

Original Paper

Looking Beyond a Nuclear-Armed Iran: The Major Implications of Nuclear Iran for the Middle East

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Abstract

Iran has pursued nuclear weapons for over four decades. The basic reasons for this quest have remained unchanged in the face of the most crippling sanctions. Almost three and a half years after Trump's withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Pact (JCPOA), Tehran officially announced that it has enriched uranium up to 60%, very close to the 90% suitable for nuclear weapons. Iran is highly likely to be the world's next nuclear state. A nuclear-armed Iran will be emboldened to accelerate its aggressive activities in the region and act against its neighbors with little fear of retribution. Moreover, Iran's network of proxies would adopt a more confrontational approach towards Israel. Besides, Iran's politics of threat can have serious socioeconomic consequences for Israel.

Iran's possession of nuclear weapons could arguably set off a cascade effect, encouraging other major regional powers to move in the same direction. The West, particularly the United States, would seek to offset this risk by providing a "defence umbrella". However, some might be reluctant to be openly protected by the United States or would find the umbrella questionable and choose nuclear option for both security concerns and prestige.

Keywords

Iran, Israel, nuclear weapons, nuclear proliferation, Middle East

1. Introduction

The Middle East is the most penetrated subsystem of the international political system. Ever since Napoleon's expeditionary force landed in Egypt in 1998, it has been an object of rivalry among the Great Powers. The strategic value of the Middle East was considerable as the gateway between Europe

and the Far East (Book of Fawcett, pp. 254-255). The Middle East is also known as the cradle of all the “Abrahamic religions” which has disintegrated the region into different religious enclaves. Besides, the discovery of oil, in the early part of the twentieth century, enhanced the regions’ importance for the global economy (Shams-uz-Zaman, 2011, p. 168).

After the Second World War, the Middle East became one of the major theatres of the Cold War. It was constantly caught up in superpower rivalry for political influence, power, and prestige. External sources of conflict combined with internal ones led to frequent crises, violence, and wars. The most destabilizing factors in the affairs of the region has been the creation of the Jewish state of Israel and the subsequent bitter, protracted and intractable conflict between the Arabs and Israelis.

In recent decades, the Middle East has become the focal point in global politics for another important issue and that is the Iranian nuclear program. The coercive measures by the West generally failed to stop Iran’s nuclear ambition. Instead of being stopped or slowed, Iran’s nuclear program has grown exponentially in recent years. In November 2021, Iran announced that it has enriched uranium up to 60%, very close to the 90% suitable for nuclear weapons.

Evidence suggests that the policy of imposing sanctions on Iran has not dissuaded it from developing nuclear weapons. Furthermore, even an Israeli and/or US military attack against Iran’s nuclear facilities could not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons; it could only delay such development. In the face of all pressures, Iran is strongly shouldering its way into the nuclear club, and it is highly likely that Iran, sooner or later, will join the club. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the major impacts of a nuclear-armed Iran on the Middle East.

After offering an overview of Iran’s lust for nuclear weapons, this paper discusses the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran for the Middle East in three distinct sections. The first section deals with the strategic and socioeconomic consequences of Iran’s nuclear capability for Israel, since these two countries have adopted hostile approach toward each other, and even threatened destruction of each other in the past. The second section explains Iran’s deterrence policy and its dependence on the bomb as ultimate guarantor as well as provides an analysis of Iran’s potential behavior, and support for its network of proxies across the Middle East. As revisionist state, Iran believes it has the historical, cultural, even moral weight to powerfully shape the region where classic Persian empires have at one time held sway. The third section assess the likelihood proliferation in the Middle East after Iran secures its spot as the tenth nuclear state.

There are many works which discuss the proliferation issue through a holistic approach; some authors believe that major Middle Eastern states could go nuclear, and others claim that they will not seek to develop nuclear weapons after Iran acquires the bomb. This paper, first of all designates the potential would-be nuclear states and assesses the possibility of each case individually, because Middle East is a large, diverse region not ruled by the single hand; each country in the region has its domestic policies and foreign policy priorities.

2. Iran Won't Stop until It Has the Bomb

It is a common hope within Washington's foreign-policy establishment that no matter how close Iran gets to the atomic threshold, it won't detonate a bomb. Many want to believe that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's fatwa against the production and use of nuclear weapon will keep Iran a threshold state. Iran's current leader Ayatollah Khamenei has issued a religious ruling (Fatwa) that forbids the use of nuclear weapons. Apparently, based on his theological premise the use of weapons of mass destruction is against all that is holy (Kamel & Lewis, 2019, p. 82). However, that ruling may not preclude the development or assembly of such weapons. Moreover, Khamenei may have the authority to revise or reinterpret his own ruling if circumstances change (Nader, 2013, p. 5; Einhorn, 2014). Therefore, these hopes that Iran does not go nuclear are delusional (Gerecht & Takeyh, 2021). Some documents found in Iran's secret nuclear archive, seized by Israel in 2018 proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that Iran's allegedly "open" civilian nuclear program is, in fact, its nuclear weapons project (Porat, 2021). Therefore, many argue that Iran will build the bomb as soon as it can and justifies it afterward (Gerecht & Takeyh, 2021; Einhorn, 2014). Moreover, Iran has invested billions of dollars in the program and tens of thousands of people have been working on it for decades. Instead of generating economic benefits and political clout associated with a normal nuclear program, Iran's program has instead caused enormous damage, including political isolation and economic sanctions. For many, both inside and outside of Iran, these costs do not make sense if the program is for peaceful purposes only—as Iran has insisted—since the country would have been much better off economically and politically if it simply stopped enrichment of its soil and bought nuclear materials from the international markets (Huang, 2016, p. 6).

Iran has several reasons to have nuclear weapons: deterrence and regional hegemony. Ehud Barak, then-Israeli defense minister, in an interview with Charlie Rose in November 2011 made a sincere acknowledgment when asked whether he would strive for nuclear weapons had he been in Iran's shoes. Barak answered: "probably, probably. I don't delude myself that they [Iran] are doing it just because of Israel. They have their history of 4,000 years. They look around and they see Indians are nuclear. The Chinese are nuclear, Pakistan is nuclear, not to mention the Russians." (Aljazeera, 2011). It is clear that Iran is situated in a region in which nuclear weapons are viewed as common currency in the field of power and prestige and make the situation much worse if Iran does not go nuclear. Iran obviously needs nuclear weapons because it's part of a hostile world. Marin Van Creveld, Israeli military historian, once stated that Iranians "would be crazy" not to build nuclear weapons considering the security threats they face.

