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The day after Iran goes nuclear: Implications for NATO

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Contents

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On 8 November 2011 a new International Atomic Energy Agency report on nuclear verification in Iran was circulated to the Agency's Board of Governors and the UN Security Council. In a 12-page appendix, the IAEA gave information with an unprecedented level of detail on the military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program, including projects that have been under way for more than a decade now [2].

As the likelihood of a nuclear-armed Iran grows, so does the need for NATO to have a comprehensive appraisal of the implications of such a scenario for the Atlantic Alliance, and more particularly for its posture towards the Middle East region. Of course, exploring the scenario of a nuclear-armed Iran should not induce fatalism. This is not to discount the ongoing diplomatic process conducted by the United Nations Security Council and the related investigations by the International Atomic Energy Agency. However, the dramatic consequences behind this "alternative future" make it worth analyzing and planning for.

In a nutshell, the day after Iran becomes a nuclear-armed country, the Middle East will face a situation where at least two local actors (Iran and Israel) and five external powers (France, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) have a nuclear deterrent capability. Several others could be poised to invest in their own arsenal (Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey), and small states (Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates) would look for reinforced security guarantees, multilaterally from NATO and bilaterally from Western powers.

The issue of a nuclear Iran matters for NATO for five main reasons: first, because Iran borders the territory of the Atlantic Alliance through Turkey, making a nuclear Iran a close and immediate threat for NATO; second, combined with its ballistic missile arsenal, a nuclear Iran would have the capability to strike targets in continental Europe; third, some NATO members (France, the United Kingdom and the United States) maintain a military presence in the region that could be at stake; fourth, NATO partners in the Middle East and the Gulf have been expressing growing concerns to NATO over their security in an environment

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[2] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, GOV/2011/65, 8 November 2011.

with a nuclear Iran; and fifth, the regional chain reaction that such a scenario entails could endanger the Middle East's strategic stability, putting NATO missions in the area directly at risk (e.g. the NATO Training Mission in Iraq).

From this perspective, the biggest challenge both for the region and NATO the day after Iran goes nuclear is not the potential for nuclear warfare per se but the risks of increasing subconventional confrontations and of "nuclear hedging" among NATO partners in the region. As a result, a nuclear Iran would represent a major test for NATO: it would challenge the raison d'être of its partnerships (the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative) and raise key decisions on the future of NATO nuclear and missile defense means.

The road toward a nuclear Iran

The characteristics of an Iranian nuclear deterrent, once the military domain effectively benefits from its nuclear program, will depend first and foremost on whether Iran manufactures deliverable or only unassembled nuclear weapons; and second, on the quantity and quality of its delivery systems. As of today, there is no irrefutable evidence that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons but there are many plausible signs that its program is not serving solely civilian purposes.

First, although Iran has consistently claimed that it wants to build nuclear power plants to diversify its energy portfolio, the program is unnecessarily costly in this regard, and Iranian gas reserves are still sufficient for the country's use of electricity for several decades. One could argue that energy policy remains a sovereign decision, but the clear contradiction in Iranian official statements on the subject is undeniable.

Second, Iran has not provided the IAEA with sufficient and convincing information regarding its program. In its September 2011 report, the Agency concluded that it *"is unable to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran, and therefore to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities"*[3]. In its previous report in May 2011, the IAEA already provided a detailed list of worrying signs of a militarization of Iran's nuclear program:

- experiments involving the explosive compression of uranium deuteride to produce a short burst of neutrons;
- uranium conversion and metallurgy to produce uranium metal from fluoride compounds, and its manufacture into components relevant to a nuclear explosive device;
- development, manufacturing and testing of explosive components suitable for the initiation of high explosives in a converging spherical geometry;
- multipoint explosive initiation and hemispherical detonation studies involving highly instrumented experiments[4].

All in all, there is circumstantial evidence to support the view that Iran could reach breakout capability within the next five years.

