
Strategic Stability Reconsidered: Prospects for Escalation and Nuclear War in the Middle East

In collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA)

James A. Russell

Spring 2009



Security Studies Center

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ISBN : 978-2-86592-495-0

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James A. Russell

Proliferation Papers

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Introduction

This paper addresses the prospect that nuclear weapons could be used in the Middle East – breaking the so-called “taboo” against the use of these weapons since the United States dropped a nuclear bomb on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 and which remained unbroken throughout the Cold War and continues to endure. It argues that unstable dynamics of the coercive bargaining framework surrounding Iran’s nuclear program may be pushing the world closer toward the use of nuclear weapons than is generally realized – perhaps closer than any time since the Cuban missile crisis¹ – and proposes a number of near- and longer-term scenarios to illustrate the ways in which structural uncertainties in the regional interstate bargaining framework could result in the use of nuclear weapons.

In itself, the “taboo” against nuclear use is unlikely to prevent regional states and/or non-state actors from using these weapons to protect themselves and to secure their vital interests. While the very use of the word “taboo” in connection with nuclear weapons offers an attractive metaphor, it has little use as a meaningful term to describe the policies and attitudes of states’ and non-state actors toward the use of nuclear weapons. It is difficult to argue that any country has ever obtained nuclear weapons with the idea that the weapons would not be used.² A case in

¹ A compelling case can also be made that the world came close to seeing the use of nuclear weapons during the India-Pakistan standoff over Kashmir, a crisis that lasted from December 2001 through October 2002. See Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon, “U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia’s ‘Twin Peaks’ Crisis”, *Report 57*, The Stimson Center, Washington DC, September 2006, <http://www.stimson.org/southasia/pdf/USCrisisManagementFull.pdf>.

There also remains considerable debate about our proximity to nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As Robert S. McNamara recalled in his 2005 *Foreign Policy* article, “Apocalypse Soon”, “The Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated that the United States and the Soviet Union—and indeed the rest of the world—came within a hair’s breadth of nuclear disaster in October 1962. Indeed, according to former Soviet military leaders, at the height of the crisis, Soviet forces in Cuba possessed 162 nuclear warheads, including at least 90 tactical warheads. At about the same time, Cuban President Fidel Castro asked the Soviet ambassador to Cuba to send a cable to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev stating that Castro urged him to counter a U.S. attack with a nuclear response. Clearly, there was a high risk that in the face of a U.S. attack, which many in the U.S. government were prepared to recommend to President Kennedy, the Soviet forces in Cuba would have decided to use their nuclear weapons rather than lose them.” Cf. Robert S. McNamara, “Apocalypse Soon”, *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2005), pp. 3-4, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2829&page=0

² No non-state actor is reported to possess a nuclear weapon at this point – though the logic of the statement would apply equally to non-state actors as well.

point is the United States, for example, which, while embracing the concept of nuclear deterrence, has made a point of not forswearing the first use of nuclear weapons, and has repeatedly articulated a range of plausible conditions under which the weapons would be used.³ The paper agrees with political scientist Michael Mandelbaum, who declared more than a decade ago that: "...like all taboos, this one will be violated under necessity. Individuals will eat forbidden foods, even one another, if the alternative is starvation; nations will acquire and use forbidden weapons if they deem it necessary for survival."⁴

The paper first draws upon Thomas Schelling's ideas to assess the regional strategic framework, and finds systemic uncertainties which suggest that escalation by various parties – state and non-state actors – is a possible outcome. Both near-term and long-term scenarios are considered. The near-term nuclear use scenarios are all predicated on the assumption that nuclear use will occur within the context of escalation to or within war. As dangerous as these circumstances are, longer-term scenarios for nuclear use will also be proposed, which, like the alarming near-term scenarios, flow from the same unstable regional dynamics.

The Middle East's unstable dynamics occur within a global environment characterized by a general sense of insecurity about various nuclear issues. Reflecting this situation, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists recently moved its "Doomsday Clock" from seven- to five minutes to midnight – the most advanced setting since 1981.⁵ Citing Iran's nuclear ambitions, North Korea's test of a nuclear weapon, the failure to secure nuclear materials, a controversial U.S. nuclear doctrine that some argue suggests an expanded role for nuclear weapons, and the continued presence of 26,000 nuclear weapons in the United States and Russia, the Bulletin expressed new concerns about global strategic stability. These developments occurred against a backdrop of the collapse of the 2005 Nonproliferation Treaty Review conference due, among other things, to disinterest in the global community in supporting the spread of non-proliferation norms.⁶

³ I am indebted to Professor Daniel Moran for insights on this issue.

⁴ Michael Mandelbaum, "Lessons of the Next Nuclear War", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1995, p. 25; There is a rich literature on the nuclear taboo. For good recent examples, see Nina Tannenwald "Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo", *International Security*, vol. 29, No. 4, Spring 2003, pp. 5-49; George H. Quester, "If the Nuclear Taboo Gets Broken", *Naval War College Review*, vol. 58, No. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 71-92; T. V. Paul, "Nuclear Taboo and War Initiation in Regional Conflict", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 39, No. 4, 1995, pp. 696-717.

⁵ *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January/February 2007, pp. 66-71.

⁶ Analysis of the failed 2005 review conference is covered in John Simpson and Jenny Nielson, "The 2005 NPT Review Conference", *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 12, No. 2, July 2005, pp. 37-41.