After years of high tensions and fitful diplomacy, it should now be clear to all that there will be no negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear issues (Takeyh, 2021). The failure of diplomacy leaves the United States and Israel with last resort: military action against Iran (The Iran Project, 2012, p. 44). Although US presidents and Israeli prime ministers have routinely insisted that they have taken no option off the table, there is no consensus on military option right now. Some believe that a military

strike on Iran's nuclear site would be a far easier than allowing Iran to cross the nuclear threshold (Brewer, 2021). Others think it is unlikely that either the United States or Israel will use military force to eliminate Iran's nuclear program. It is time to start envisioning a world with a nuclear-armed Iran (Takeyh, 2021).

It is now certain that even military attack cannot stop Iran's move toward becoming nuclear (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, p. 128). A military action involving aerial strikes, cyber-attacks, covert operations, and special operations forces would destroy or severely damage many of Iran's physical facilities and stockpiles. But according to the judgment of many national security analysts and former politicians in the US, complete destruction of Iran's nuclear program is unlikely; and Iran would still retain the scientific capacity and the experience to start its nuclear program again if it chooses to do so.

[They] believe that extended military strikes by the U.S. alone or in concert with Israel could delay Iran's ability to build a bomb by up to four years—if the military operation is carried out to near perfection, with all aircraft, missiles, and bombs working to maximum effects. A military strike by Israel alone with its more limited military capacity could delay Iran's ability to build a bomb for up to two years (The Iran Project, 2012, p. 23).

It is worth noting, an Israeli air strike is unlikely to succeed in destroying or even seriously damaging the Fordow enrichment facility, which is 200-300 feet underground, which has stored stockpile of most enriched uranium of Iran.

On the other hand, military action is not without costs. A military strike carries significant political and military risks (Edelman & Ross 2013, p. 18). Meir Dagan, former head of Israel's external intelligence agency, the Mossad, warned a number of times that an attack on Iran would "ignite a regional war." As the history of war and conflict in the Middle East reminds us, the Middle East is a tinderbox where a few sparks could all too easily ignite a major conflagration (Eiran & Malin, 2013, pp. 77-78). Iran has a strong capability to retaliate and a deep capacity for absorbing pain and suffering. It has the stomach for a protracted struggle (Mahbubani, 2008, p. 204). Such an attack will inject energy into Persian nationalism, strengthen the regime's argument that the West is a threat, and leave Iran with a grudge that it may express by deepening or initiating relationships with other states and groups hostile to U.S. purposes (Posen, 2009, p. 241). Furthermore, the attack would most likely increase Iran's resolve to develop a weapon to protect the nation and the regime (Thomson, 2014, p. 2).

Regime change should be regarded risky and unwise scenario. Not only it carries significant risk, but also it will not put an end to Iran's nuclear activities. First, it is not guaranteed that the successor government will be totally different from the present regime. John J. Mearsheimer says, there is deep-seated American belief that hostile states are essentially comprised of benign citizens controlled by evil leaders. Remove the evil leaders, the thinking goes, and the forces of good will triumph and the problem goes quickly away. In his opinion, this is not a promising view (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 109). In the case of Iran's regime fall, others suggest that even a successor government, however friendly

toward the United States and better disposed toward Israel, might still want to pursue many of the same programs that the current regime has initiated (Quillen, 2002, p. 21). Once a country has decided to develop nuclear weapons, it is almost impossible to prevent it doing so (Ramon, 2021). The historical record, according to Kenneth Waltz, indicates that a country bent on acquiring nuclear weapons can rarely be dissuaded from doing so. Punishing a state does not inexorably derail its nuclear program. Take North Korea as an example. If Tehran determines that its security depends on possessing nuclear weapons, it will never give up (Waltz, 2012, p. 2). There is not any significant doubt, James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh claim that “the Islamic Republic of Iran is determined to become the world’s tenth nuclear power” (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, p. 128), therefore, the world, soon or late, should come to terms with a nuclear Iran.

Upon the US withdrawal from JCPOA, Iran accelerated enrichment of uranium closer to weapon grade, breaching limits set by the pact. In November 2021, Iran increased its stockpile of 60% enriched uranium to 25 Kilograms (55 Pounds), While it had made only 6.5 kg of uranium enriched to up to 60% in June of that year (Reuters, 2021). Furthermore, at the same time, Iran admitted that “its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium has reached 210 kg (463 pounds). Under the JCPOA, Iran was allowed to enrich uranium to a level not exceeding 3.67%, far below the 90% suitable for nuclear weapon. Nowadays, President Biden and his Iranian counterpart showed interest in negotiation to revive the JCPOA. That said, there is no guarantee that the US and Iran will reach a comprehensive solution (Ibrahim, 2021).

3. Implications of Nuclear-Armed Iran for the Middle East

After a short introductory section, now we turn to the main point of this paper. First, I will discuss the impacts of a nuclear-armed Iran on Israel. Then, the paper will analyze the importance of nuclear weapons for Iran from survival concern to political renaissance; and finally, I Assess the Likelihood of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East once Iran gets the bomb.

3.1 The Impacts of a Nuclear-Armed Iran on Israel

The impacts of a nuclear-armed Iran will be discussed in two following parts.

3.1.1 Strategic Consequences

Waltz, one of the icons of international relations theory, published a short essay suggesting that “[a] nuclear-armed Iran would ... most likely restore stability to the Middle East.” In his view, Israel’s regional nuclear monopoly ... has long fueled instability in the Middle East ... It is Israel’s nuclear arsenal, not Iran’s desire for one, that has contributed most to the current crisis. Power, after all, begs to be balanced.” He added, “[i]f Iran goes nuclear, Israel and Iran will deter each other, as nuclear power always have.” In fact, Iran’s nuclear power would reduce imbalances in military power and paves the way for more regional and international stability, not less (Waltz, 2012, pp. 2-5; Waltz, 2009, p. 231). In the same vein, Davin Hagerty concluded that “[t]here is no more ironclad law in international relations theory than this, nuclear states do not fight wars with each other.” (Sagan, 2009, p. 220). Because in a nuclear war, there will be no ultimate winner or loser. Both sides consider it mutual suicidal move and

the mentality of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) prevents from a nuclear conflagration (Waltz, 2009, p. 228). However, these conclusions seem to ignore the Cuban missile crisis, when the Soviet Union and the United States apparently came close to a nuclear confrontation. Furthermore, during the Kargil fighting between India and Pakistan, two nuclear states, the former went to “Readiness State 3,” which means that warheads were prepared for placement on delivery vehicles, and the later state apparently took similar steps (Waltz, 2009, p. 234). These examples suggest that although the possibility of a nuclear war is very low, however, it should not be regarded as zero. Scott Sagan believes that future military crisis between India and Pakistan are likely to be nuclear crisis (Sagan, 2009, p. 221). The author’s view is that a nuclear-armed Iran will not bring stability to the Middle East, even it can add fuel to the current unresolved conflict for several reasons.

