

Between Stagnation and Chaos: Iran and the Middle East

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The Middle East is not a region given to incremental change and moderation. Countries in the region may wallow in economic, political and social stagnation for decades and then suddenly leap into unrest and volatility that threaten to undermine the fabric of their societies. The very threat of such instability then serves as a warning to all involved not to challenge the status quo again. Ultimately, it is human nature to prefer a bitter status quo to revolution — which offers equally the hope of a better life and the danger of the unknown. Indeed, only one country (or society) in the Middle East has undergone a true revolution — Iran. All regime changes in the Arab countries have been military coups with a thin veneer of ideology. The “radical” or revolutionary trend in the region is paradoxically represented by the ultra-conservative Islamist trend — ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafi-Jihadis and al-Qa’ida in the Sunna world and Iran and its proxies (Hizbullah et alia) on the Shi’a side. Except for the reformist movement in Iran, there is no “middle class” revolution — or any liberal-democratic tendencies — that challenges the status quo.

Today, more than ever, the Middle East is in a state of tension between the forces of status quo and the forces of radicalism. The former are represented by the conservative and predominantly pro-Western regimes, such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia (though the last of these plays a pivotal role in nurturing the forces of radical change against the rest of that group), while radical forces are represented primarily by Iran and the Sunna fundamentalist ideology.

The state of tension has been exacerbated by a sense of enhanced threat (in the eyes of the former) and of enhanced opportunity (in the eyes of the latter). The key ingredients of this tension are: the fragility of the status quo regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where octogenarian leaders are in power and the future of their succession is unclear; the looming threat of a nuclear Iran; a perception of a “Shi’a threat” to the predominance of the Sunna-Arab world; and what is widely seen as the withdrawal of the United States from regional leadership and from direct

involvement in the defense of its allies in the region. Contrary to conventional wisdom in Europe (and in the current American administration), the Israeli–Arab conflict is not perceived as a potentially existential threat to these regimes.

Among all these elements, it seems that an “opinion poll” among Arab leaders of the region would place Iran at the top of the list of threats. Iran is seen not only as a strategic threat to the neighboring Gulf states but also as a threat of historic dimensions to the traditional predominance of the Sunni Arabs in the region. Even the domestic Sunni Islamist threat is now seen, to a great extent, as an extension of the Iranian challenge. It is widely believed in the region that the audacity of the Sunni fundamentalists feeds off the Iranian challenge in two manners: some of the organizations (Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, parts of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan) have increasingly become “proxies” or supporters of Iran, are emboldened by Iranian successes and are handled by Iranian intelligence agencies to undermine the stability of the Arab countries; and others, such as al-Qa’ida, succeed in mobilizing support by invoking the Shi’a threat and exploiting the deep anti-Shi’a sentiments in those countries. Notwithstanding the Arab political convention of referring to the Palestinian problem as the core problem of the region, in political reality it is not treated as such. The Palestinians are dealt with as part of the permanent pathology of the region, but are seen as a condition that can be quarantined within the confines of the Israeli–Palestinian context. A solution to the Palestinian problem is not so very urgent to the regional powers as to take domestic risks for it.

There is no doubt that, left to its own devices, Iran will achieve a military nuclear capability within a few years. For the Islamic regime, nuclear weapons are a strategic response to the threat from the US¹ and Israel, an umbrella under which it can expand its influence in the region and a “membership card” to an exclusive and respected club of “superpowers.” Therefore, there is no “enticement” that the West can offer Iran that would equal the advantages of the status of a nuclear power. Iran, perceived by its neighbors as having a nuclear capability, would have much more leverage over oil production policy.² Iran would also enjoy an “umbrella” for subversion of its neighbors and immunity against conventional retaliation for the terrorism it sponsored against its neighbors and Israel. The success of Iran in being the first regional power to acquire nuclear weapons would also surely raise its prestige in the eyes of the Muslim “street” and exacerbate the domestic threat to the status quo regimes. This would effectively put paid to any hopes of an Israeli–Arab peace process. Hence, the hopes (harbored by many in Europe for some time, and of late in Washington) that Iran will remain content with mere “threshold” status seem to be naïve; all the above goals will not be served by such a status. Furthermore, domestic pressures in Iran would make it difficult to forego the nuclear program; the efforts and monies spent on the nuclear

project, the prestige of key figures and apparatchiks in the regime and the affront to national pride, if Iran were to be coerced into giving up the program, will play a role.