Added to these developments in nuclear technology, the IAEA and other organizations have expressed concern with regard to delivery systems, since Iran has for a long time been making efforts to acquire a robust arsenal of ballistic missiles. In its May 2011 report, the IAEA underlined the troubling correlation between Tehran's nuclear program and its missile re-entry vehicle redesign activities for a new payload "assessed as being nuclear in nature" (concerning the modification of the Shahab-3 missile)[5]. As early as 2009, Dennis Blair, then the US Director of National Intelligence, declared to the American Congress that *"Iran continues to deploy and improve ballistic missiles inherently capable of delivering nuclear weapons"*[6]. As a matter of fact, since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has been developing an indigenous missile production capability. For instance, Iran is reported to have launched more than 600 ballistic missiles during its war with Iraq in the 1980s[7]. Starting in the late 1990s, the US intelligence community assessed that Iran was on the path to acquiring Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs[8]) by 2015. However, the Iranian ICBM program might need foreign technology. Some observers have identified a program called the Shahab-6, derived from North Korean technology. But the arsenal could also benefit from the Iranian space program (a space-launch vehicle program could be converted into an ICBM program).

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[3] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, GOV/2011/54, 2 September 2011, p. 9.
[4] International Atomic Energy Agency, I*mplementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, GOV/2011/29, 24 May 2011, p. 7.
[5] IAEA, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
[6] Dennis Blair, Written testimony on the Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Washington DC, 12 February 2009.
[7] Steven Hildreth, *Iran's Ballistic Missile Programs: An Overview*, Washington, Congressional Research Service, February 2009, p. 1.
[8] ICBMs are traditionally missiles capable of ranges greater than 5 500 kilometers (about 3 400 miles).

Considered as a whole, these data make it plausible to argue that Iran will be equipped with a small number of short- to medium-range ballistic missiles loaded with nuclear warheads in the near future; their potential targets could be the capitals of Gulf and Middle Eastern NATO partners, and/or NATO members' troops stationed in the region. But what would be the potential Iranian nuclear doctrine and, more particularly, how might the national strategic culture shape this doctrine?

As a starting point on this issue, we need to avoid the conventional wisdom that in a general context of nuclear proliferation, and more particularly in the Iranian case, nuclear weapons provide first and foremost a deterrent against aggression. This can be characterized as a status quo bias. In addition, several scholars interpret the modern Iranian international posture as the expression of Persian history and identity, which combine a sense of superiority over neighbors with a deep sense of insecurity [9]. As a result, academic studies related to Iranian strategic culture usually argue that Iran is a rational actor and, as such, not guided by irrational and unpredictable religious fanaticism [10].

Nevertheless, this debate on rationality versus irrationality misses a core issue: although one can assume that Iran would behave as a rational actor, nuclear weapons would provide its leadership with political leverage and room for maneuver to support or conduct non-nuclear operations. The status quo bias that describes a potential Iranian nuclear force as only defensive misses the fact that these capabilities could well prove to be an effective security umbrella for offensive non-nuclear military activities. As a matter of fact, there are precedents for this.

In South Asia, we can argue that the nuclear standoff between India and Pakistan after the tests of nuclear devices by both countries in 1998 did not bring stability to the region but led to an increase in violence, ranging from Pakistan-supported proxy aggressions (e.g. the rise of Lashkar-e-Taiba[11]) to protracted combat between their armed forces[12]. Similarly, recent archives from Saddam Hussein's regime prove that, starting in the 1980s, the Iraqi leader envisioned his country's nuclear program as a coercive tool against Israel's own deterrent, which would force Israel to fight a conventional war against the Arabs under the nuclear threshold[13].

These precedents illustrate how the status quo analysis misses what stands at the intersection between nuclear and conventional warfare. In fact, the common belief that a country would never dare to use nuclear weapons on the battlefield creates what scholars call a "stability-instability paradox". The paradox states that, because States are rational actors, there is a low likelihood that conventional war will escalate to the nuclear level, hence the notion of strategic or nuclear stability. By the same token, however, the improbability of an escalation beyond the nuclear threshold reduces the danger for the aggressor of launching a conventional war. Precisely because this lowers the potential costs of conventional conflict, it also makes the outbreak of such violence more likely, creating a state of instability at the conventional or subconventional level [14].

