that it is beyond Israel's capacity.³⁸

³⁷ Most notably the two known enrichment centres in Natanz and Fordow, both of which have been fortified, as well as the heavy water reactor under construction at Arak (heavy water reactors are generally used to produce plutonium) and the gas conversion facility in Isfahan (in order to be enriched with centrifuges, uranium must first be converted into gaseous form).

³⁸ See Elisabeth Bumiller, "Iran Raid Seen as a Huge Task for Israeli Jets", in *The New York Times*, 19 February 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/20/world/middleeast/iran-raid-seen-as-complex-task-for-israeli-military.html>.

According to some calculations, Israel would need to mobilize at least one hundred planes that would have to fly 1,000 miles over unfriendly space (the route over Iraq being the most likely choice), fend off Iranian defences, hit simultaneously several targets, and fly back home.³⁹ Given the distance, Israel's bombers would have to refuel in air, but Israel is not believed to have enough air tankers.⁴⁰ In addition, the use of tankers might imply additional aircraft to protect them. Finally, it is uncertain whether Israel possesses bombs with enough power of penetration to damage underground facilities.

In light of these difficulties, few believe that Israel would embark on a military strike without the support of the United States, but even US participation would not guarantee its success.⁴¹ While speaking and acting as if Israel possessed the capability to hit Iran's nuclear programme alone,⁴² Israeli leaders will strive to ensure that the United States joins the attack. To convince a reluctant Obama administration, Israel may count on massive bipartisan support in Congress and in the whole lot of Republican presidential contenders.⁴³ With the US media and public opinion keenly sensitive to Israel's concerns, and an anything-but-granted reelection to win in November, Obama cannot afford to be perceived as soft on Iran. Hence, he has made rhetorical concessions to Israel - most notably his refusal to consider containment of a nuclear Iran⁴⁴ - that might soothe it in the short run. However, they could also reduce Obama's room for manoeuvre in the future if the stalemate with Iran drags on, making a US attack an obliged choice.

The costs of an air operation are an equally disputed issue, although most analysts tend to agree that they could be very high.⁴⁵ Iran could retaliate with a barrage of missiles against Israel, an attempt at closing the Strait of Hormuz (where around 35

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ The Obama administration deems it possible however that Israel might use bases in Azerbaijan, north of Iran, which would spare Israeli jets around 800 miles of fuel. See Mark Perry, "Israel's Secret Staging Ground", in *Foreign Policy's* website, 28 March 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/03/28/israel_s_secret_staging_ground.

⁴¹ Elisabeth Bumiller, "Iran Raid Seen as a Huge Task for Israeli Jets", cit.

⁴² In a recent press interview, Defence Minister Barak said that he is not against attacking Iran alone, although he did make clear that having the US on board is a key Israeli concern. See Herb Keiron, "Barak: Iran must be given deadline in nukes talks", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 23 March 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?id=263079>.

⁴³ Of the four candidates still running in the Republican primary campaign, frontrunners Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum have both adopted a hawkish stance on Iran, as has Newt Gingrich; the only exception is Ron Paul, who holds an isolationist view of US foreign policy. Romney has authored an op-ed in the *Washington Post* on the matter: "How I would check Iran's nuclear ambition", in *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mitt-romney-how-i-would-check-irans-nuclear-ambition/2012/03/05/gIQAnEYItR_story.html; see also the pointed response by John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: "Romney's wrong-headed assertions about Iran", in *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/romneys-wrong-headed-assertions-about-iran/2012/03/07/gIQAcKCvxR_story.html.

⁴⁴ Obama ruled out the option of containment in his 4 March 2012 intervention at the AIPAC convention, available on the 2012 AIPAC Policy Conference's website (<http://www.aipac.org/get-involved/attend-policy-conference/follow-pc/sunday-morning-plenary/president-barack-obama>).

⁴⁵ *Foreign Affairs* has collected a number of opinions on the potential pros and cons of a strike against Iran. The contributions to the debate are available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/collections/the-iran-debate-to-strike-or-not-to-strike>.

percent of the world's seaborne oil transport transits), and/or by urging its allies in the region to attack Israeli and US targets.