First, at the heart of the views of the Waltz school is a simple extrapolation from the non-use of nuclear weapons in the Soviet-US context to the future non-use of those weapons in other regions. Each nuclear state presents a distinct case and generalization about that without considering their particularities might be risky and misleading. The specific characteristics of each region and country, together with a large number of continuously changing variables, make any attempt to derive a norm extremely difficult and largely inaccurate (Dokos, 2014, p. 2). There is one important structural difference between the new nuclear states and their cold war predecessors: Just as each new child is born into a different family, each new nuclear state is born into a different nuclear system in which nuclear state influence each other’s behavior (Sagan, 2009, p. 226). Given that the Middle East is unrivalled for long-standing conflict, irreconcilable disputes, feelings of distrust and hatred, and recurrent wars (Waltz, 2009, p. 233), it does not make much sense to compare it to other regions in the world.

Second, Waltz failed to consider that the Iranian government has historically preferred to confront Israel through its network of proxies such as Hizballah and Hamas, and nuclear weapons are unlikely to change this policy (Nader, 2013, p. 32). In this case, a nuclear-armed Iran will not be a force for stability. Historical evidence from the Cold War suggests that the war between two superpowers were not that cold; it turned into hot conflicts in many countries. Since the United States and the Soviet Union were afraid of mutual assured destruction, they did not initiate any war directly, however, they fought so many wars through proxies. Since 1945, the proxy war has been a perpetual element of modern warfare and will continue to be so (Mumford, 2013, pp. 1-2). The end of the Second World War ushered in the nuclear era, starkly accentuating the risks associated with going to war or challenging the security of a nuclear nation. This nuclear weapon-induced stability/instability paradox arguably caused nations to find alternative outlets for their strategic ambitions, where the consequences were contained yet the rewards tangible. The global reach of the Cold War soon demonstrated, in the mid-twentieth century, that engagement in proxy wars was a convenient means by which the superpowers states could exert their influence and attempt to maximize their interests in parts of the Third World, while simultaneously reducing the risk of conflict escalation (Mumford, 2013, p. 3). The

Cold War remained “cold” for a reason: the emergence of nuclear weapons had ensured that ‘hot’ wars between superpowers would have such unparalleled consequences as to make direct conflict between the two morally unthinkable (Mumford, 2013, pp. 38-39). It is beyond doubt that a nuclear-armed Iran will keep sponsoring its affiliated proxies across the Middle East. These proxies and Israel are most likely to keep challenging and inflicting pains upon each other in every opportunity that presents itself. Third, far from restoration of stability, it is highly likely that a nuclear-armed Iran would embolden Iran’s network of proxies which could adopt a more confrontational approach towards Israel (Shams-uz-Zaman, 2011, p. 171; Hobbs & Moran, 2012, p. 143). From Tel Aviv’s perspective, an Iranian nuclear capability could negate Israel’s overwhelming military superiority over Hizballah, Hamas and other potential adversaries. An Iranian nuclear weapons capability that would serve as an “umbrella” for its allies could significantly hamper Israel’s military operations in the Palestinian territories, the Levant, and the wider Middle East (Nader, 2013, p. 31). In an August 2012 interview, Ehud Barak said “if we will need to take action against Hezbollah and a nuclear Iran would declare that an attack on Hezbollah constitute an attack on Iran, what we shall do then?” Barak further stated that non-state actors “cannot be deterred in the way that countries can exert deterrence against one other. (Eiran & Malin, 2013, p. 80). Because nuclear weapon cannot be used against guerillas (Ayoob, 2014, p. 76). The implications of such a development would be much graver than now.

Fourth, although Iran with nuclear capability will not welcome a nuclear conflagration with any country including Israel, however it will be emboldened enough to start a direct conventional war with Israel (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, p. 130). The 1999 Kargil conflict demonstrated that nuclear-armed states can fight wars (Sagan, 2009, p. 220). This concern has already been expressed by some Western politician. During the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, President Bush averred that the event would have been much more dangerous had Iran possessed nuclear weapons. His implication was that Iran would have been more inclined to involve itself directly in the crisis. At that point, Iran’s leadership would shelter behind its nuclear deterrent. Great powers would be afraid to attack Iran directly, especially to invade Iran, if they faced the risk of nuclear escalation. Therefore, Iran would be free to do anything from meddling in the internal affairs of other countries to invading them with conventional forces, because it could control its costs (Waltz, 2009, p. 244).

One thing is certain, although Iranian officials repeatedly claimed that Israel, the “Little Satan” is a true cancerous tumor at the heart Islamic countries that should be cut off (Huang, 2016, p. 13), however a nuclear Iran will not pose an existential threat to Israel (Rand). “If this is 1938”, as former Israeli prime minister Netanyahu famously once declared, “then Iran is Romania, not Germany.” (Zakaria, 2008, p. 17). Despite a widespread belief to the contrary, Iran is not being led by irrational Mullahs, but “perfectly sane ayatollahs who want to survive just like any other leaders.” (Waltz, p. 5). A primary purpose of Iran’s nuclear arsenal would be to deter an American and/or Israel attack against Iran, not to destroy Israel. Taking all what discussed into consideration, the possibility of nuclear weapons’ use in a potential conflict involving Iran and Israel should not be dismissed as impossible forever (Nader, 2013,

p. 21). Therefore, it seems that the Middle East is stranger to stability in the foreseeable future and a nuclear-armed Iran would make the world, particularly the Middle East, a far more dangerous place (Brewer, 2021).

The fear of Iran with nuclear capability among Sunni Arab countries may be the only positive outcome for Israel. Many Sunni-Arab states (including Saudi Arabia) believe that this is now the time to make peace with Israel so as not to have to deal with two adversaries at the same time (Mahbubani, 2008, p. 181). The decision by four Arab countries (the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Morocco and to a lesser extent, Bahrain) to forge ties with Israel in 2020 is not unrelated to Iran (Ephron, 2020). Hussein Ibish, a senior Resident Scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, asserted that even “Saudi leaders like Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have focused on the benefits of normalization with Israel.” (Ibish, 2021).