As a result, nuclear weapons could provide Iran with decisive leverage for non-nuclear initiatives. There are several indicators that suggest that nuclear weapons could represent an insurance tool for Iran in subconventional conflicts. However, given the poor state of the Iranian conventional forces (mainly composed of outdated weapons systems acquired during the Shah's era, with few modern armored vehicles, artillery pieces, aircraft or major combat ships), plans for a conventional full-scale confrontation under the nuclear threshold are probably not driving Iranian strategic thinking. Meanwhile, Iran has been explicitly focusing its procurement and military training on irregular warfare. It has developed niche weaponry such as UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), ballistic missiles and small naval aircraft. Moreover, Major General Jafari, the Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, stated explicitly in September 2007 that *"since the enemy has considerable technological abilities, and since we are still at a disadvantage in comparison, despite the progress we have made in the area of equipment, [our only] way to confront [the enemy] successfully is to adopt the strategy of asymmetric warfare and to employ various methods of this kind"*[15].

Therefore, the paradox of thinking about a nuclear-armed

[9] Gregory F. Giles, "The Crucible of Radical Islam: Iran's Leaders and Strategic Culture", in Barry R. Schneider, Jerrold M. Post (Eds.), *Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures*, USAF Counterproliferation Center, 2003, p. 146

[10] Anthony C. Cain, Iran's Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Implications of US Policy, Air War College, *Maxwell Paper No. 26*, April 2002, p. 16.

[11] Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), meaning "army of the pure", has been active since 1993 and is the military wing of the Pakistani Islamist organization Markaz-ad-Dawa-wal-Irshad. During the 1990s, it is said that LeT received instruction and funding from Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in exchange for a pledge to target Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir and to train Muslim extremists on Indian soil. Pakistan's government has repeatedly denied allegations of supporting terrorism.

[12] See S. Paul Kapur, "India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia Is Not Like Cold War Europe", *International Security*, Fall 2005; S. Paul Kapur, "Ten Years of Instability in a Nuclear South Asia", *International Security*, 33:2, Fall 2008, pp. 71-94.

[13] Hal Brands, David Palkki, "Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?", *International Security*, 36:1, Summer 2011, pp. 133-166.

[14] See Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 19-23.

[15] Sabahat Khan, *Strategies in Contemporary Maritime Security: Challenges Confronting the Arabian Gulf*, Dubai, Institute for Near East & Gulf Military Analysis, 2009, p. 35.

Iran is that it has less to do with assessing prospects of nuclear warfare per se than with anticipating the potential increase of asymmetric conflict supporting Tehran's interests in the region. This could apply to a variety of scenarios: a new Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon; a naval confrontation in the Persian Gulf over islands such as the Tunb Islands and Abu Musa, seized by Iran in 1971 and still claimed by the United Arab Emirates; or – more currently – a move to prevent sanctions against Iranian oil exports by threatening to close the strait of Hormuz.

Subconventional conflicts under the nuclear threshold

If Iran becomes a nuclear-armed country, the logic of subconventional conflicts involving the Iranians directly or indirectly via its non-state allies (Hezbollah, Hamas) will be altered in a way that could lead to miscalculation and escalation by accident. A nuclear-armed Iran means that the intersection between conventional and nuclear warfare in the Middle East will have to be rethought carefully. It will have implications not only for military education and training but also for political-military exchanges between NATO and its partners. Furthermore, the prevention of conflict escalation will largely depend on the accurate interpretation of Iran's intentions (whether defensive or offensive) during a crisis.

The first risk is the development of a naval confrontation in the Persian Gulf between Iran and Gulf countries, which might also involve NATO countries (particularly the United States, the United Kingdom and/or France). The probability of incidents is high in the confined waters of the Strait of Hormuz, taking into account the number of vessels that go through it. In recent years, Iran has shown increased boldness in the area. For instance, in January 2008 Iranian boats approached three US Navy ships in the Strait, threatening to blow them up. The US forces were on the verge of firing when the Iranian boats eventually moved away. At that time, a Pentagon official said, *"It is the most serious provocation of this sort that we've seen yet, the Iranian boats turned away literally at the very moment that U.S. forces were preparing to open fire"*[16]. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps subsequently denied the US version of the events, claiming that the Iranian boats were conducting *"an ordinary identification"* [17]. In retrospect, if Iran had been armed with nuclear weapons, the crisis of January 2008 could have produced a much worse end result. In this sense, a nuclear-armed Iran would act as a miscalculation multiplier. The stakes being much higher, any misperception by Gulf countries and NATO members could have dramatic consequences and even lead to a "Gulf of Tonkin" scenario [18].