The Framework: From Theory to Regional Dynamics

This paper draws upon Thomas Schelling's work to highlight potential problems in the region's bargaining framework surrounding Iran's nuclear program, suggesting that strategic stability could be harder to establish and maintain in the Near- and Middle-East than it proved to be between the Cold War's two superpowers.⁷

Schelling on Coercion and Escalation: A Primer

Schelling argued that nuclear weapons could have a role in strategies of compellence and deterrence, i.e. forcing actors to take certain actions (compellence) and/or convincing actors to take no action (deterrence). In his view, nuclear weapons could play a role in limiting the scope of armed conflict once begun, since the escalation dominance it afforded could convince an adversary of the futility of continuing the conflict. The possession of nuclear weapons could, he argued, serve as an instrument to bring the action to a close on favorable terms to the nuclear-armed actor in the framework. He took this point to an extreme in *Arms and Influence*, arguing that destruction of enemy cities could form part of a coercive strategy to inflict successive and unacceptable levels of pain on an adversary in order to terminate a conflict on favorable terms.⁸ His book *The Strategy of Conflict* proposed "a theory of interdependent decision"⁹ to further explore the functioning of interstate coercive bargaining that is relevant to the current environment in the Middle East.¹⁰

Schelling's theoretical work on bargaining applied not only to escalatory dynamics such as those seen in international conflict, but also to de-escalatory dynamics such as those harnessed by arms control efforts. During this period, as recalled by Jeffrey A. Larsen, arms control experts "were in agreement that the objectives of arms control were threefold: [...] reducing the likelihood of war, reducing the political and economic costs of

⁷ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966, and T. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1960. Schelling's analytical framework on interstate bargaining forms the basis for analysis of U.S. nuclear strategy in James A. Russell, "Nuclear Strategy and the Modern Middle East", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 11, No. 3, Fall 2004, pp. 64-78.

⁸ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, op. cit., Chapter 5, pp. 190-220.

⁹ For further analysis, see Vincent P. Crawford, "Thomas Schelling and the Analysis of Strategic Behavior", in Richard J. Zeckhauser (ed.), *Strategy and Choice*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1991, pp. 265-294.

¹⁰ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Chapter 2, Chapter 4, op. cit.

preparing for war, and minimizing the scope and violence of war if it occurred.”¹¹ The pursuit of these objectives through the controlled bargaining framework of arms control mirrored the pursuit of similar goals through more coercive bargaining frameworks such as strategic deterrence, compellence, and actual war.

Schelling identified a number of critical elements for the predictable interactions between actors in a bargaining framework: actor rationality, common interests and mutual dependence, and a communications system to convey intent.¹² He foresaw the potential for breakdown in the bargaining framework when asymmetries in communications prevented actors from receiving and/or conveying intent.¹³ This paper seeks neither to validate nor test Schelling’s hypotheses, which would be impossible since the presented scenarios are hypothetical. However, his theories on bargaining and conflict escalation usefully highlight problems in the region’s coercive dynamics that could lead to war, which, in turn, could result in the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁴

Two critical underlying parts of any coercive bargaining framework are the motivations of the actors involved and the degree to which the actors will carefully weigh costs and benefits in deciding on courses of action. The issue of actor rationality and the function of interstate communications have always troubled analysts in thinking through the implications of assigning roles to nuclear weapons in deterrent and coercive strategies. Former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara cogently expressed these doubts in June 1962 during his University of Michigan Commencement address when he stated: “...the mere fact that no nation could rationally take steps leading to a nuclear war does not guarantee that a nuclear war cannot take place. Not only do nations sometimes act in ways that are hard to explain on a rational basis, but even when acting in a “rational” way they sometimes, indeed disturbingly often, will act on the basis of misunderstandings of the true facts of a situation. They misjudge the way others will react, and the way others will interpret what they are doing.”¹⁵ McNamara’s misgivings about the supposed rationality of actors involved in deterrent relationships and the problematic nature of interstate

¹¹ Jeffrey A. Larsen, “An Introduction to Arms Control”, in Jeffrey A. Larsen (ed.) *Arms Control: Cooperative Security in a Changing Environment*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p. 2. Larsen is citing Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, Washington, Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1985 [orig. publ. 1961], p. 3.

¹² T. C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, *op. cit.*, p.4; Chapter 3, “Bargaining, Communications and Limited War”, pp. 53-80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 146-150.

¹⁴ As also argued in Russell, “Nuclear Strategy and the Modern Middle East”, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, “The No Cities Doctrine”, University of Michigan Commencement, June 1962. In this speech, McNamara also argued that “...basic military strategy in a general nuclear war should be approached in much the same way that more conventional military operations have been regarded in the past. That is to say, principal military objectives, in the event of a nuclear war stemming from a major attack on the alliance, should be the destruction of the enemy’s forces, not his civilian population.”

communications are reflected in much of the literature on deterrence theory and remain relevant in the context of today's Middle East.¹⁶

Regional Coercive Framework

The strategic environment in the Middle East consists of various troubling and interactive factors that could combine in dangerous ways that lead to the use of nuclear weapons. The Iran nuclear program and the region's changing nuclear status constitute one element in a complicated region-wide coercive bargaining framework that involves adversarial regional states, non-state actors, and various outside global powers. Not all the actors in the framework share common assumptions to bound the bargaining framework; some of the actors have opposing interests and objectives at stake; and, there is no common agreement between the antagonists and even the protagonists on acceptable outcomes in the bargaining process.

In the Middle East today, none of the elements identified by Schelling for a stable interaction and a successful bargaining outcome can be found, suggesting that strategic stability remains an unlikely outcome, though less controlled and balanced bargaining activity can nonetheless occur. Because of the underlying asymmetries of this strategic environment, the current volatility of the strategic competition, and the diminished prospects for stability, the risk of escalation past the nuclear threshold remains elevated. The region boasts one nuclear weapons state (Israel) that confronts another non-nuclear state (Iran) that most observers agree seeks to obtain nuclear weapons. The outcome of Iran's quest for the bomb is being closely watched by other regional states, some of whom may change their nuclear status if Iran successfully crosses the nuclear threshold.¹⁷ Israel has repeatedly stated its intent to stop Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold, while Iran has just as vehemently stated its commitment to develop an indigenous nuclear capability – although it denies intent to build a nuclear weapon. Rounding out the framework's state actors are nuclear-armed outside powers that have vital interests at stake in the outcome of the standoff. The most important of these is the United States, which has an estimated arsenal of 4,075 operational nuclear warheads.¹⁸ The United States has repeatedly stated its intent to defend its

¹⁶ For example, in his book *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1977, p. 78, Patrick Morgan notes that the circumstance of threat and reaction can create psychological reactions in the minds of the actors that can introduce "...some influence from irrational objectives and perceptions into an otherwise rational decision-making process."