An air strike by Israel or the United States would result in a "rally around the flag" call by Iran's regime (with a good chance that its domestic popularity would surge, at least in the short term) and a tightening of the screw on internal dissent. Furthermore, the Iranian leadership would not necessarily be deterred from re-starting the nuclear programme. In fact, the regime could seize the opportunity to pull out of the NPT, make a case for an indigenous nuclear deterrent, and expel IAEA inspectors, thereby depriving the world of the agency's invaluable oversight. In part, this was the pattern chosen by Saddam Hussein's Iraq after Israel destroyed its only nuclear reactor in Osirak in 1981: the Iraqi nuclear programme went underground (it was dismantled only after the 1991 Gulf War).⁴⁶

An attack would exacerbate tensions in the region. The situation in Afghanistan, where Iran wields some influence, and Iraq, where Iran has considerable influence, could deteriorate. In the former, Iran could lend support to forces opposing the NATO-led coalition, making its presence there untenable. In the latter, Shi'a groups would push for siding with Iran and against the United States, which could lead to renewed tensions with, if not violence against, their Sunni and above all Kurdish counterparts, who are more sensitive to US friendship.

An attack could compromise the UN Security Council's cohesion, as a number of countries are opposed to it, and weigh heavily on the West's relations with other key players that have also expressed opposition to the military option, such as China, Russia, Brazil and Turkey. Those carrying out or supporting the attack would have a difficult time in persuading the rest of the world that the case for a war was indeed indisputable. As shown above, the available evidence does not support this argument.

On top of that, a new war in the oil-rich Gulf region could result in oil prices skyrocketing, hardly an optimal development for a world economy still reeling, in particular in the West, from the effects of the great recession of 2008-9.

Last but not least, a military strike carries the risk of planting the seeds for a protracted conflict in the region. If Iran were to re-start its nuclear programme after the attack, in some years' time (depending on the intensity of the damage inflicted on Iranian facilities) Israel and the West would face a situation in which Iran would again be

⁴⁶ Arguments supporting the view that the bombing of Osirak convinced Iraqi leadership of the necessity to build up a nuclear arsenal clandestinely can be found in Sammi Salama and Karen Ruster, "A Preventive Attack on Iran's Nuclear Facilities: Possible Consequences", in *CNS Feature Stories*, 12 August 2004 (updated 8 September 2004), <http://cns.miis.edu/stories/040812.htm>; Charles Duelfer, "Regime Strategic Intent", in *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD* (The Duelfer Report), 30 September 2004, https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/index.html; Bob Woodward, *State of Denial*, Washington, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007, p. 215; Richard K. Betts, "The Osirak Fallacy", in *The National Interest*, No. 83 (Spring 2006), p. 22-25, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/the-osirak-fallacy-1093>; and Dan Reiter, "Preventive Attacks Against Nuclear Programs and the 'Success' at Osirak", in *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (July 2005), p. 355-371, <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/Osirak.pdf>.

considered dangerously close to the nuclear threshold. The attacker/s would thus risk locking itself/themselves into an unsustainable cycle of strikes.

3.2. Comparing Israel's, the West's and Iran's interests

The potential costs of an air operation are such that one may wonder why Israel and, to a lesser extent, the United States continue to refer to it as a practical solution. One interpretation is that it is a carefully orchestrated performance staged to convince the Iranians that this is their last chance to enter serious negotiations on their nuclear programme before suffering Israel's and/or the US's wrath. Iran's recent decision to re-engage in talks with the EU3+3, the informal group formed by Britain, France, Germany, China, Russia and the United States that has been handling Iran's nuclear issue since 2006,⁴⁷ seems to lend some substance to this reading. Be as it may, this strategy would amount to a hazardous act of brinkmanship, as it can only be applied once. Were the talks with Iran to lead nowhere, Israel and the West would be left with few or no alternatives but war (or support to war), lest their credibility suffer a serious blow.