In the context of a nuclear-armed Iran, another scenario implying a risk of dangerous escalation is a new conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Since the August 2006 war, both Israeli forces and Hezbollah militants have been explicitly preparing for the next conflict. The Israeli Defense Forces have thus designed a new policy called the "Dahiya Doctrine", under which Israel would use heavy firepower against civilian infrastructure associated with Hezbollah military operations. In 2008, Israeli Northern Command Chief Gadi Eisenkot asserted the doctrine's relevance by stating that *"what happened in the Dahiya quarter in Beirut in 2006 will happen in every village from which Israel is fired on. We will apply disproportionate force on it and cause great damage and destruction there"*. Leaving no room for ambiguity, Eisenkot added *"This is not a recommendation. This is a plan. And it has been approved"* [19].

By emphasizing the disproportion of the projected Israeli use of force, the doctrine aims at reinforcing Israel's deterrence posture after the 2006 war. But its credibility ultimately depends on Hezbollah leaders' assessments. Although Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah suggested that the Party of God's provocation before the 2006 conflict was a mistake [20], his declarations in recent years and Hezbollah's contemporary military build-up suggest that the Dahiya Doctrine might not be deterring the organization. *"The Zionists will think ten thousand times before attacking Lebanon"*, declared Nasrallah in 2008 [21]. Deterrence works when both parties have a clear understanding of each other's communication. In the Israel-Hezbollah case, this remains a shaky assumption, and the degree of uncertainty in mutual communication would rise with a nuclear-armed Iran.

Although there is no certainty about the scope of Iran's security guarantees to its allies if the country were to have nuclear weapons, there are reasons to believe that Hezbollah would benefit from this, at least symbolically. For instance, in January 2005 Major General Jafari ambiguously claimed

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[16] Quote from Sabahat Khan, *Strategies in Contemporary Maritime Security: Challenges Confronting the Arabian Gulf*, Dubai, Institute for Near East & Gulf Military Analysis, 2009, p. 42

[17] Tim Ripley, "Gulf of Distrust: Naval Stand-offs and the Persian Gulf", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, March 2008, p. 8.

[18] In August 1964, the US alleged that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked two US destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, prompting retaliatory US air strikes and a Congressional resolution backing further US military operations.

[19] A densely populated group of Shia neighbourhoods where Hezbollah's headquarters were located, the Dahiya quarter was the target of massive air strikes by the Israeli Air Force during the first days of the 2006 war. Quote from Jeffrey White, *If War Comes: Israel vs. Hizballah and Its Allies*, Washington, Washington Institute for Near East Policy Institute, 2010, p. 10.

[20] *"Nasrallah: Soldiers' Abductions a Mistake"*, CNN.com, 27 August, 2006.

[21] Gabi Siboni, "Disproportionate Force: Israel's Concept of Response in Light of the Second Lebanon War", *INSS Insight*, 74, October 2008.

that, *"in addition to its own capabilities, Iran has also excellent deterrence capabilities outside its [own borders] and if necessary it will utilize them"* [22] . Hezbollah could exploit this ambiguity in various ways. As a non-state actor, it could play the game of "calculated irrationality": in the midst of a conflict, an emotional, out-of control declaration from Hassan Nasrallah threatening nuclear retaliation could convey the intended impression of irrationality that would deter the Israeli Defense Forces [23] . Hezbollah could also show great confidence during the confrontation if it assumed (rightly or wrongly) that Iran would undoubtedly back it up if the conflict was to escalate. But even in a scenario in which the Israeli Defense Forces had evidence that Iran was supporting Hezbollah's adventurism, they would have to refrain from directly attacking Iranian targets and limit the scope of any retaliation to Hezbollah targets in order to avoid uncontrolled escalation. In fact, unless Tehran offered a formal pledge regarding nuclear protection of its proxies (which is unlikely), Israel would have to operate in an uncertain environment, in which the fault lines for escalation would be unknown, and as a result escalation control could be extremely difficult. All in all, the absence of a reliable communications channel would render the situation highly unstable.

In short, Iran, emboldened by nuclear weapons, could launch and support more subconventional operations. NATO has to consider the consequences for the countries in the region carefully.