3.1.2 The Socioeconomic Challenges

Israelis also believe that a nuclear-armed Iran would have many socioeconomic effects on Israel. Yarom Ariav, a former Director General of the Israeli Finance Minister, asserted that “nuclear Iran involves considerable economic costs to Israel, from its effect on our economy rating to large security outlays.” Israelis are concerned that Iran with nuclear capability would hinder the state’s ability to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (Eiran & Malin, 2013, p. 81). Many argue that nuclear Iran would cause insecurity in Israel. Insecurity, in its turn, creates “crisis of confidence along with uncertainties.” Insecurity destroys investor’s confidence and even may lead to mass exodus of local and foreign companies (Abubakar, Tanko, & Abubakar, p. 175). Nobody wants to invest in a country where security is a challenge, because that can hamper the future of such investment. Columnist Lawrence Solomon articulated the concern:

You’re the CEO of IBM or intel or Siemens or Nestle or any one of the 500 other Western companies that have opened up operations in Israel ... What do you do should Iran get the bomb? Do you continue to invest in Israel, on the hope that Iran doesn’t make good on its promise to wipe it off the map?... [W]ould your top executives agree to stay in or relocate to Israel, knowing that they would be putting their families at risk of perishing in the same mushroom cloud that could snuff out the tiny country? (Solomon, 2012).

If this fear materialized, it would be a major problem for Israel: in 2010, 49 percent of its industrial exports (excluding diamonds) were from the globally oriented high-tech sector (Eiran & Malin, 2013, p. 81). In turn, this sector is heavily dependent on external funding from Research and Development (R&D) centers set in Israel by global giants like Microsoft and Google, purchases of Israeli firms by foreign firms, and venture capital funding from abroad. Indeed, Israeli economist Yair Aharoni reported that in 2005 50 percent of the output in R&D and communications equipment was produced in Israel by foreign direct investment-based enterprises.

The concern goes well beyond high-tech. Indeed, Aharoni showed the fifteen out of Israel’s top 100

industrial and service companies are FDI-based enterprises that include not only technology companies but also food, metal, and paper producers. Correspondingly, employment in some sectors is heavily dependent on foreign direct investment. Almost half of the employees of the electronic communication sector and about a third of the basic metal sector worked in 2005 for FDI-based enterprise (Eiran & Malin, 2013).

And additional socioeconomic fear is that a nuclear Iran would diminish Israel's ability to retain and attract the globally-oriented, highly qualified portions of its labor force, which are the main engines of Israel's economy. As Ephraim Sneh, former Deputy Defense Minister, who lost his grandparents in the Holocaust, asserted, if we have to live under the shadow of an Iranian nuclear bomb, Israeli Stanford graduates won't come to Israel. From Sneh's perspective, a nuclear-armed Iran could lead to the withering of Israel even if the bomb would not be used. He believes, even the possibility that Iran would use a nuclear weapon would halt Jewish immigration into Israel, deter foreign investment, and lead Israeli technological elite to leave the country. "This is how the sunset of the Zionist dream begins. Even without a nuclear event, Khamenei will succeed in bringing about the decay of the state of Israel."

3.2 From Survival to Political Renaissance

Many experts agree that Iran's nuclear program appears more like a means than an end for Iranian leadership in its quest for two major purposes: regime survival and regional hegemony (Dokos, 2014, p. 1). The foremost priority of the leaders in Tehran is ensuring the survival of the Iranian regime (Thomson, 2014, p. 3). The desire to survival is non-ideological in nature; any political system, whether a democracy or theocracy, is motivated by the instinct to survive and prosper (Nader, 2013, p. 3). As Waltz argues, "[i]n anarchy, security is the highest end." When security is guaranteed, states safely can seek other goals (Waltz, 2010, p. 126). Because once a state is conquered, it is unlikely to be in a position to pursue other aims. Soviet leader Josef Stalin put the point well during a war scare in 1927: "We can and must build socialism in the [Soviet Union]. But in order to do so we first of all have to exist" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 31).

Iran's post-revolutionary leaders are steeped in a political culture that is obsessed with the country's historical victimization at the hands of foreign power. The inequitable agreements that winnowed the country, such as the Treaties of Golestan and Turkmanchai, which ceded most of the Caucasus to Russia, are frequently invoked as a cautionary tale for contemporary diplomacy (Maloney, 2017, pp. 4&9). The "Great Satan" is merely the latest in a line of rapacious world powers that have exploited Iran and eroded its sovereignty in pursuit of their own interests. Tehran prioritize regime survival above all else, and self-preservation has become intertwined with a deeply ingrained conviction that the world, led by Washington, bent on the revolutionary state's eradication (Maloney, 2017, pp. 9-10).

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran reinforced the revolutionary leadership's paranoia, appearing to fulfill their expectations of a US-backed military effort to force a pliant, pro-Western leader back into power. Ultimately, the conviction expressed by Khamenei that the invasion was not a war between two

countries, two armies; it was a war between an unwritten, global coalition against one nation. But it was the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 overthrow of Saddam that may have truly increased the perceived value of a nuclear deterrence for the Islamic Republic. In those conflicts, the United States not only used its superior military forces to defeat its adversaries on the battlefield, but it also effectively achieved regime change in both countries.

American forces surrounded Iran on all sides. In addition, the George W. Bush administration appeared to adopt a policy of regime change in Iran; Bush's 2002 branding of Iran as a member of the "axis of evil" made Iranian officials more apprehensive than before (Nader, 2013, p. 6). The Islamic Republic believes that US hostility towards Iran is institutionalized, systemized, and the result of irreconcilable ideologies (Nader, 2013, p. 3). In the light of what mentioned, self-reliance was the only option for the Islamic Republic, a principle that became enshrined within the strategic worldview of its leadership. Thus, Iran adopted a nuclear policy to deter a military attack by the United States and/or Israel (Tabatabai, 2020; Huang, 2016, p. 24).

As indicated above, although survival is the primary goal that Iran wants to achieve, it is not the only one. When its survival is assured, Iran can safely seek its next goal: regional hegemony. It is agreed that under almost any conceivable leadership, Iran would seek to play an outsized role in the Middle East. The contemporary vision of Iran's natural predominance has been reinforced throughout the modern era by a deliberate invocation of the country's legacy as the heir to the ancient Persian empire and a great civilization, and thus this vision of Iran's imperial entitlement today continues to loom large for its population as well as for its leadership (Maloney, 2017, p. 2). Archaeological evidence of early civilizations in Iranian lands go several thousand years, but the country's written history dates back to over 2,500 years ago when the Persian king Cyrus the Great founded the first world empire, stretching from central Asia to Cyprus, Egypt, and Libya (Katouzian, 2020, p. 26).

Although Iran was conquered by Arab Muslim armies in the seventh century, the gradual conversion to Islam by the majority of the population of contemporary Iran was not accompanied by a wholesale adoption of Arabic language, culture, or customs. Since the late nineteenth century, Iran's modern state-building efforts have deliberately invoked its cultural heritage and imperial lineage as a means of bolstering unity and fostering a sense of national identity. The ideational roots are epitomized by Iran's national epic, the *Shahnameh* by Abdolqasem Ferdowsi, written more than a thousand years ago. The *Shahnameh* glorifies Iran's great kings and warrior, and more generally connects Iranians as well as the inhabitants of former territories of the great Persian empire to "an imagined shared cultural past." (Maloney, 2017, p. 3).