Another interpretation is that many in Israel, America, and even in Europe think that the potential benefits resulting from a strike would outweigh the potential costs associated with it. If this last attempt at diplomacy fails, the attack would be welcomed as a lesser evil. This calculus might perhaps be true for Israel, but not for the United States and Europe.⁴⁸

It is difficult to say to what extent the Israeli government believes in its rhetorical demonization of Iran. There might be sections of the political establishment and public opinion that really fear a nuclear aggression by Iran, but most of the political and security leadership must be aware that this is, at best, an extremely unlikely scenario.

Behind the rhetoric of the "existential threat" lies a more concrete concern about Israel's losing, in the long term, strategic superiority over its regional foes. The pursuit and maintenance of such superiority, a constant in Israel's history, largely depends on preserving military and technological superiority, but psychological aspects also play a role. For Israel, striking Iran would not only mean slowing down its nuclear programme, but also imparting the regime the harsh lesson that any attempt at neutralizing Israel's superiority comes with a high price. Israel's greatest fear is not that of being annihilated, but that Iran's clerical regime, protected by the nuclear arsenal, develops over time political and military assets that might constrain Israel. Again, it is difficult to say how an isolated Iran - because Iran would be internationally isolated if it were to go openly nuclear - could make much military and technological progress. But Israel thinks in the long-term, and in the long-term everything can change; no-one can predict how the emerging multipolarity at the global level might affect events in the Gulf twenty or

⁴⁷ The group is more commonly known to the media as the "Iran six" or the "P5+1", as all its members except Germany are Security Council permanent members. The phrase "EU3+3" derives from the fact that the group has originated from a diplomatic initiative by the three European states, which first engaged Iran in nuclear talks in 2003-2005.

⁴⁸ For the argument that Israel's and America's interests on Iran do not overlap, but even collide, see John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "Mr Obama must take a stand against Israel over Iran", in *Financial Times*, 5 March 2012, p. 9.

thirty years from now. Even if isolated, Iran would remain the focus of a number of global players, not least because of its massive energy resources.

Israel's calculus is to make the costs of Iran's nuclear advancements excessively high, including by striking it. The implications of an attack for regional stability would be grave, but for Israel they may be ultimately bearable. Many Israelis doubt that Iran would ever try to close the Strait of Hormuz because it lacks the military capabilities to do so; but Israel would be comfortable even with an Iranian attempt to do so, as the United States and probably others in Europe and elsewhere could not but intervene to safeguard their energy interests. The debate in Israel about whether Iran's ballistic missiles are capable of inflicting heavy damage on its civilian population is open (Defence Minister Barak has predicted that an Iranian retaliation could, as a maximum, provoke 500 casualties).⁴⁹ On balance, however, one may assume that Iran's potential retaliation is not considered such a formidable deterrent by the Israelis. The same applies for any potential action Hamas or Hezbollah would undertake in show of solidarity with Tehran. The longer-term costs of a military confrontation with Iran, i.e. further destabilization of the Middle East and the Gulf, are less of a worry for Israel than for other players, as Israel is long accustomed to living in an hostile region. This is not to say that Israel is desperate for attacking Iran; but Israel is ready to envisage an attack because the costs associated with it are, in its view, outweighed by the benefits.⁵⁰

For the United States and its European Union partners things stand differently. The West, and the United States in particular, is painfully extricating itself from years of conflict in the wider Middle East theatre. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have cost it a lot in terms of human casualties, financial resources and international standing, while they have brought little results. The risk that an attack increases the odds that Iraq and Afghanistan, already on the brink of becoming failed states, descend into greater instability, have already been recalled. The inability, or unwillingness, of the United States and Europe to press Israel to make significant concessions to the Palestinians contributes to keep the West's and especially America's approval ratings in the Arab world at historical lows. NATO's intervention in Libya might have partially mitigated the widespread perception that the West is wary of revolutionary change in the Arab world, but the fact remains that the Western response to the so-called Arab Spring has been indecisive and not free of ambivalence.⁵¹ In spite of the Sunni-Shi'a divide, a new war against Muslim Iran, whose government's criticism of the West and championing of the Palestinian cause are in synch with the preferences of the Arab public, would further damage the West's standing in the region extending from North Africa to South Asia. Even if the attack were carried out by Israel alone, the West and the United States in particular would be held responsible, if only for having let it happen. As Arab public

⁴⁹ Aron Heller, "Israelis fear home front vulnerable to Iranian attacks", in *USA Today*, 20 February 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-02-20/israel-iran/53177692/1>.