The chain reaction in the Middle East

The regional ambitions of Iran have for years now represented a major concern, if not an existential threat, for neighboring countries. According to the US State Department cables leaked to the Wikileaks website, Saudi King Abdullah and Bahraini King Hamed Ibn Isa Khalifa have repeatedly advocated a preemptive strike by the US [24] . As Iran continues implementing its nuclear program and as Gulf countries start perceiving the NATO member states as ready to live with it, their security dilemma grows.

In 1984, George Shultz, then the US Secretary of State, wrote that *"proliferation begets proliferation"* [25] . This is why the chain reaction in the Middle East the day after Iran becomes a nuclear-armed country matters. This is also why the idea of a nuclear-armed Iran triggering a so-called *"cascade of proliferation"*[26] has grown in earnest since Tehran's program was first brought to public attention.

A first sign of this chain reaction is the growing interest in nuclear energy in the Middle East. This interest has dramatically risen in the last few years: in the year 2006 alone, 13 countries in the region announced plans to explore nuclear energy for civilian purposes. While this does not necessarily portend further proliferation of nuclear weapons (no state has declared that the production of nuclear weapons is its goal), this risk should not be downplayed, given that such interest is inconsistent with the abundance of traditional energy sources in the region and the historically low standing of nuclear energy in the Middle East.

Although Middle Eastern leaders do not explicitly articulate the linkage between their newly expressed interest in nuclear energy and Iran's program, it undeniably plays a role. In a January 2007 interview, King Abdullah of Jordan cryptically stated that *"the rules have changed on the nuclear subject throughout the whole region"*. In fact, Jordan is to start uranium mining activities by 2013. Meanwhile, the Gulf countries have been very active on these matters. By the end of 2006, the Gulf Cooperation Council had commissioned a joint study on *"the use of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes"*. The following year, the GCC started discussing formal cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency for this initiative. Moreover, the Bush administration signed memos of understanding on nuclear energy cooperation with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in 2008. The Obama administration went even further by signing a nuclear cooperation agreement with the United Arab Emirates (less than a year after a UAE-France agreement on nuclear cooperation).

If Iran becomes a nuclear-armed country, Turkey, which already has a well-established nuclear research agency, could follow. Although this presents a different case from the other Middle Eastern countries because of Turkey's membership of NATO, there has been an explicit debate in Ankara about these prospects. For instance, two former Commanders of the Turkish Air Force, Generals Halis Burhan and Ergin Celasin, argue that *"if Iran develops nuclear weapons, Turkey should do the same so as to be able to preserve the balance of power between the two countries and also in the region"* [27] . Although these views are not officially endorsed by Turkey's government, they reflect the state of the national security debate.

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[22] Jafari quoted in Sabahat Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
[23] On the issue of calculated irrationality and nuclear deterrence, see Henry Nash, *Nuclear Weapons and International Behavior*, New York, Springer, 1975, p. 79.
[24] Borzou Daragahi, Paul Richter, "Iran must be stopped: Arab leaders implored U.S. to attack, Wikileaks disclosures show", *Los Angeles Times*, 29 November 2010; Lawrence Korb, Caroline Wadhams, "Perceptions of Security in the Arab Gulf Region", Washington, Center for American Progress, 19 May 2010.
[25] George Shultz, "Preventing the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons", Department of State Bulletin, 84:2093, December 1984, p. 18
[26] "A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility", Report of the Secretary-General High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, 2004, p. 40.
[27] Burhan and Celasin quoted in Mustafa Kibaroglu, Baris Caglar, "Implications of a Nuclear Iran for Turkey", *Middle East Policy*, 14:4, Winter 2008, p. 72.

The case of Saudi Arabia remains the most discussed. There have been repeated affirmations that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have arranged a deal under which Pakistan could station nuclear weapons in the Kingdom if Riyadh was to react to a nuclear-armed Iran [28] . Senior Saudi officials have been present at ballistic missile tests in Pakistan and nothing, in theory, would legally prevent the "Pakistan option" [29] as long as these weapons are not under the control of the recipient country .

However, as noted above, these initiatives on nuclear energy do not in themselves constitute nuclear proliferation in the region. Although speculation related to Saudi Arabia's intentions and capabilities (or those of other countries) is legitimate, the history of predictions on nuclear proliferation makes caution advisable. Since the dawn of the nuclear age, scenarios of rapid bursts of nuclear proliferation beyond the club of five (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States) have abounded but never materialized [30]. True, the historical list of potential proliferators is a long one, but the list of nuclear reversals (meaning a state that embarked on a path leading to nuclear weapons acquisition but reversed course) comprises nearly twenty states [31].