¹⁷ As argued in *Chain Reaction: Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East*, Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, 110th Congress, February 2008. Also see Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbors", *Survival*, vol.49, No. 2, pp. 111-128. Regional reactions to Iran's program are also addressed in James A. Russell, "A Tipping Point Realized? Nuclear Proliferation in the Persian Gulf and Middle East", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 29, No. 3, December 2008, pp. 522-538.

¹⁸ Estimated by the Nuclear Information Project and the Federation of American Scientists, <http://www.nukestrat.com/nukestatus.pdf>

nuclear-armed regional ally (Israel), creating a strategic environment in which the use of nuclear weapons by the United States is implied as part of its commitment to Israel's security. Leaders of such outside powers as France and the United Kingdom, both medium-sized nuclear powers, have at various times also expressed opposition to Iran's program and have warned Iran not to cross the nuclear threshold.¹⁹ Though these France and the United Kingdom are both nuclear powers and are involved in the region's politics, their commitment to Israel's security must be regarded as less comprehensive than the United States: it is very difficult to imagine a scenario under which either France or the United Kingdom would consider using their nuclear weapons to disarm Iran by force.

The coercive bargaining framework thus must be seen as an integrated whole in which global, regional, and inter-state dynamics are inextricably intertwined. Each of these levels involves its own dynamics of competition, conflict, and cooperation that affect the broader framework. To understand how complex is the regional framework, one first needs to review the various actors' security posture and interests.

As the nuclear armed, pre-eminent global power, the United States has a variety interests and objectives at stake that guide its behavior in the bargaining framework. Its principal strategic interest is to preserve regional stability and ensure that international energy markets can continue to "fuel" the global economy. It also secondarily fears an existential threat from an Iranian nuclear weapon, though the overwhelming U.S. nuclear arsenal places it in a position of permanent superiority that could conceivably be used as the basis for deterrence. The U.S. protection of Israel – a powerful domestic political issue – must also be near the top of any list of objectives in the framework. The United States extends its nuclear umbrella over Israel. It has funded Israel's missile defense system as one of a variety of steps to help its closest regional ally build a seamless web of deterrent, defensive and offensive capabilities. U.S. interests do not stop there, however. The United States also has security commitments with many additional regional states (Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf States) and has developed a significant host-nation basing infrastructure to support the forward deployment of its military personnel that form part of these commitments. By implication, a nuclear umbrella is implicitly draped over all regional states that allow use of their military facilities by U.S. forces. Bilateral defense cooperation agreements in place throughout the region (except Saudi Arabia) not only commit both parties to jointly respond to threats to their security, but the United States has historically held out the right to respond to threats against its military forces with all means at its disposal, particularly in the case of attacks by chemical or biological weapons.²⁰ The United States has also historically extended a nuclear umbrella over Europe as part of its defense commitments to that region –

¹⁹ Charles Bremner, "Sarkozy Talks of Bombing if Iran Gets Nuclear Arms", *Times Online*, August, vol. 28, 2007, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article2337190.ece>.

²⁰ As discussed in James A. Russell and James J. Wirtz, "Negative Assurances and the Nuclear Posture Review", *Strategic Insights*, vol. 1, No. 5, July 2002, <http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/july02/nukes2.asp>.

some states that would technically be within reach of Iran's long-range missiles. These extended deterrence commitments introduce an added layer of complexity in shaping U.S. interests, motivations, and actions in the bargaining framework.

While there is close overlap in many areas, Israel's vital interests and objectives differ from the United States in important respects. Since it is not a global power with global commitments, Israel's vital interests are more narrowly defined. Above all, Israel seeks to prevent existential threats to the state and seeks to preserve its regional monopoly on nuclear weapons as the principal means to achieve this vital interest. While the United States and Israel share a common objective of curtailing Iran's nuclear ambitions, there is an asymmetry in interests that stems from simple geography and military realities. Israel faces a hostile state rhetorically committed to its destruction less than 1,500 miles from its borders. A nuclear-armed Iran with long-range missiles capable of delivering a nuclear payload with minutes of warning time is unacceptable to Israel. The United States is less directly threatened by a nuclear-armed Iran, though political realities of the U.S.-Israeli relationship may make this asymmetry moot. It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the impact that these different interests could have on supporting particular bargaining framework outcomes. Perhaps more importantly, these different interests suggest that the parties could react quite differently in a wartime escalation scenario with Iran. History supports this argument. The asymmetry of Israeli and U.S. interests formed a powerful backdrop during Gulf War I, when the United States successfully convinced Israel against responding to Saddam's missile attacks in Gulf War I.²¹

European states – two of which are nuclear armed – express less implacable opposition than either Israel or the United States to a deal that allows Iran to develop an indigenous nuclear capability. While they share concerns about the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon, the Europeans show themselves more willing to allow Iran to build a nuclear power infrastructure under strict international oversight. As a bloc, they are prepared to dangle economic incentives in an attempt to convince Iran to change its behavior and place its nuclear program under IAEA supervision.²² While the Europeans have called for restraint and have taken the lead in attempting to find a diplomatic solution, it is unlikely they would become directly involved in wartime confrontation involving Israel, the United States and Iran. Europe could be expected to support the United States – even if tacitly – if and when hostilities began.

Iran's interests are complicated and open to interpretation. At the heart of arguments surrounding discussions of its long-term interests and objectives is the degree to which Iran is a revisionist or status quo regional

²¹ Differences trenchantly addressed by Geoffrey Aronson, "Hidden Agenda: US-Israeli Relations and the Nuclear Question", *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 46, No. 4 (Autumn 1992), pp. 617-630.