The Iranian response to Western demands for negotiations over the nuclear program reflects this situation. Tehran offers to enter into a dialogue for building new mechanisms for the international community.

These mechanisms include:

- a reform of the UN Security Council and the IAEA;
- the right to acquire space technology;
- the universality of the NPT (world disarmament);
- cooperation in the global financial crisis; and
- fighting drugs and crime.

In essence, Tehran seeks to play the role of a regional superpower even before it has acquired the coveted status of a nuclear power. Iranians want to be co-opted into forging a new world order. Prior to transmitting the response, an Iranian spokesman declared that Iran “takes into account the international economic crisis and the war in Georgia.” Subsequently, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reiterated that Iran is willing to discuss all issues on the agenda of the international community except for “Iran’s rights to nuclear technology.” This response is clearly indicative of Iran’s goals and its assessment of the situation. Tehran could have responded as it did in the past—by offering negotiations on the nuclear issue and filibustering. However, it now assesses that the threat of US intervention or crippling sanctions has passed; that the West has, in essence, reconciled itself to a nuclear Iran, and is now looking for a “face-saving” solution to the conflict. Based on this assessment, Iran now wishes to use the process in order to achieve both the strategic goal of international recognition of its status as a regional power and the domestic goal of proving to the populace that its confrontational attitude has paid off. Western acceptance of the Iranian basis for negotiations proved that the Iranians’ gamble paid off. The West has played into the hands of Tehran and has locked itself into fruitless (or even worse—capitulationist) negotiations.

If “carrots” have little chance of success, what are the chances of sticks being successfully employed? Most pundits would agree that sanctions without total compliance and cooperation of at least Russia (if not China, as well) will not be effective. The chances of bringing Russia on board at the moment seem slim. The Russian interests are well served by supporting Iran against Western pressures, knowing that even if the US or Israel intervenes and takes out the Iranian nuclear

program militarily, Russia will reap the fruits of its support. Some observers have speculated that the only real “carrot” that the US can offer Russia in return for cooperation in regards to Iran may be in Central Asia and Eastern Europe; American concessions to Russia in its erstwhile sphere of influence may be important enough to bring Moscow into the fold against Iran. It seems, though, unlikely that the US will offer to sacrifice the new members of NATO and the EU for such a “grand deal.”

The strategic—indeed historic—implications of a nuclear Iran should ostensibly galvanize the countries of the region into action. However, this is not the case for the time being. In light of the common wisdom that the United States is withdrawing from its former interventionist policy, many of the regimes in the region are already accommodating themselves to the new “neighborhood strongman.” This is evident in the behavior of Qatar, Oman and even Saudi Arabia itself. Iran will probably take advantage of this period of Arab strategic inferiority in order to cement its hegemony in the region. A prime example may be by renewing its call for “leaving the security of the Gulf in the hands of the Gulf countries themselves” —a euphemism for Iranian hegemony without American or British presence. In this demand, Iran will be able to leverage the fact that the very failure of the US to prevent Iran from going nuclear and the regional image of the Obama administration as conciliatory toward Tehran will diminish any faith that the countries of the region may have in American guarantees. The Iranian ability to employ subversion will also make it difficult for those regimes to continue to rely on the “infidel” to defend them against (Muslim) Iran.