These traditions and myths have become incorporated in contemporary political life as key frames of reference. Reza Khan, founder of the Pahlavi monarchy, appealed assiduously to the country's glorious imperial history, going so far as to change its name from Persia to Iran in order to emphasize the broad geographical sweep of the great Persian empires. For, Reza, the exploitation of history was designed to consolidate his authority; his son Mohammad Reza saw himself and his country as the rightful

successor to Cyrus the Great and Iran's storied empires. He briefly altered the official calendar to one that was based on the origins of Persian kingship, and in 1971, he staged a grandiose celebration for the ostensible twenty-five-hundred-year anniversary of the founding of the Achaemenian Empire at Persepolis, where, before throngs of foreign dignitaries, the Shah addressed the tomb of Cyrus the Great and linked himself to this legacy as *shahanshah* (king of kings) (Maloney, 2017, p. 4).

Despite Americans, for whom history is kind of old, antiquated, boring stuff (Chomsky 2007, 56), the inculcation of the exploits of the ancient Persian empire have shaped the worldview of Iranians throughout the modern era—even those who reject it. Iran's imperial past occupies a central place in daily life, expressed through the enduring allegiance to the solar calendar and the festivals around Nowruz, the Zoroastrian New Year, as well through the abiding reverence for the poetic traditions of Persian culture. These are not simply remnants of the country's cultural pluralism, but evidence of the Iranian claim to a history, and a future, as one of the greatest civilizations and the leading regional power (Maloney, 2017, p. 4).

Since the revolution, Iran's regional policies have been characterized by a considerable degree of continuity (Maloney, 2017, p. 10). That said, some argues that Iran's foreign policy has not changed since the time immemorial. From Achaemenian Empire to Safavid dynasty and from the Pahlavi dynasty to Islamic Republic, Iran has constantly sought to exert influence in the Middle East (Sharifi, 2016, pp. 233-234). Iran believes it has the historical, cultural, even moral weight to powerfully shape the region where classical Persian empires have at one time held sway (Fuller, 1991, p. 241). Therefore, Iran views its regional hegemony in the Middle East as a political renaissance (re-birth) rather than as a rise.

It is well documented that Iran's regime is a revisionist state that seeks to expand its sphere of influence in the region. (Nader, 2013, p. vii). A nuclear-armed Iran would seek to weaken the US posture in the Middle East, further diminish the influence of Israel's closest and most powerful ally (Eiran & Malin, 2013, p. 81). However, it is very hard to predict whether Iran achieves that goal. Historical evidence suggest that the United States will not reduce its presence in the Middle East readily in the face of a rising threat from nuclear Iran. Given the goals that Iran and the US pursue in the Middle East, these two powers are destined to be in an intense competitive relationship. Each has cards to play at this competition. Iran knows the region well, has an excellent geographic position, and may be able to find support in Shia Arab population in neighboring countries. The United States has a giant economy and the world's most advanced military. Historically, most state in the region consider the US their close allies. The United State will provide its allies in the Middle East with some protections that will be discussed further below (Posen, 2009, pp. 243-244).

It is likely that China come to Iran's help indirectly. Obama's "Pivot/Rebalancing to Asia" strategy has enhanced the American military presence and its activities in China's neighborhood to contain China (Zhao, 2019, pp. 382-83), this strategy suggested the transfer of resources and strategic attention from the Middle East to Asia (Saunders, 2013). If the United States reduces its presence in the Middle East

due to that strategy, Iran would be its number one beneficiary. Since the revolution, Iranian leaders have rejected the legitimacy of the US security role in the region and have sought to dissuade or reject the US forces from the Gulf (Maloney, 2017, p. 8). As much as the US reduces its presence in the Middle East, Iran's influence would be expanded to that extent. Because Iran is mindful that only great powers like the United States can block its way to the regional hegemony; the regional powers won't be able to contain Iran on their own.

It is certain that Iran with nuclear capability could be emboldened, and it will give momentum to its revisionist efforts. Mark Dubowitz, Executive Director of the Foundation for Defense and Democracies, has argued that "at a minimum, a nuclear-armed Iran will be emboldened to accelerate its aggressive activities in the region and act against its neighbors with little fear of retribution." Many analysts believe that Iran armed nuclear weapons would become an increasingly assertive regional power, seeking to expand its influence in both the Gulf region and the Levant. In such a circumstance, Iran might confront Israel with a more aggressive and capable regional alliance (Eiran&Malin, 2013, p. 80). At the same time, it should be noted that a nuclear-armed Iran will not be able to attack any regional country directly and no country would cave into Iranian's demand by having the US support. However, Iran's nuclear success would overshadow its territorial disputes with Iraq over the Shat al-Arab waterway and with the UAE over Abu Musa and Tunb islands. However, Iran is in possession of the Persian Gulf islands in dispute with the UAE, it's less likely that the later initiates a military conflict over the islands with a nuclear Iran (Nader, 2013, pp. 16-17).

3.3 Assessing the Likelihood of Regional Nuclear Proliferation

There is an old maxim that "proliferation begets proliferation." If a country acquires nuclear weapons its regional rivals will follow suit (Economist, 2021). The prospect that a nuclear-armed Iran could trigger a regional "proliferation cascade" is one of the most commonly cited dangers associated with Iran's nuclear ambitions. "Former US President Barack Obama once said that face with a nuclear-armed Iran, "it is almost certain that others in the region would feel compelled to get their own nuclear weapons. UK officials also asserted that Iran's nuclear ambitions would likely lead to "a new Cold War" in the Middle East (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, pp. 129-130).

The three countries most mentioned as candidates for following Iran into the nuclear club are Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In a March 2012 New York Times op-ed, for example, Haaretz senior correspondent Ari Shavit argued, "[a]n Iranian atom bomb will force Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt to acquire their own atom bombs." Thus, a multipolar nuclear arena will be established in the most volatile region on earth. (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine, 2013, p. 7).

Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom that Iranian nuclearization will inevitably spark region-wide proliferation deserves closer scrutiny. Historically, "reactive proliferation" has been exceedingly rare. And in the current context, going nuclear carries significant risk for every ambitious state. It is time to discuss every candidate state in detail.