⁵⁰ For a critical assessment of Israel's evaluation of the potential consequences of a strike against Iran, see Ehud Eiran, "What Happens After Israel attacks Iran", in *Foreign Affairs Snapshots*, 23 February 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137300/ehud-eiran/what-happens-after-israel-attacks-iran>.

⁵¹ See Riccardo Alcaro and Miguel Haubrich-Seco (eds), *Re-thinking Western Policies in Light of the Arab Uprising*, Roma, Nuova Cultura, March 2012 (IAI Research Papers No. 4), <http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=2&contentid=739>.

opinion is destined to influence Arab governments to a greater degree than in the past, the West can ill-afford alienating it indefinitely.

In sum, if Israel can cope with the destabilizing effects of an air strike against Iran, the West would be in a more difficult spot. Neither the United States nor European Union member nations have an interest in conflictual relations with regional players. In fact, there is a strong underground logic favouring cooperation between the West and Iran. An understanding between Tehran and Washington would defuse regional tensions, help contain the risk of destabilization in Afghanistan and Iraq, and contribute to stabilizing oil markets.

It may seem odd to speak of an Iran-West understanding in the midst of a crisis that might escalate into war. Certainly no significant level of cooperation can be expected in the short run. But just like Israel, the West should think long-term: having struggled to cope with an unstable Middle East for over fifty years, it would be ill-advised to think it can go on so forever. Avoiding a war with Iran would help this effort. The hope that a change of regime in Iran would significantly alter the picture is probably misplaced. The regime does not seem to be at risk of overthrow (contrary to Arab autocracies, the clerical regime does enjoy support amongst large sections of the population); further, the Iranian leadership has cleverly turned the defence of Iran's nuclear "rights" into an issue of national pride, supported by hard-liners as well as reformers. Even if it occurred, a regime change would not necessarily imply a change of behaviour.

The threat assessment review conducted above shows that there is no need for the West to rush into a military adventure at serious risk of backlash. The "dual track" approach it has been following so far, which combines sanctions with the offer of dialogue and cooperation, can still work if it is wisely rebalanced towards the diplomacy component. It might be that part of the fractious Iranian leadership would even welcome an attack because it believes it can capitalize on it to reinvigorate popular consensus and break definitively with the West and the IAEA. The West should deprive it of this chance. Time is not necessarily on Iran's side. Sanctions will bite hard: with the threat of targeting the US-based activities of foreign companies doing business with Iran, particularly the Iranian Central Bank, the United States has managed to restrict Iran's access to international financial markets considerably. When the EU embargo on Iranian oil imports enters into force next July, Iran's predicament will look even more precarious. Furthermore, pressure on Iran to enter negotiations is going to come not only from the West, but also other key players with no interest in an escalation, such as Russia, China, or Turkey.

As argued above, the one advantage the Iranian regime is more likely to obtain from an atomic bomb is deterrence against a foreign invasion. This is no minor issue for a country that counts among its foes two nuclear-armed powers such as the United States and Israel. But the costs it would incur could well outweigh the benefit of deterrence. For Iran, going nuclear without being previously attacked would amount to a 180 degrees reversal of the public diplomacy campaign it has conducted so far, which has aimed at invigorating support for its nuclear "rights" both domestically and

internationally by insisting on the solely peaceful nature of its nuclear programme.⁵² This notwithstanding, Iran has been unable to avoid harsh sanctions. If the Iranian regime were to exercise the military option in the current circumstances, it would lose the favour of those international players, such as Russia, China, Turkey or Brazil, which have most forcefully resisted the Western and Israeli push for tightening the noose around its neck. For the Iranian regime, such level of isolation would pose a constant challenge to its domestic legitimacy. Iran could have more to gain from a compromise than from stubborn defiance of UN requests for greater transparency and cooperation. From this angle, its nuclear programme is more valuable as a bargaining chip with the West than as a means to get a nuclear deterrent that would come with high costs.