This is why the idea of a *"cascade of proliferation"* reflects an old fear of non-proliferation analysts but does not precisely capture the current logic in Middle Eastern countries. It would be more accurate to describe the current regional chain reaction as the first step in a process of *"nuclear hedging"* by the Arab countries, faced with the Iranian conundrum, in their relations with NATO member states.

According to Ariel Levite, *"nuclear hedging" designates a "national strategy of maintaining, or at least appearing to maintain, a viable option for the relatively rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons, based on an indigenous technical capacity to produce them within a relatively short time frame ranging from several weeks to a few years"* [32]. In other words, if Iran becomes a nuclear-armed country, Arab countries currently initiating nuclear programs for civilian purposes could well reach the point where Iran is widely believed to be today: close to the thin red line of having acquired breakout capability. This *"nuclear hedging"* would not automatically lead to Arab countries developing nuclear weapons, but this certainly would provide them with additional security options. Subsequently, Gulf states could trade potential nuclear weapons programs off for new security guarantees from NATO as a whole and/or a reinforcement of existing agreements with NATO countries (the US, the UK, and/or France). But *"nuclear hedging"* also means that these countries would not automatically or not exclusively ask for security guarantees from NATO or some of its members. Confronted with the possible internal discontent that an increased role of NATO countries in their security affairs might fuel, Gulf countries are likely to remain ambivalent. In some cases, they might be tempted to behave accommodatingly towards a nuclear-armed Iran. For instance, Qatar signed a defense cooperation agreement with Iran in 2010; the UAE are torn between the security agenda driven by Abu Dhabi and the business interests developed by Dubai (which is a decisive commercial partner for Tehran)[33] ; and the Sultanate of Oman maintains good relations with Iran.

In the end, preventing "nuclear hedging" from becoming nuclear proliferation will greatly depend on the NATO countries' ability to understand the implications of this chain of reaction, not only for the Middle East but for the Atlantic Alliance as well, and then on their determination and credibility to address the issue and to reassure NATO partners.

Implications for NATO

The security issues surrounding the Iranian conundrum involve some of the most urgent challenges NATO faces: the scope of its partnerships in the Middle East, and at the same time the appropriate defense and deterrence posture to counter such a threat.

A nuclear-armed Iran would undoubtedly be a game changer for NATO partnerships. If Iran becomes a nuclear-armed country, NATO as a whole and individual Allies bilaterally engaged in the region will eventually face a dilemma: unless they reinforce their relations with regional partners through security guarantees, these countries will look for alternative solutions. Yet, today the cooperation framework of the Atlantic Alliance in the Middle East remains modest. NATO's two main initiatives are the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), launched in 1994 and currently including Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), started in 2004 – comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Both partnership frameworks have

[28] Stephen Blank, "Saudi Arabia's nuclear gambit", *Asia Times*, 7 November 2003.
[29] Pakistan is not a party to the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and, in this scenario, the Saudi interpretation of articles I and II of the NPT would be similar to the US interpretation, unchanged since the late 1960s.
[30] Albert Carnesale, Paul Doty, Stanley Hoffmann, Samuel Huntington, Joseph Nye, Scott Sagan, *Living with Nuclear Weapons*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 215; see also William Potter, Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, "Divining Nuclear Intentions: A Review Essay", *International Security*, 33:1, Summer 2008.
[31] Ariel Levite, "Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Reversal Revisited", *International Security*, 27:3, Winter 2002-03, p. 61.the US interpretation, unchanged since the late 1960s.
[32] Ariel Levite, *op. cit.*, p. 71
[33] Karim Sadjadpour, *The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War*, Carnegie Papers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, July 2011.

been effective at promoting defense cooperation in fields such as military reform, interoperability, counterterrorism and border security. But the MD and the ICI have usually been seen by their members as fora limited to secondary security priorities. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and Oman, which represent approximately 70% of Gulf countries' defense expenditures, are not part of the ICI. Saudi Arabia has shown cautious interest in NATO activities in the region, while Oman remains careful not to endanger its relations with Iran. To use a close analogy, discussing Gulf security without both these countries is as relevant as discussing transatlantic security without the United States.