3.3.1 Egypt

Egypt and Iran are natural regional rivals due to similarities in geographical size, imperial pasts, and differences in religion (predominantly Sunni Arab versus Shia Persian population). This rivalry has been borne out through a long history of strained relations and opposition including Egypt's support of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's sponsorship of Hamas and Hezbollah, the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in 1979 and Egypt's strategic relationship with the United States (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, p. 133). Moreover, as a result of Egypt's historical role as a leader in the pan-Arab movement and its status as the most populous country in the Arab world, it has always been expected to develop a nuclear weapons program (Taha, 2021, p. 13). Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that Egypt has long viewed Iran's nuclear program with suspicion hinting to US officials that Egypt "might be forced to begin its own nuclear weapons program" if Iran gets the bomb.

There is no doubt that Cairo would be concerned for reasons of both prestige and security if Iran succeed in acquiring nuclear weapons. Egypt at one time had an active nuclear energy research program, and there was concern that it could become a nuclear weapons program. It has the technological and scientific expertise and has recently announced a new civilian nuclear energy program. In 2015, Egypt signed an agreement with ROSATOM, the Russian state atomic energy corporation, to build a nuclear power plant at Al Dabaa on the country's northern coast, west of Alexandria. The agreement is a culmination of around six decades of discussions and plans in Egypt to harness nuclear energy declared for peaceful purposes. Egypt has two research reactors which are currently operational (Taha, 2021, p. 2).

Some analysts argue that absent active US diplomacy, and strategic guarantees, Egypt probably would follow suit in developing nuclear weapons. Egypt faces a number of barriers, however. First, it is highly dependent on the United States for conventional weaponry. The United States surely would suspend this relationship if Egypt decided to pursue nuclear weapons. This would be quite unsettling to Egypt's internal politics. Second, Egypt is a poor country; foreign economic assistance would also dry up. Egypt is one of the top recipient of US foreign assistance, coming third after Israel and Jordan in 2020 by receiving USD 1.43 billion in foreign assistance (Oswald, 2021). Third, given that Israel is already a nuclear-armed state, and Iran is on the threshold of become a nuclear weapons state, Egypt would go through a period of both conventional and nuclear vulnerability as it attempted to produce nuclear weapons (Sagan, 2009, p. 251).

It is worth noting, Egypt for years has pursued a strategy of nuclear diplomacy, under which it has used the non-proliferation treaty and other international for a to apply pressure to Israel's nuclear weapons program for the past four decades. It would seem very unlikely that the threat presented by a nuclear-armed Iran cause Egypt to abandon this approach. Egypt has never faced Iran in a major military conflict, nor is Egypt involved in any territorial disputes with Iran (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, p. 133). In addition, although Egypt views Iran as a regional rival, it does not see Iran's nuclear ambitions as an existential threat (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine, 2013, p. 7). Consequently, the security threat posed by a

nuclear-armed Iran is arguably weaker than the challenges Egypt has faced from other quarters. As a result, the Egyptian government is highly unlikely to divert scarce financial resources, put its peace agreement with Israel at risk and invite the ire (crippling sanctions) of the international community by pursuing nuclear weapons (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine, 2013, p. 7). In authors view, Egypt is not in a position to accept all these risks and costs, but it seems more plausible that the United States and European Union could find a package of assurances and incentives that would be acceptable to Egypt. During the Cold War, the United States offered the protection of its nuclear deterrent forces to many allies who did not possess nuclear weapons. (Posen, 2009, pp. 245-246). It is likely that the United States would simply extend its nuclear umbrella over its key Middle Eastern allies. This also occurred when China acquired nuclear weapons during the Cold War. The US nuclear umbrella covers South Korea and Japan. This is why South Korea deemed it unnecessary to pursue its own nuclear weapons when North Korea built its own nuclear capabilities. Indeed, the United States would even benefit from extending its umbrella over Arab allies as a solidified security reliance on American protection puts the United States in a very favorable light with the oil exporters in the Gulf. Moreover, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explicitly stated that the United States would consider a “defense umbrella” over the Middle East in just such a scenario. Thus, there would be no reason for Egypt to fear Shia Iran’s nuclearization (Thomson, 2014, pp. 7-8).

3.3.2 Saudi Arabia

If Iran gets the bomb, Saudi Arabia will face similar, though stronger temptations, than Egypt. Saudi Arabia is arguably the other “great power” of the Persian Gulf region, and thus a natural competitor with Iran, particularly after the collapse of Saddam (Posen, 2009, p. 251). Saudi leaders have long viewed Iran as a regional rival, and Tehran has become increasingly central to Riyadh’s strategic considerations since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Today, the Kingdom views the Islamic Republic as its principal geopolitical foe (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine, 2013, p. 15). Iran’s Shia revolutionary, also, viewed the Saudi monarchy as a cornerstone of the regional Pax-Americana. The Saudi family’s control of Mecca and Medina and its espousal of the ultra-conservative Sunni Wahhabi doctrine was a particular affront to the Islamic Republic, which viewed itself as the natural leader of the Islamic world. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was especially hostile toward the House of Saud. He accused the House of Saud of “distorting the Islamic spirit.” He also stated, “Mecca is now in the hands of a group of infidels who are grossly unaware of what they should do” (Nader, 2013, p. 12).

More broadly, Saudi leaders believe that Iranian nuclear weapons would facilitate the Islamic Republic’s aspiration for regional leadership. For four decades, Saudi Arabia and Iran have competed for regional influence, with the House of Saud serving as the self-appointed capital of Sunni Islam and a conservative defender of the status quo and the revolutionary Iranian regime serving as the advocate for Shia interests and the champion of regional “resistance” against Israel and the West. The Saudi-Iranian cold war has been fought in myriad ways and on numerous fronts, from the Iran-Iraq war to current proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and even Afghanistan (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine,

2013, p. 16).

Saudi Arabia has long aspired to achieve nuclear capacity of its own, in order to counter Iran's atomic ambitions. Saudi Arabia has not hidden its ambition, openly stating to the US as early as 2009 that it would also seek capacity if "Iran cross the threshold." In 2018 Muhammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, told CBS, an American broadcaster, that the Kingdom "does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran develop a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible." (Economist, 2021). King Abdullah had expressed the same view in 2012 (Shay, 2018). But rather than being taken at face value, such intimidations should be seen as part of a broader Saudi tactic of prodding Washington to take a tougher line toward Iran. Such warnings are akin to the much-hyped statements from Riyadh in 2006 that it would be forced to intervene militarily in Iraq if Washington did not do more to quell the sectarian bloodshed there and counter Iran's malign influence (Wehrey, 2012, p. 4).

many argue that the prospects of Saudi reactive proliferation are lower than the conventional wisdom suggests (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine, 2013, p. 8). Saudi Arabia's economic policy outlook exemplified Etel Solingen's seminal theory on the relationship between economic liberalism and nuclear restraint. Solingen argues that political coalition favoring economic liberalization are more likely to be receptive to "compromise nuclear postures that do not endanger their [economic] interests." In this regard, Saudi Arabia's emphasis on facilitating the growth of foreign investment is significant. Riyadh has cultivated extensive trade relations with most international powers and in 2012, Saudi Arabia was identified as one of the leading global economies in terms of "business-friendly regulation." The monarchy has placed emphasis on foreign investment as a means of reducing over-reliance on oil and gas, increasing employment opportunities for the local population, and reinvigorating the Saudi private sector. In this context, the acquisition of nuclear weapons would have far-reaching consequences, stalling progress and bringing progressive economic isolation, thus drastically changing the nature of the Kingdom's international trade relations (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, pp. 137-138).