Soon the EU3+3 and Iran will meet for a further session of talks. To exert the maximum level of pressure on Iran, Western leaders have indulged in depicting the talks as the last chance for Iran to avoid a war. There is no need to jeopardize the outcome of the negotiation this way. Instead, the EU3+3 should put forward a credible proposal for a roadmap that would lead to the Security Council and the West to lift sanctions and Iran to accept to develop its civilian nuclear industry in phases and under strict IAEA oversight. Foreign policy and nuclear experts alike have put forward a number of valuable proposals concerning how such a roadmap could be detailed.⁵³ The West's priority in the nuclear standoff with Iran should be to seek a compromise and not hasten a military confrontation with potentially ruinous implications. A balanced assessment of the known facts, threat, and interests of the parties involved, supports this conclusion.

Conclusion

Much of the recent war talk hinges on the view that Iran is very close to crossing the nuclear weapon threshold. The known facts of Iran's nuclear activities, however, do not support yet the argument that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons, but rather a nuclear weapon capability. Israel, whose leaders have turned increasingly hawkish recently, insist that no difference should be made between a nuclear-capable and a nuclear-armed Iran, because for Iran it would only be a matter of time before actually going nuclear. This eventuality is said to be the greatest challenge Israel has ever confronted. Hence, its call for urgent action, including a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Israel's threat assessment cannot be taken at face value, however. In fact, even a nuclear-armed Iran would not pose a direct threat to its existence (no more than

⁵² According to a recent Gallup survey, 57% of Iranians support Iran's developing an autonomous civilian nuclear programme, while only 40% view the acquisition of nuclear weapons favourably and 35% are opposed. See Gallup, *Iranians Split, 40% to 35%, on Nuclear Military Power*, 15 February 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/152633/iranians-split-nuclear-military-power.aspx>.

⁵³ Just to mention the most recent ones, see International Crisis Group, "In Heavy Waters: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Risk of War and Lessons from Turkey", in *ICG Middle East and Europe Report*, No. 116 (23 February 2012), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iran/116-in-heavy-waters-irans-nuclear-program-the-risk-of-war-and-lessons-from-turkey.aspx>; see also David Albright *et al.*, "Preventing Iran from Getting Nuclear Weapons ...", *cit.*, in particular p. 32 and ff.

Israel's nuclear arsenal poses a direct threat to Iran today), and would not be able to increase its regional influence by an appreciable measure. The regime in Tehran would be safer from the risk of a forced regime change from abroad, but Iran would not be immune to more limited forms of attack. An Iranian atomic bomb would nonetheless severely weaken the NPT regime, with the risk of a near collapse becoming a realistic prospect if a regional nuclear arms race ensued. While the latter is a distant (but not implausible) prospect, an Iranian atomic bomb would definitely exacerbate regional tensions and eventually turn the Gulf into an even more unstable flashpoint. A nuclear-armed Iran would bring about a serious deterioration of international security. A nuclear-capable Iran, which is a more likely scenario today, would also be a source of concern. The difference is that it would leave greater room for diplomacy.

The West has a great interest in seeking a compromise. In the current circumstances, embarking on, or supporting, or simply nodding to a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities would be unwise. Not only would a strike not necessarily "resolve" the Iranian nuclear question. Also, the destabilization of the Gulf region that would likely follow an attack(s), if not in the short then in the mid-term, does not suit Western interests in any way, while it could be a bearable burden for Israel, long accustomed to living in a hostile region. This critical divergence between Israel's and the West's long-term interests is what should impose caution on Washington as well as on European capitals. Furthermore, the Iranian regime itself - or at least a considerable section of it - is uncomfortable with the prospect of being treated as an international pariah the likes of North Korea. If presented with an acceptable way out, it might yet decide to trade its nuclear programme with its gradual re-integration into the international community.

There is much scepticism that the forthcoming talks between the EU3+3 and Iran can deliver any significant results. Yet, under the haze of a highly politicized debate (both in the West and Iran), it is still possible to spot the undercurrents potentially leading to a concerted solution to the nuclear standoff. Western leaders should premise their approach to Iran on such undercurrents rather than on an inflated threat assessment.

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