In the long run, therefore, it is reasonable to assume that along with a first response of appeasement of Iran, the Arab countries will attempt to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. This will probably start with Saudi Arabia and it is hard to believe that countries like Egypt, Syria and even Iraq could allow themselves to lag behind. It would also be reasonable to assume that until these countries acquire a nuclear capability, they will rely more and more on chemical and biological weapons (the “poor man’s bomb”), thus eroding the international taboo on those weapons as well. One may argue that the Iranian nuclear program has been developed over decades, and it may take the other countries in the region no less time to reach that status. This is an optimistic argument which ignores the development of nuclear proliferation since the inception of the Iranian program in the days of the Shah. The emergence of North Korea as a proliferation regime par excellence, the porous nature of the Russian nuclear industry and the anticipated disintegration of Pakistan (which was a source of proliferation even when the regime was strong and in control) will all facilitate acquisition of nuclear technology. Regarding the latter, the A.Q. Khan network is very much intact, poised to market its expertise and already has contacts with the potential clientele.

Middle Eastern nuclear proliferation, as described above, may not remain restricted to states. In such a scenario, weapons of mass destruction may filter down to non-state entities in two ways: to any of a plethora of quasi-states with differing levels of control (Kurdistan, Palestine), terrorist organizations (al-Qa'ida, Hamas, Islamic Jihad) and rival ethnic groups for whom the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a hostile state would be an incentive to acquire at least a limited WMD capability; and finally to "proxy" or "surrogate" terrorist groups (Hizbullah;). The Cold War experience that nuclear powers did not transfer to their allies or proxies nuclear weapons or technology to make them would not apply. The break in the dam gates of proliferation would make it easier for those entities to acquire the weapons, and the states may have an interest in providing them to keep control over their own proxies.

A rapprochement between the conservative Sunni regimes (primarily Saudi Arabia) and the Jihadi-Salafi movement would be an additional consequence of a nuclear Iran. The Jihadi-Salafi movement is the most powerful anti-Shi'a force in the region. Faced with a Shi'a threat in the form of Iran, a Shi'a Iraq, a Hizbullah-controlled Lebanon and a pro-Iranian wave in the Sunni Arab street, the religious establishments will feel the need to co-opt the anti-Shi'a forces and bring them into the fold. Of course, they would then be riding the proverbial hungry tiger. Ultimately, it is impossible to co-opt such movements on one target (the Shi'as) and to expect them to abandon their other goals (liberation of the Muslim world from Western influence).

Some experts seek to look on the positive side, arguing that a nuclear Iran would not be a destabilizing factor in the region. Indeed, they suggest, a nuclear Iran may provide the foundation for a regional order based on the Cold War doctrine of mutually assured destruction, or MAD. Even a perfunctory analysis of this argument should expose its flaws. Today we know that the situation during the Cold War was much less stable than we care to remember. In any case, there are substantial cultural, religious, political and organizational differences between the relationships between the protagonists in the Cold War and that which exists between the candidates for nuclear powers in the Middle East. The dynamics of regional proliferation today seem to make a nuclear arms race inevitable. The interests that stemmed the tide of nuclear proliferation in Europe and East Asia during the Cold War do not apply to the Middle East. Furthermore, whereas the two superpowers of the Cold War did all they could to avert the transfer of nuclear weapons to their allies, there exists in the Middle East a likelihood of transfer of nuclear weapons not only to other states but to non-state (terrorist) entities as well. A distinction should also be made between the Cold War paradigm of bi-polar deterrence based on second strike and the multi-polar situation, in which no nation would have such a capability, which will be the case in the Middle East.

Nuclear decision making in the Middle East will also be affected by the role of religion and religious leaders and a different level of rationality in political decision making than that which characterized the Cold War. Last but not least, the Cold War was characterized by strong executive hierarchical command and control structures, in stark contrast to the diffuse, multi-polar, "polycratic" regimes which exist in the Middle East.⁵

The aftermath of the June 12 elections in Iran has revived the hope that the scenario painted above may be preempted by a change in regime. Some experts even draw on an analogy between Iran today and the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, focusing on Iran's economic situation, the behavior of the younger generation, who are attracted to Western culture, and the disintegration of the Communist party's authority. These democracy promotion advocates argue that American "engagement" with civil society in Iran will produce an Iranian revolution just as American involvement with the opposition in the former USSR encouraged that opposition and ultimately contributed to the fall of the Soviet Empire.