Added to the reticence of regional actors is NATO's own reluctance. Since the early stages of NATO partnership policy, the Allies have made it clear that partnership in the Mediterranean Dialogue or the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative does not equal membership, nor does it signify a first step toward membership. In this context, the core problems are discussed in regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council or by the countries themselves in their own bilateral relations with NATO members. Bilateral ties frequently matter more than NATO partnerships. Certain NATO members have special relations with countries in the region. For example, the US has a general commitment to Israel's security (although there is no formal document specifying this American support). Because Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar host US military bases, they enjoy a concrete form of security commitment. In the meantime France has signed defense agreements with Kuwait (initially in 1992, subsequently strengthened in 2009), Qatar (1994, 1998) and the United Arab Emirates (1996, 2009). The UAE are also tied to the United Kingdom through a defense agreement. At the moment, British armed forces are also stationed in Oman. Because most of the content of these agreements is classified, it is difficult to measure the actual level of commitment involved. For instance, experts frequently assume that Saudi Arabia benefits from a strong US security guarantee and, according to US Ambassador Chas Freeman, King Fahd asked in 2003 for a nuclear guarantee in case Iran produced a nuclear weapon. However, this is based only on informal statements [34].

As a result, one of the challenges for NATO will be to find the most appropriate role among all these frameworks. Because of the depth and the quantity of bilateral defense agreements in the region, there is not so much a vacuum of security guarantees as a risk of congestion. Even though "multi-bilateralism", to use David Petraeus' expression [35], is conducive to cooperation, it does not ensure common strategic planning, military interoperability and technical complementarity. It can lead to an absence of collective priorities, inconsistent military-to-military relations, and unnecessary redundancies in capabilities.

This is the essential reason why NATO and its robust planning processes could make a difference. NATO's structures could provide a framework to start addressing collectively the issue of a nuclear-armed Iran and its political and military implications. For instance, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative could be employed for specific activities, including wargaming or joint simulation exercises. These activities would allow NATO and its partners to share their views on potential contingencies such as the ones suggested in this research paper.

However, partners will also assess the Alliance's credibility compared to that of their bilateral agreements, notably on its ability to reassure them and help them bolster their security. In one way or another, this will lead to a debate on NATO security guarantees for MD and ICI partners. In theory, the conceivable forms of security guarantees are numerous: at the low end, such guarantees could be informal statements politically binding the Alliance to the security of its MD and ICI partners; at the high end it could be an inclusion of NATO partners under the provisions of Articles 4 and 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty [36], or even one of the most emphatic and unmistakable expressions of extended deterrence – the stationing of nuclear weapons on the soil of MD and/or ICI partners.

As of today, the last option is unlikely to be considered in policy circles for three main reasons. First, extended deterrence through nuclear warheads stationed on the soil of Gulf countries could have a counter-productive effect, making the recipients of these weapons appear prepared to use disproportionate means of force. US nuclear weapons in Europe were originally perceived as an adequate response to Soviet conventional superiority on the continent during the Cold War. There is no such balance with Iran. It is likely that in the first few years, Iran's arsenal will be quantitatively small and will consist only of first-strike capabilities. Therefore the political consensus for the stationing of nuclear weapons in the Gulf would be hard to find. Second, the internal agendas of certain countries of the Alliance regarding nuclear disarmament might well impede any move toward the extension of a NATO nuclear umbrella. Third, the internal agendas of Gulf countries, confronted with strong anti-American sentiments among their populations, might also prevent them from supporting such a move.

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[34] Bruno Tertrais, *Security Guarantees and Nuclear Non-Proliferation*, Paris, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, 2011, p. 8.
[35] Petraeus quoted in International Institute for Strategic Studies, *"IISS News", Newsletter*, December 2009 p. 5.
[36] Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty defining the prerequisites for membership would have to be amended if the Alliance intended to expand its membership to include these States.

Still, the Atlantic Alliance and its MD and ICI partners should consider another form of extended deterrence, less politically sensitive but more strategically binding, which is nuclear sharing. The "Asian model" of US extended deterrence for its regional allies could inspire this framework [37]. More specifically, nuclear sharing with MD and ICI partners would not involve the stationing of nuclear weapons on the soil of host countries but it might rely on policy measures such as information sharing, nuclear consultations, common planning, and common execution.