²² On the western strategy regarding Iran nuclear program, see Mark Fitzpatrick, "The Iranian Nuclear Crisis. Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes", *Adelphi Papers*, No. 398, Chap. 2.

power, and whether its strategic objectives are defined in realist, ideological, or religious terms. A more pragmatic, realist-oriented Iran, for example, would likely behave more predictably than a state motivated primarily by religion and ideology. An ideologically motivated actor might be less interested in negotiation and might not be deterred by the threat of war. In fact, it could conceivably welcome a war. Leadership rhetoric strongly suggests revisionist objectives of reordering the regional environment in ways that reflect Iranian Islamist ideological and religious interests. Some argue that Iran sees the possession of a nuclear weapon as the basis on which to create a coercive political framework that will allow it to push the Islamic revolution throughout the region or, under the mantle of Islamic ideology, more traditional Persian interests. Others, however, see Iran as an insecure, status-quo, realist oriented state whose pursuit of the bomb makes perfect sense given its strategic circumstance.²³ Iran's recent history suggests a troubling example of the confusing stances that bargaining framework participants can take towards war as an outcome. While Iran did not start the war with Iraq in 1980, it certainly took a series of steps that many governments less adventurous than Saddam's would have regarded as worthy of a military response. Once the war started, Ayatollah Khomeini used circumstances provided by the war as a powerful tool to consolidate the Islamic revolution. Khomeini then resisted Saddam's peace entreaties and wasn't brought to the bargaining table until the Iran Air shoot down and Saddam's dumping tons of chemical agents on his troops in the Fao Peninsula.²⁴ An added disturbing element of complexity in the coercive bargaining framework is Iran's established track record of employing subterranean means (assassination, agitation, sponsorship of quasi-state or non-state terrorist organizations) as instruments of its policy – a track record that dates to the earliest days of the post-revolutionary period and extends to the present. Iran's motivations, history, and its embrace of terrorist groups and tactics all present a troubling and unpredictable series of factors that undermine the stability of the coercive bargaining framework.

The Gulf States fear the prospect of a nuclear armed Iran because they believe Iran will seek to use the shadow cast by its nuclear capabilities in order to coerce them to behave in ways that are advantageous to Iran.²⁵ The Gulf State ruling elites seek to maintain the status quo, preserve their hold on domestic political power, want to preserve the U.S. security umbrella, and focus upon making money in international energy markets to fund national economic development. Despite their internal squabbles, the Gulf State Sunni political elites share a commitment to global economic integration and internal economic development to move their societies into

²³ These competing arguments are summarized in Judith S. Yaphe and Charles D. Lutes, "Reassessing the Implications of Nuclear Armed Iran", *McNair Paper*, vol. 69, August 2005, <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/mcnair/mcnair69/mcnairpdf.pdf>. Also see Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litwak, "Debating Iran's Nuclear Aspirations", *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 26, No. 4, Autumn 2003, pp. 99-114. A good representative piece articulating a "realist" perspective on Iranian motivations is Ray Takeyh, "Iran Builds the Bomb", *Survival*, vol. 46, No. 4, Winter 2004-2005, pp. 51-64.

²⁴ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, London, Routledge, 1991.

²⁵ As noted in the Senate Report, *Chain Reaction*, *op. cit.*

the modern era. As a group, while they fear the prospect of a regional war with Iran, they would reluctantly and perhaps only indirectly support military action against Iran if all other attempts to reach a solution to the impasse fail. Despite their fear of nuclear armed Iran, these states also fear the consequences of any military action by either Israel and/or the United States. Their populations would be at risk if Iran used chemical weapons or biological agents to attack U.S. military installations as they would be at risk for nuclear fallout should either the U.S. or Israel use nuclear weapons in the context of conflict escalation – not to mention the probable negative reactions of their own population or parts thereof.²⁶

An acute source of uncertainty in the coercive bargaining framework stems from the undeniable presence of various non-state (Hamas, Hezbollah, and various Shiite groups) and quasi state actors (the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC). Whether these groups realize it or not, they constitute additional participants in the broader coercive bargaining framework. This is a particular problem in the Iran-Israel standoff, in which Iran actively supports two non-state actors (Hezbollah and Hamas) that are in open warfare with Israel and which have publicly committed to the destruction of the Jewish state. Hezbollah in particular is seen as a proxy of Iran, although their interests are not necessarily identical. After being created in the early 1980s to act as an agent of the IRGC in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah today is a political actor in Lebanese national politics. It services Shia constituencies throughout southern Lebanon while maintaining its historic relationships with the IRGC. While Hamas receives money and arms from Hezbollah via the IRGC, its long-term objective is unrelated to Iran's wider ambitions or even those of Hezbollah. It seeks above all the establishment of a unified Sunni Islamist Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank and the destruction of Israel. Iran also supports a variety of Shiite militias inside Iraq that have a similarly confusing series of objectives. Each of these actors are seen by the antagonists (Israel and the United States) as instruments of Iran, but it is manifestly unclear whether Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Jaysh al Mahdi recognize the important role they play in the broader regional inter-state standoff over Iran's nuclear program. Moreover, it is unclear the degree to which these organizations are directly controlled by Tehran and whether their motivations for action are in fact synonymous with Iran's. This raises the prospect that aggressive actions by these groups that may be seen as Iranian provocation may in fact be wholly the result of decisions by local leadership. The involvement of non-state actors represents an acute source of instability in the coercive bargaining framework.

The divergent interests and objectives of the actors introduce a source of unpredictability in the coercive bargaining framework, increasing the chances that miscalculation could lead to an escalation spiral that might prove difficult to control. The divergent interests and objectives of regional and global actors are summarized in Table 1 below.