Moreover, the Saudis are unlikely to engage in a race to produce the bomb because doing so could make the Kingdom's strategic predicament worse, not better. It would complicate the Kingdom's national security, risk a strategic rupture with the United States, do great damage to Saudi Arabia's international reputation and potentially make Riyadh the target of international sanctions (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine, 2013, p. 8). Saudi Arabia's economy depends almost entirely on its Petroleum sector, which in 2021 accounted for nearly 87 percent of budget revenue, 42 percent of gross domestic product and 90 percent of export earnings. Consequently, the Kingdom could be highly vulnerable to energy sanctions (Economic Indicator, 2021). Compared to Iran, Saudi Arabia is much less economically self-sufficient and cause it not to attempt to shoulder its way into the nuclear club.

In addition, Saudi Arabia does not have a developed nuclear science and technology effort. And it does not have the other industrial capabilities needed to support a nuclear weapons program and associated delivery systems. Saudi Arabia would thus take quite a long time to develop its own nuclear forces, and

like Egypt, would be vulnerable in the interval (Posen, 2009, p. 251). Given the risks and costs of such a move for Saudi Arabia, it is safe to say that Riyadh is much more likely to seek a nuclear security umbrella from either Pakistan or the United States (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine, 2013, pp. 8-9). It is needless to say why the US is “defense umbrella” candidate, but Pakistan might require some explanation. Saudi Arabia provided generous financial support (\$1 billion) to Pakistan that enabled the nuclear program to continue, particularly when the country was under sanctions. Saudi cooperation with nuclear power Pakistan has been a source of speculation about the Kingdom’s nuclear ambition. It has long been rumored that in return for that support, Saudi Arabia has a claim on some of those weapons in time of need (Shay, 2018). Pakistan, however, would face enormous pressure not to transfer complete weapons to another party. Furthermore, even if Islamabad proved willing to extend its nuclear umbrella, a potential US nuclear guarantee would likely “out compete” a Pakistanis alternative (Kahl, Dalton, & Irvine, 2013, p. 6).

Finally, Saudi Arabia does have good reason to believe that outsiders are committed to its security. The United States and other great powers have extensive economic and military interests in maintaining Saudi security. The United States has demonstrated its commitment in many ways, including war. The Saudis are accustomed to security cooperation with the United States. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is not going to follow in Iran’s foot steps and US guarantee likely would prove the most attractive option for Riyadh (Posen, 2009, pp. 251-252).

3.3.3 Turkey

Turkey also will be concerned, for security and prestige reasons, about a nuclear weapons capability in neighboring Iran (Posen, 2009, p. 252). Turkey has already decided to build three nuclear power plants to apparently reduce its dependence on importing energy. The project is part of President Erdogan’s “2023 Vision” marking 100 years since the foundation of modern Turkey. In 2007, the Turkish government began its first push in the twenty-first century to construct a nuclear power plant, in passing “The Law on Construction and Operation of Nuclear Power plants and Energy Sale.” President Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin launched the construction of the Akkuyu plant at a ceremony in Ankara in early April 2018. The Akkuyu project is based on an inter-governmental agreement signed between Russia and Turkey in May 2010.

The second nuclear plant is due to be built by a French-Japanese consortium in the Black Sea city of Sinop. The negotiations for the Sinop power plant’s contract concluded in May 2013 when a Japanese-French consortium at an estimated cost of more than USD22 billion. Turkey’s president, said on June 18, 2018, that the country will build a third nuclear power plant. The third plant will be built near the town of Igneada near the Bulgarian border. In 2023, Turkey will put into operation the first unit and Turkey will thereby join those countries that use nuclear energy. In 2018, Erdogan stated, “[o]n the anniversary of our republic, we will crown this work with success (Shay, 2018).

Some argue, however, that Turkey will not go nuclear for multiple reasons. Despite the difference between Turkey and Iran after Islamic revolution, the turn of the millennium brought a change of

direction in bilateral relations between the countries. Turkey and Iran have developed strong energy and economic links. For example, Iran is the second largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey after Azerbaijan. Moreover, Turkey has proved sympathetic to Tehran's nuclear cause. In 2009, Erdogan accused the West of "double standard" treating Iran unfairly over its nuclear program and in 2010, it voted against the imposition of additional sanctions on Iran by the UN Security Council (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, pp. 140-41).

Second, Turkey is a NATO member since 1952. Under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement, five European countries—Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey—host US tactical nuclear weapons. At Incirlik Air Base, Ankara stores the most of any NATO state, about 50 B61 nuclear gravity bombs (Bugos, 2019). Therefore, the US defense umbrella is already extended to Turkey and Turkey does not need to build its own bombs. Third, Turkey has eye on European Union (EU) membership. Membership of the EU is a political priority for Ankara and the Turkish government would be wary of jeopardizing its relations with European powers by going nuclear (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, p. 142).

Despite what mentioned, Erdogan's Turkey has showed interest in nuclear weapons. In 2006, military chief of staff General HimiOzkok referred implicitly to the nuclear option. He stated, "[t]he presence of countries possessing or suspected of possessing weapons of mass destruction ... the Middle East is a serious and determining threat for our country today." Furthermore, he said, "[i]f the problem cannot be resolved despite the intense diplomatic efforts of the international community, I see a strong likelihood that we will face some important decision stages in the near future. Otherwise, we will face the prospect of losing our strategic superiority in the region." (Yazicioglu, 2019, p. 3).

President Erdogan at his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 24, 2019, did not hide his nuclear ambition. He said that Turkey may be interested in acquiring nuclear weapons. Moreover, Erdogan on the centennial of the Turkish independence movement said, "[s]everal countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But [they tell us that] we can't have them. This I cannot accept. There is no developed nation in the world that doesn't have them." (Bugos, 2019).