Therefore, the challenge will be to find a balanced posture, halfway between an informal pledge and admission of ICI and MD countries to the Alliance, including the provisions of Articles 4 and 5. As a matter of fact, the solution to this equation will be dependent on NATO's own balance, its own "appropriate mix", between nuclear, missile defense and conventional means. For instance, an option less far-fetched than extended nuclear deterrence based on nuclear deployment on the soil of its MD and ICI partners would be a relocation of US nuclear weapons currently stationed in Europe, from northern Europe to southern Europe. The redeployment of US nuclear weapons in the southern region of Europe could represent an indirect measure to reassure Middle Eastern partners on NATO solidarity. Furthermore, the implementation of multinational exercises including multicapable aircraft in this area of NATO territory would underline the enduring relevance of these instruments of nuclear deterrence.

Similarly, the deployment of a US radar in Turkey in late 2011 reaffirms the Alliance's will to counter ballistic missile threats from Iran [38]. Indeed, in the coming years the NATO missile defense architecture (covering the Mediterranean Sea through the new US European Phased Adaptive Approach), as well as the US missile defense systems purchased by Gulf countries and Israel, will play a substantial role in security reassurance. At the bilateral level, the US and Israel signed agreements in 2010 to jointly develop capabilities (Arrow-3 interceptor, David's Sling weapon system) to address the missile threat [39]. In 2010 too, the US deployed two Patriot batteries to the United Arab Emirates. The same procurement strategy can be observed in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

However, in the longer term, if Iran increases both the quality (accuracy, throw-weight, penetration aids) and the quantity of its missiles, missile defense will become operationally unreliable and financially unaffordable[40]. NATO's reassurance of its MD and ICI members will remain credible only if it maintains a sufficient mix of defensive and offensive means. Missile defenses against Iran cannot be the sole means of response, but can prevent the agressor from winning with a first wave of attack and provide time for an offensive response to be launched.

Lastly, in the long term, all security reassurances to NATO partners and the Alliance's deterrence capacities will have to be combined with the preservation of back channel communications with Iran. This might seem far-fetched but, if Iran becomes a nuclear-armed power, NATO will have to find a framework – which might be more or less formal – to shape a kind of deterrence dialogue. Such a "forum" would logically engage NATO partners from the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, although it would not necessarily involve high-level national representatives. In the end, it could provide a framework to discuss respective nuclear postures, to exchange assessments on potential flashpoints, to design safety valves and ultimately to avoid miscalculation.

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The Iranian nuclear issue encapsulates all the critical questions related to NATO's posture towards the Middle East region. It challenges the grammar of military escalation in the Middle East and could generate a chain reaction in the region. All in all, the Iranian conundrum challenges the very raison d'être of NATO as a security provider, a nuclear alliance and a diplomatic actor.

This is the background against which, in order to stimulate the strategic dialog between NATO members and between NATO and its partners in the Middle East and the Gulf, this research paper has analyzed the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran for the Atlantic Alliance and suggested political and military options to mitigate the risks of future conflict. Indeed, as the NATO Chicago Summit in 2012 will have to follow up on the decisions made at Lisbon in 2010 with regard to the content of its partnerships and the findings of the Deterrence and Defense Posture Review, it is time for an in-depth dialog among allies about where to go the day after Iran becomes a nuclear-armed country, and the possible paths ahead.

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[37] On the "Asian model" and its relevance for NATO, see Richard Bush, *"The U.S. Policy of Extended Deterrence in East Asia: History, Current Views, and Implications"*, Brookings Institution, February 2011; Karl-Heinz Kamp, "NATO's Nuclear Posture Review: Nuclear Sharing Instead of Nuclear Stationing", *Research Paper n.68*, NATO Defense College, May 2011.

[38] The data from the radar in Turkey will be combined with US intelligence data and assessments and shared with allies, including Israel.

[39] In addition, Israel's Iron Dome, a mobile air defense system against short-range rockets and artillery shells, was declared operational in March 2011.

[40] For instance, a detailed operational analysis of the current and potential future balance between the Iranian ballistic missile arsenal and Saudi Arabian missile defense is offered in Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, Miranda Priebe, "A Crude Threat: The Limits of an Iranian Missile Campaign against Saudi Arabian Oil", *International Security*, Summer 2011, 36:1, pp. 179-180.