²⁶ See Ian Black, "Arabs fear fallout of nuclear conflict: Nervous Arab states fear a war in the Gulf but a nuclear-armed Iran is an even greater concern", *The Guardian*, July 10, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/10/middleeast.iran>.

**Table 1:
Interests of Regional Bargaining Framework Participants**

COUNTRY	MAINTAIN STATUS QUO	IRAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM	LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES
IRAN	Mixed. ²⁷ Enhance regional position relative to Gulf States and Arab Sunni political establishment/counteract US influence/Mitigate military threats to regime; continually threaten Israel and regional states.	Yes	Regime survival/forestall domestic reformers/achieve regional political and military dominance /prevent economic collapse/ propagate Islamic revolution (See note 27)
ISRAEL	Yes	No	Maintain nuclear monopoly/no existential threat to state/ military superiority over regional adversaries/US relationship
UNITED STATES	Yes	No, possible peaceful enrichment deal?	Regional stability/protect Israel/preserve regional influence/preserve energy market functions/
HEZBOLLAH	Mixed; preserve strong position in Lebanon; preserve Iran ties; keep rhetoric of conflict at forefront.	Yes	Control of south Lebanon/Take over Lebanon/Cement position as vanguard of resistance to West-Israel; destruction of Israel
HAMAS	Mixed. Preserve position in Gaza– increase political influence in West Bank; money and arms from Iran; win against Fatah	Rhetorical embrace	Independent Palestinian State; destruction of Israel
SYRIA	Yes	Rhetorical embrace?	Regime survival/regional integration
GULF STATES	Yes; preserve regional political and economic influence relative to Iran and Iraq	No	Regime survival; keep US umbrella; prevent Iran from establishing regional political and military ascendance; ensure market functions; keep getting richer; ensure economic development to keep citizens happy.
EUROPEAN STATES	Yes	No – allow peaceful program, limit enrichment	Regional stability/stop crisis escalation/buy off Iranians.

²⁷ There is profound disagreement on whether Iran is a “status quo” vs. a “revisionist” regional power. Compelling cases can be made for both arguments. This is an extremely important point for evaluating Iranian motivations and actions in the coercive bargaining framework and in determining whether a stable deterrent relationship is possible under any circumstances.

Strategic Instability

The basis of the argument that escalation is possible in the short-term scenarios outlined below is that the region is today in a strategically unstable situation due to asymmetric interests, complex relationships between states and non-state actors, and a nascent Iranian nuclear power. In such a specific regional framework, the conditions for strategic stability identified during the Cold War may prove inadequate to prevent the outbreak of wars, and even nuclear escalation.

Escalation and Strategic Stability

The paper argues that a conventional preventive attack by Israel or America might inspire Iran to break the historic “taboo” on nuclear use or act in some sufficiently outrageous way that the Israelis or the Americans feel compelled to use nuclear weapons in response. The motives for such a response would be a combination of revenge plus dissuasion from whatever the outrageous behavior was, and it also implies that neither the United States nor Israel possessed conventional options that would be sufficiently punitive. Accordingly, strategic stability may not be attainable in the region.

To fully understand this point, it is necessary to analyze the concept of “strategic stability”, starting with its history.²⁸ The term has its roots in the history of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry during the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, strategic analysts today look upon the hallowed era of the Cold War with a sense of perverse comfort. Despite the fact that the world’s two major powers – indeed the entire world – lived under the continuous threat of nuclear incineration, they eventually developed a complicated but strategically stable relationship. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis in November 1962, a system of inter-state interactions developed based upon one overriding shared assumption: that escalation to all-out nuclear war should be avoided at all costs.

The system of strategic stability developed by the United States and the Soviet Union included a number of critical elements: (1) an acceptance in the idea of mutually assured destruction that made the prospect of

²⁸ See John D. Steinbruner, “National Security and the Concept of Strategic Stability”, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 22, No. 3, September 1978, pp. 411-428; For Cold War history, see Paul Nitze, “Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente”, *Foreign Affairs*, January 1976. For a more recent treatment, see Walter B. Slocombe, “Strategic Stability in a Restructured World”, *Survival*, vol. 32, No. 4, July/August 1990, pp. 299-312.

nuclear war unthinkable and an implicit acceptance in the idea of strategic parity – despite the presence of a different mix of strategic forces (ICBMs, bombers, SLBMs, etc.); (2) agreement to create a process to control the numbers of overtly offensive nuclear weapons in each other's arsenal and thereby prevent an unconstrained arms race; (3) development of redundant second strike capabilities on both sides that made it impossible for either side to realistically consider a first strike that would leave the adversary unable to respond to the attack; (4) a system of communications that could be activated during confrontations and crises to prevent escalation in conflict and an associated confidence built over time in both actors in their respective command and control procedures over each sides' strategic forces; (5) confidence building measures that helped create a more cooperative political atmosphere; (6) acceptance that competition, conflict and rivalry could all co-exist in the interstate relationship. These and other assumptions formed the basis of the Cold War bargaining framework that helped create "strategic stability" between the world's superpowers, even if Soviet and American war plans diverged from their declared doctrines, leaning more toward achieving military victory than relying on Mutual Assured Destruction as a sufficient basis for deterrence.²⁹

While there are limitations in drawing upon the U.S. – Soviet experience as the basis to judge whether the Middle East is strategically stable,³⁰ assumptions from the era provide a useful starting point to judge whether the concept of strategic stability can be usefully applied to the region. Few if any of the elements that characterized the U.S. – Soviet strategic balance are present in today's Middle East. For example, it is unclear whether the main antagonists share important and foundational assumptions to bound the bargaining framework surrounding their rivalry. Israel appears strongly committed to preventing the emergence of a strategic environment in which any regional state possesses comparable nuclear capabilities. In short, it prefers not to rely on mutual vulnerability and deterrence as the basis to preserve its security and remains implacably opposed to an environment in which there is any existential threat to the survival of the Jewish state, though it has tolerated some level of mutual deterrence ensured by Syria's probable WMD capability via chemical or bio-chem tipped missiles. Its strategic assertion is in marked contrast to the Cold War superpower relationship, in which both sides appeared to doctrinally, politically, and diplomatically accept that the threat of mutual incineration represented an all-powerful constraint on the potential use of nuclear weapons. For its part, Iran claims to reject the idea that it must accept Israeli nuclear superiority – achieved outside the confines of the NPT – in perpetuity. This basic disagreement suggests that the two parties look at the strategic relationship from completely different and incompatible perspectives. Lacking the same sort of shared assumptions and

²⁹ This argument may be found in John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2001.