Turkey feels the need for having nuclear capability for the following reasons. First, the relations between Turkey and Iran have not been that friendly. Similar to Saudi Arabia, Turkey's relationship with Iran has historically been characterized by rivalry, based largely on competing expansionist and religious ambitions (Hobbs & Moran, 2012, p. 140). The outbreak of the Arab Spring gave the historical rivalry between Turkey and Iran new impetus. As the unrest and pressures for change spread, Turkish-Iranian relations became increasingly strained. Turkey and Iran had clashed over a number of issues (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, p. 2). The most important factor contributing to the growing strains in relations was Turkey's support for the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Syria is Iran's only true ally in the Middle East. Since 1979, the secular, Baathist Syrian regime and Revolutionary Iran have strongly supported each other. Assad's downfall would be a serious strategic blow to Iran and could result in the growth of Turkey's influence (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, p. vii). Moreover, in 2015, Turkey explicitly supported the Saudi war in Yemen, called on Iran to withdraw from the country and

joined Riyadh's so-called Islamic military alliance against terrorism, which many saw as targeting Iran. In this period, Erdogan accused Iran of attempting to dominate the Middle East, which he said was anathema to Turkey (Dalay, 2021).

Publicly, Turkey has downplayed the dangers of Iran's nuclear program, stressing that Iran has the right to develop a peaceful program. However, the difference between the United States and Turkey on the Iranian issue are largely over tactics, not strategic goals. Both countries want to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power. They differ, however, on how best to achieve that goal. In principle, Turkey opposed sanctions against Iran, although it had grudgingly carried out UN-imposed sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Its opposition was heavily influenced by its bitter experience with sanctions during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Iraq was one of Turkey's most important trading partners, and Turkey suffered substantial economic losses as a result of its support of sanctions against Iraq. This time Turkish officials learned from history and argued that quiet diplomacy is likely to have more effect in moderating Iranian behavior in the long run than overt efforts to isolate or punish the regime (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, p. 27).

Second, some argues that, on the one hand, the willingness, and the ability of the United States to defend its partners in the region against a nuclear-armed Iran are questionable (Edelman, Krepinevich, & Montgomery, 2011, p. 67). On the other hand, others believe while Erdogan called out for no nuclear weapons in the region before, certainly after the crisis of S-400 and deprivation of F-35 warplanes, geopolitical context has changed for Turkey. (Yazicioglu 2019, p. 4). Turkey claims that it attempted to procure the US Patriot missile system to meet its domestic defence needs but the US did not offer the missile defence system then Turkey was forced to pursue the Russian S-400 missile systems (Tass News Agency, 2019; Fraser, 2019). One lesson that Turkey might learn from the crisis is that the United States is not a trustworthy partner. Moreover, Turkish officials asserted, the S-400 was found to better meet Turkey's security concerns in light of defective patriot missiles (Bensaid, 2020). Turkey's changing role in the alliance as well as in the region are raising many questions, including a potential proliferation dilemma.

Third, the European Union's executive body has said in October 2021 that Turkey's bid to join the bloc had "come to a standstill" amid serious democratic shortfalls. According to the EU, Ankara was no longer serious about delivering on EU-backed reforms. "The EU's serious concerns on the continued deterioration of democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights and independence of the judiciary have not been addressed. There was further backsliding in many areas." (Aljazeera, 2021). An article by The Economist had described the accession process as "dead" and claimed that "many European voters regard the prospect of such a nation joining the club with horror." (Daily Sabah, 2021). Given the current situation, there is huge gap between Turkey and the EU. It sounds that EU has lost its attraction for Turkey, and it decreased the EU's leverage on Turkey to push it away from its nuclear ambitions.

Finally, Turkish President Erdogan has vowed to eliminate external dependency on foreign defense technology (Bensaid, 2020). The best way of defense independence is joining the nuclear club. Erdogan

has already expressed his desperation on developing the “caliphate atom bomb” to fulfil his neo-Ottoman aspiration. The emergence of a China-Pakistan-Turkey nexus on nuclear proliferation and Pakistan coordinating on capacity building of the three countries have already been flagged by watchdogs and media (ANI News, 2021). Given Erdogan’s dream of reviving “Ottoman time”, his vision of Turkey as regional power in the Middle East, and nuclear arms as a source of national prestige Turkey has to join the regional nuclear race. Otherwise, Turkey will remain second class—a position that Erdogan cannot and will not accept (Shay, 2018; Yazicioglu, 2019, p. 5).

4. Conclusion

It is highly likely that despite all crippling sanctions “Iran will not stop until it has the bomb.” Deterrence and regional hegemony are two major factors that make the nuclear weapons attractive for the Islamic Republic. Once its security is guaranteed, a nuclear-armed Iran will seek to change the geopolitical context in its favor. Iran believes it has the historical, cultural, even moral weight to powerfully shape the region where classical Persian empires have at one time held sway. However, it is difficult to precisely predict the level of success it will achieve.

Iran with nuclear capability will be emboldened to accelerate its aggressive activities in the region and act against its neighbors with little fear of retribution. Furthermore, it is highly likely that a nuclear-armed Iran would embolden Iran’s network of proxies which could adopt a more confrontational approach towards Israel. Far from restoring stability to the Middle East as Waltz argued, a nuclear-armed Iran would make the Middle East a far more dangerous place. A Middle East in which Iran’s supreme leader asserts that “nuclear button is on his desk at all times,” and the Israeli prime minister responds that the nuclear launch button on his desk is “much bigger” and “more powerful,” is far from stability. In addition, the politics of threat would have much stronger socioeconomic consequences for Israel and can damage its thriving economy seriously.

A nuclear-armed Iran would tempt major Middle Eastern powers to go nuclear for security and prestige. Three would-be nuclear candidates are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Despite ambitious rhetoric of Egyptian and Saudis’ officials, they will not be able to develop nuclear weapons. Because both countries are highly dependent on the United States in terms of conventional weapons and military aids. Choosing nuclear option not only damages their ties with the International Community, but also inflicts heavy sanctions on Egypt and Saudi Arabia which both countries cannot tolerate. Finally, the US will offer it nuclear “defense umbrella” to Middle Eastern countries and Saudi Arabia and Egypt would embrace it. The case of Turkey, however, is different. After the crisis of S-400 and deprivation of F-35 warplanes, the geopolitical context has changed for Turkey. Turkey views Washington with suspicions and will not depend on the US defense umbrella. Furthermore, Turkey’s accession to the EU could limit its nuclear ambition to a large extent, but nowadays Turkey has come to realize that its accession process to the EU is no longer promising; thus, it will feel free to follow in Iran’s footsteps. Erdogan has already expressed his willingness on developing the “caliphate atom bomb” to fulfil his neo-Ottoman aspiration.

Given Erdogan's dream of reviving "Ottoman time", Turkey has to join the regional nuclear race. Otherwise, Turkey will remain second class—a position that Erdogan cannot and will not accept.

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