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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

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We Can Live With A Nuclear Iran

Barry R. Posen

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The intense concern about Iran's nuclear energy program reflects the judgment that, should it turn to the production of weapons, an Iran with nuclear arms would gravely endanger the United States and the world. An Iranian nuclear arsenal, policymakers fear, could touch off a regional arms race while emboldening Tehran to undertake aggressive, even reckless, actions.

But these outcomes are not inevitable, nor are they beyond the capacity of the United States and its allies to defuse. Indeed, while it's seldom a positive thing when a new nuclear power emerges, there is reason to believe that we could readily manage a nuclear Iran.

A Middle Eastern arms race is a frightening thought, but it is improbable. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, among its neighbors, only Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey could conceivably muster the resources to follow suit.

Israel is already a nuclear power. Iranian weapons might coax the Israelis to go public with their arsenal and to draw up plans for the use of such weapons in the event of an Iranian military threat. And if Israel disclosed its nuclear status, Egypt might find it diplomatically difficult to forswear acquiring nuclear weapons, too. But Cairo depends on foreign assistance, which would make Egypt vulnerable to the enormous international pressure it would most likely face to refrain from joining an arms race.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has the money to acquire nuclear weapons and technology on the black market, but possible suppliers are few and very

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closely watched. To develop the domestic scientific, engineering and industrial base necessary to build a self-sustaining nuclear program would take Saudi Arabia years. In the interim, the Saudis would need nuclear security guarantees from the United States or Europe, which would in turn apply intense pressure on Riyadh not to develop its own arms.

Finally, Turkey may have the resources to build a nuclear weapon, but as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it relied on American nuclear guarantees against the mighty Soviet Union throughout the cold war. There's no obvious reason to presume that American guarantees would seem insufficient relative to Iran.

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Facilitating Aggression?

So it seems that while Iranian nuclear weapons might cause considerable disquiet among Iran's neighbors, the United States and other interested parties have many cards to play to limit regional proliferation. But what about the notion that such weapons will facilitate Iranian aggression?

Iranian nuclear weapons could be put to three dangerous purposes: Iran could give them to terrorists; it could use them to blackmail other states; or it could engage in other kinds of aggressive behavior on the assumption that no one, not even the United States, would accept the risk of trying to invade a

nuclear state or to destroy it from the air. The first two threats are improbable and the third is manageable.

The Terrorism Question

Would Iran give nuclear weapons to terrorists? We know that Tehran has given other kinds of weapons to terrorists and aligned itself with terrorist organizations, like Hezbollah in Lebanon. But to threaten, much less carry out, a nuclear attack on a nuclear power is to become a nuclear target.

Anyone who attacks the United States with nuclear weapons will be attacked with many, many more nuclear weapons. Israel almost certainly has the same policy. If a terrorist group used one of Iran's nuclear weapons, Iran would have to worry that the victim would discover the weapon's origin and visit a terrible revenge on Iran. No country is likely to turn the means to its own annihilation over to an uncontrolled entity.

Because many of Iran's neighbors lack nuclear weapons, it's possible that Iran could use a nuclear capacity to blackmail such states into meeting demands—for example, to raise oil prices, cut oil production or withhold cooperation with the United States. But many of Iran's neighbors are allies of the

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United States, which holds a strategic stake in their autonomy and is unlikely to sit by idly as Iran blackmails, say, Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. It is unlikely that these states would capitulate to a nuclear Iran rather than rely on an American deterrent threat. To give in to Iran once would leave them open to repeated extortion.

Some worry that Iran would be unconvinced by an American deterrent, choosing instead to gamble that the United States would not make good on its commitments to weak Middle Eastern states—but the consequences of losing a gamble against a vastly superior nuclear power like the United States are grave, and they do not require much imagination to grasp.

A Less Constrained Iran?

The final concern is that a nuclear Iran would simply feel less constrained from other kinds of adventurism, including subversion or outright conventional aggression. But the Gulf states can counter Iranian subversion, regardless of Iran's nuclear status, with domestic reforms and by improving their police and intelligence operations—measures these states are, or should be, undertaking in any case.

As for aggression, the fear is that Iran could rely on a diffuse threat of nuclear escalation to deter others from attacking it, even in response to Iranian belligerence. But while it's possible that Iranian leaders would think this way, it's equally possible that they would be more cautious. Tehran could not rule out the possibility that others with more and better nuclear weapons would strike Iran first, should it provoke a crisis or war. Judging from cold war history, if the Iranians so much as appeared to be readying their nuclear forces for use, the United States might consider a pre-emptive nuclear strike. Israel might adopt a similar doctrine in the face of an Iranian nuclear arsenal.

These are not developments to be wished for, but they are risks that a nuclear Iran must take into account.

Nor are such calculations all that should counsel caution. Iran's military is large, but its conventional weapons are obsolete. Today the Iranian military could impose considerable costs on an American invasion or occupation force within Iran, but only with vast and extraordinarily expensive improvements could it defeat the American military if it were sent to defend the Gulf states from Iranian aggression.

Each time a new nuclear weapons state emerges, we rightly suspect that the world has grown more dangerous. The weapons are enormously destructive; humans are fallible, organizations can be incompetent and technology often fails us. But as we contemplate the actions, including war, that the United States and its allies might take to forestall a nuclear Iran, we need to coolly assess whether and how such a specter might be deterred and contained.

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