This hypothesis is seductive. It offers a painless solution to the problem by which the Iranian nation itself will free the international community from the need to take tough decisions. However, the disparity between the Soviet Union before its collapse and Iran today is vast. The Communist ideology that went bankrupt in the Soviet Union was a secular ideology superimposed on the nation's root religion. Its abandonment did not entail giving up basic cultural beliefs. In contrast, while the Islamic regime in Iran may not be liked by the populace, it does represent a strong tradition in Iran that existed before the revolution and retains the devotion even of those who oppose the regime. Furthermore, the Soviet Union did not fall overnight: its collapse can be traced to first stages of détente in the 1970s when it became clear to the Kremlin that it had to reach a strategic accommodation with the US. The Soviet Union also went through a series of destabilizing leadership changes, with one octogenarian coming fast on the heels of another. Other forces that had no little effect on the fall of the Soviet Union were the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and the defeat in Afghanistan. There is no analogy in Iran for any of these forces. In any case, even if, despite the dissimilarity to the Soviet Union, Iran is heading toward a democratic counter-revolution, the timeline for the transformation makes this irrelevant to the nuclear crisis. Even the optimists do not see democratic change happening within the next year or two, the time most experts believe Iran needs to cross the threshold of a military nuclear capability.

Therefore, if the hopes of engagement or a popular revolution in Iran solving the Iranian nuclear conundrum are empty, the chances of effective sanctions with Russian acquiescence are slim, and the consequences of a nuclear Iran so dire that we may be left with the military option. This is, no doubt, the least attractive

option to prevent a nuclear Iran, and such action will not pass without Iranian retaliation. However, the doomsday prophecies of an all-out war in the Middle East and the Gulf, accompanied by an Iranian blockade on oil exports from the Arab Gulf states, missile attacks on all Iran's neighbors, attacks on shipping in the Gulf, blocking of the Straits of Hormuz, and at the end of the day a worldwide Muslim intifada in the wake of such an attack are greatly exaggerated.

Iran's strategic capabilities are, for the time being and until it acquires a nuclear capability, limited and short-range. Iranian attacks on the Gulf states in retaliation for an Israeli attack would draw in Washington, with all the implications of an American attack on Iran; Iran's capabilities to attack Israel directly are limited to the present stocks of Shehab missiles, which would have to penetrate Israel's Arrow defenses. Even if some of the missiles succeed in hitting Israel, the damage that they would cause can be sustained. Other options, such as provoking Hizbullah and Hamas attacks on Israel and terrorist attacks abroad, would also be sustainable from the Israeli point of view, and Iran would have to take into account further losses of its strategic assets.

Therefore, the Middle East may be on the brink of fundamental change—but not for the better. Compromise with Iran that will leave Tehran with a nascent nuclear capacity—on the constant verge of breakout—will lead the Arab states to respond by initially accommodating themselves to the new “bully on the block.” They will then co-opt the forces within the Sunna Arab world that are willing to act against Iran and the perceived Shi'a predominance and ultimately achieve their own nuclear option.

Notes

- ¹ The fact that the US attacked Iraq despite its having chemical and biological weapons only strengthens the Iranian resolve to achieve a nuclear capability, which presumably is the only non-conventional capability that can effectively deter Washington.
- ² In a situation reminiscent of Saddam Hussein's demands on Kuwait on the eve of the Iraqi invasion of that country in August 1990, Iran would prefer that its neighbors reduce production in order to obtain more revenue from its own oil. There is no doubt that its neighbors would respond differently to demands from a nuclear Iran than to Iran without such a capacity.
- ³ See Shmuel Bar, *Standpoint*, August 2009.