³⁰ As argued by Gerald M. Steinberg, "Parameters of Stable Deterrence in a Proliferated Middle East: Lessons from the 1991 Gulf War", *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 7, No. 3, Fall-Winter 2000, p. 44. Steinberg also forcefully argues this point in "Deterrence Instability: Hizballah's Fuse to Iran's Bomb", *Jerusalem Viewpoints*, No. 529, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, April 1, 2005, <http://www.jcpa.org/jl/vp529.htm>.

symmetrical interests that characterized the U.S.-Soviet relationship makes it much more difficult to operationalize a bargaining framework to guard against the prospect of pre-emptive attack and conflict escalation.

Deterrence, Escalation, and the Coercive Framework

Asserting that the Middle East's strategic environment is fundamentally unstable rests in part on a judgment that critical assumptions about deterrence are not commonly shared by the framework participants. Deterrence is essential to construction of a strategically stable framework. The Department of Defense defines the term as: "The prevention from action by fear of the consequences. Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction."³¹ Deterrence remains stable so long as each side assesses that the benefits of inaction are deemed to outweigh the costs of military action. The opposite is also true. Deterrence fails when any of the actors judge that the benefits of military action outweigh the costs of inaction. Perceived actor credibility is critical to the maintenance of a stable deterrent relationship. Each actor in the framework must believe in the other's capabilities and their political resolve to maintain the deterrent status quo. Deterrence also is unquestionably a theory that considers the motivation of actors that must continually assess their windows of vulnerability as part of the ongoing calculus that underlies a stable deterrent relationship. Other supporting elements in deterrent relationships are judgments assessing actor rationality and the communications framework through which antagonists convey and receive actor intent.³²

Actors in a deterrent framework typically find themselves in two forms of deterrent relationships: deterrence by punishment, which sometimes takes the shape of a situation of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), and deterrence by denial. Mutual Assured Destruction means just that – a situation in which each actor accepts that an attack by either adversary will result in their mutual destruction. So long as a disarming first-strike is impossible, the military balance remains stable, and neither side will attack. Deterrence by denial means that actors are in a parallel or reciprocal manner seeking to deny the antagonist military victory under nearly any circumstances. It seems clear that Israel, for example, has adopted elements of a deterrence by denial strategy. Israel's steps in this direction mirror the U.S. nuclear stance, which is today increasingly structured around a strategy of deterrence by denial.³³ With U.S.

³¹ Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, August 26, 2008, <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/d/01661.html>. Also see Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, Beverly Hills, Sage Press, 1985, p. 30; Morgan, *Deterrence Now*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 1-2.

³² As emphasized in Gerald M. Steinberg, "Parameters of a Stable Deterrent in a Proliferated Middle East", *op. cit.*, p. 44; and James A. Russell, "Nuclear Strategy and the Modern Middle East", *op. cit.*

³³ James A. Russell and James J. Wirtz, "United States Nuclear Strategy in the 21st Century", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 25, No. 1, April 2004, pp. 91-108; Richard Sokolsky, "Demystifying the Nuclear Posture Review", *Survival*, vol. 44, No. 3, 2002, pp. 133-148.

assistance, Israel has reportedly taken steps to add a second strike capacity through the deployment of nuclear armed missiles on three Dolphin-class submarines.³⁴ It also has added missile defenses through the deployment of several U.S.-funded Arrow anti-missile batteries and is continually upgrading these defenses. In October 2008, Israel installed two U.S.-provided AN/TPY-2 radars near the Dimona nuclear plant that improves its missile tracking capability as well as its ability to provide targeting to its ground-based anti-missile system.³⁵

Neither Iran nor Israel has articulated extensive views on the role that deterrence plays in their respective national security strategies. Israel initiated its nuclear program following the 1948 war of independence in order to deter future existential threats to the state and address Israel's systemic asymmetries in relationship to its adversaries: its lack of strategic depth, its vulnerability to its more numerous adversaries, etc. After becoming a nuclear power in the late 1960s, Israel has stated that it would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the region and has relied on a combined policy of nuclear opacity and ambiguity since then.³⁶ Under this approach, Israel declines to openly declare itself as a nuclear power but in parallel signals through leaks and other pronouncements the existence of its nuclear arsenal. Such subtlety, however, may have fallen by the wayside, since recent statements by senior U.S. and Israeli officials openly acknowledge Israel's nuclear status.³⁷ It is difficult to argue at this point that Israel remains in any kind of nuclear closet.

But if Israel's nuclear policies on deterrence and strategic nuclear doctrine remain somewhat unclear, there is no confusion about its counter-proliferation policy. Israel's successful destruction of Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak in June 1981 and the destruction of Syria's reactor at al-Kibar in September 2007 leave little room for misinterpretation. In enunciating what has since become known as the "Begin Doctrine," then-Prime Minister Begin told the world following the Osiraq attack that: "We shall not allow

³⁴ Doug Frantz, "Israel's Arsenal is Point of Contention", *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2003, A1, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/oct/12/world/fg-iznukes12>.

³⁵ "Israel to Install Radar Antennae Near Nuclear Site", *AFP*, October 3, 2008.

³⁶ Background in Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 1-7. Gerald M. Steinberg, "Parameters of a Stable Deterrence", *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49; Zeev Maoz, "The Mixed Blessing of Israel's Nuclear Policy", *International Security*, vol. 28, No. 2, Fall 2003, pp. 44-77; Louis Rene Beres, "Israel's Strategic Nuclear Doctrine: Ambiguity Versus Openness", June 1, 2001, <http://www.tzemach.org/fyi/docs/beres/june01-01.htm>.

³⁷ In a confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee in December 2006, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates openly referred to Israel as a nuclear power. See "Incoming U.S. Defense Secretary Tells Senate Panel Israel has Nuclear Weapons", *Associated Press*, December 9, 2006. Several days later, then Israeli Prime Minister also acknowledged Israel's possession of nuclear weapons when he stated that. "We never threatened any nation with annihilation. Iran openly, explicitly and publicly threatens to wipe Israel off the map. Can you say that this is the same level, when they are aspiring to have nuclear weapons, as France, America, Russia and Israel?" As quoted in Phillipe Naughton and news agencies, "Olmert's Nuclear slip-up Sparks Outrage in Israel", *Timesonline*, December 12, 2006, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article752059.ece.

any enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction turned against us.”³⁸ Many believe that the Begin Doctrine and its commitment to prevent any existential, holocaust-like threat to the Jewish homeland remains a guiding principle for Israeli security strategy.³⁹

Iranian views of deterrence and nuclear weapons are more difficult to discern. Its pursuit of a nuclear capability goes back to the days of the Shah. At one time the program was dropped at the initial stages of the Islamic revolution but then restarted during the Iran-Iraq war. While there is much informed speculation about Iran’s motivations for wanting the bomb (prestige, legitimate aspirations to possess advanced nuclear know-how, with dual-use implications, national identity and self esteem, regional influence, etc.), there is little indication from the regime on the role nuclear weapons would play in its national security strategy. Attempting to decipher Iran’s thinking on deterrence and nuclear strategy leads us in contradictory directions. On the one hand, the bluster from the regime suggests that Iran is clearly interested in maintaining deterrence in the current environment in order to forestall a pre-emptive attack. Its threats of retaliation and wider regional war are intended to convince Israel and the United States that the costs of preventative attack would be high – perhaps even catastrophic in the case of Israel. It is threatening escalation and treating the use of its unconventional weapons ambiguously for its adversaries – leaving uncertainty about whether it would actually use these weapons as part of conflict escalation. These threats are not the act of an irrational actor – far from it. Iran’s interest in deterrence and forestalling preventative strikes shows a recognition that it would enter a war from a position of conventional military weakness, and it must understand that a response on its part through terrorist attacks by proxies and the use of unconventional weapons could lead either or both its adversaries to contemplate further escalation to maintain their escalation dominance. Iran would face annihilation if the conflict entered an escalation spiral. But if it can reinforce deterrence over the short term by convincing its adversaries of the credibility of its threats through rhetoric and saber rattling, it can perhaps forestall the preventative attacks and achieve its goal of realizing its own strategic deterrent. It is a dangerous strategy given the fundamental asymmetrical interests between itself, Israel, and the United States.

If Iran’s adversaries became convinced that a nuclear weapon was intended for solely defensive purposes, this understanding might form the basis for a stable deterrent relationship based on the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction. However, the rhetoric out of the Iranian leadership strongly suggests their intent to use the strategic nuclear capability once operationalized for offensive purposes, as a means to destroy Israel. This rhetoric is at variance with any appreciation for stable deterrence – a conclusion that has no doubt been reached in Tel Aviv. Iran’s competing

³⁸ Quoted in various sources. See Leonard S. Spector and Avner Cohen, “Israel’s Airstrike on Syria’s Reactor: Implications for the Nonproliferation Regime”, *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2008; http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_07-08/SpectorCohen

³⁹ As argued by Gerald Steinberg in “The Begin Doctrine at 25”, *Jerusalem Post*, July 4, 2006; <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1148482105339&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

and contradictory views on possessing nuclear weapons only reinforce doubts over its rationality and motivations in the coercive bargaining framework – both critical components in deterrent relationships.⁴⁰ This was not the case in Israel's interactions with Saddam during Gulf War I, where, despite Saddam's hostile rhetoric, he declined to escalate the conflict through the use of chemical weapons in his missile attacks against Israel. Some argue that deterrence worked in Gulf War I and that Saddam behaved rationally and was successfully deterred by Israel's (and U.S.) nuclear weapons.⁴¹ Interestingly, Saddam used chemical weapons against both his external and internal opponents when they were unable to retaliate in kind, but didn't cross the threshold when he faced nuclear-armed opponents who made veiled threats of nuclear retaliation in case of an Iraqi WMD attack, as during the Persian Gulf War. It is not clear whether the Iranian leadership would come to the same conclusion and refrain from implementing a provocative and de-stabilizing nuclear posture once it takes stock of its strategic environment, much like Saddam did, or if unique values and theocratic polity would continue to guide it down a different nuclear path.⁴²

Some believe that the Iranian leadership cannot be counted upon to systematically weigh costs and benefits in a deliberative process before taking military action. In other words, they would not be rational actors, at least as perceived through a secular lens. Israeli strategic analyst Gerald Steinberg cogently summarized these concerns, arguing that: "...the isolation of Iran's leaders, the fog that surrounds its decision-making structures, the absence of direct channels of communication, and its radical, religious-based revisionist objectives will make the development of stable deterrence extremely difficult."⁴³ Others believe that Iranian President Ahmadinejad's combative rhetoric is driven by messianic religious fervor.⁴⁴ In his September 2008 speech before the United Nations

⁴⁰ Some of the rhetoric out of the religious leadership seems to contradict Ahmadinejad. In June 2008, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei stated that Iran remained opposed to nuclear weapons "...based on religious and Islamic beliefs as well as based on logic and wisdom." He further stated that "nuclear weapons have no benefit but high costs to manufacture and keep them. Nuclear weapons do not bring power to a nation because they are not applicable. Nuclear weapons cannot be used." Paul Kerr, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Status*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, November 20, 2008. Kerr draws the quote from a briefing from Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman on November 10, 2008.

⁴¹ As argued by Gerald Steinberg, "Parameters of a Stable Deterrent in a Proliferated Middle East", *op. cit.*

⁴² On James Baker's threats conveyed to Tarik Aziz, see Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co, 1995; p. 197. For a comparative cultural analysis of Iran and Iraq's strategic personalities regarding nuclear threats, see Caroline F. Ziemke, *Strategic Personality and the Effectiveness of Nuclear Deterrence: Deterring Iraq and Iran*, Institute for Defense Analyses, September 2001, P-3658. For a more recent analysis focused on Iran, see Mehdi Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics. On the Rationality of Iranian Politics*, Washington Institute for Near-East Policy, Policy Focus #79, January 2008.

⁴³ Gerald Steinberg, "Deterrence Instability: Hisballah's Fuse to Iran's Bomb", *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Scott Peterson, "What Drives Ahmadinejad's Combative Rhetoric", *Christian Science Monitor*, September 23, 2008.

General Assembly, Ahmadinejad repeated his oft-stated call for the return of the Shiite Messiah to vanquish Iran's oppressors and restore perfection to the world. Shiite religious tradition holds that the missing 12th Imam (who allegedly disappeared in 874 AD) will return as the savior of all Shiites. To be sure, Ahmadinejad does not exercise ultimate political or religious authority but Iran's political leadership – the Council of Guardians – is comprised solely of religious figures. A religiously-motivated actor or series of actors might adopt a decidedly different thought process in weighing courses of action in a coercive bargaining framework in ways that weaken deterrence and introduce an added element of uncertainty in actor interactions.

Using Steinberg's logic, it is not difficult to construct an argument that a stable deterrent relationship with Iran's leaders would be less likely to emerge, and, further, that the same systemic factors would produce an unstable actor decision-making process in a military crisis. American Secretary of Defense Robert Gates voiced these concerns during his confirmation hearings in December 2006 when he stated that he could provide no assurance that Iran would not use nuclear weapons against Israel. Gates also openly acknowledged the prospect of conflict of Iranian use of chemical or biological weapons in the context of conflict escalation in the event of a U.S. or Israeli attack.⁴⁵

Communications, Actor Intent and the Rhetoric of War

During the Cold War, the nuclear arms limitation talks between the United States and the Soviet Union provided useful venues for both parties to communicate with each other on a wide variety of issues. These venues complemented a formal diplomatic relationship that was never broken – despite fundamental disagreements on many issues. By contrast, there is no regional political and military framework in place to facilitate interstate communications to promote transparency and confidence among the antagonists.⁴⁶ Iran has no formal diplomatic relations with its two major antagonists; though, ironically, it historically had good relations with both countries. Communications between the antagonists thus are operationalized through speeches and other pronouncements intended for a variety of different audiences. For example, Iranian President Ahmadinejad's incendiary comments that stir support in his domestic political base have an entirely different and very negative impact in Israel and the wider international community. Similarly, periodic comments by U.S. political leaders threatening to attack Iran made before America's Israeli lobby on the one hand address certain domestic political

⁴⁵ "U.S. Can't Assure Israel that Iran Won't Attack", Wire Service Reports, posted on *Haaretz.com*, December 5, 2006, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/797134.html>; another version is posted at *Ynet News* at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3336531,00.html>.

⁴⁶ The U.S. may be reconsidering its lack of diplomatic presence in Tehran – which might help facilitate inter-state communications. See Warren P. Stroebel, "U.S. Plans to Envoys to Tehran For the First Time Since 1980", *McClatchey News Service*, October 23, 2008. The story reports on the possible establishment of a U.S. Interests Section in Iran.

requirements in the United States but they also harden political attitudes in Iran.

Absent a structured communications framework, the parties increasingly rely on a complex “signaling” process that in this particular case involves threatening military exercises and countermoves. In June 2008, Israeli warplanes mounted military exercises in the Mediterranean that simulated a likely attack on Iran’s nuclear sites. Iran immediately responded with various “test” missile launches intended to demonstrate its capacity to hit targets in Israel. Signaling intent to antagonists via threatening military exercises by both parties creates conditions under which either or both parties may launch pre-emptive attacks if it believes an attack by the other is imminent. It also creates the prospect of creating insecurity in one or both of the adversaries if the military capacities being demonstrated are deemed to be of such significance that one of the parties believes it must attack to forestall the use of the demonstrated capability.

Today’s interstate communication’s framework is alive with the rhetoric of war. Iran, the United States and Israel have all made statements to inflict grave damage on each other – damage that could reasonably be assumed to include nuclear weapons. Stated differently, the antagonists are openly threatening each other and signaling a direct intention to attack the other. Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad repeatedly state their desire to destroy Israel. National Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, made a similar warning in April 2008 when he stated that “An Iranian attack will lead to a harsh retaliation by Israel, which will lead to the destruction of the Iranian nation.”⁴⁷ Following these comments, Iran’s deputy army chief, Gen. Muhammed Reza Ashitiani stated that: “Should Israel take any action against Iran, we will eliminate Israel from the scene of the universe.”⁴⁸

At the risk of stating the blindingly obvious, the rhetoric of war can lead to war. In many respects, it is surprising that no attack has yet occurred given the incendiary rhetoric coming out of Tehran. While Iran’s rhetoric may be intended to strengthen deterrence it also has the affect of hardening political calculations in Tel Aviv and Washington that there is no solution to the confrontation short of war. The 1967 war, for example, illustrates the limit of states’ patience in considering the use of force. In 1967, the international community exhibited indifference to the scale of the threat faced by Israel.⁴⁹ The best chance to avert war in 1967 was clearly firm and immediate American engagement, which failed to materialize.

⁴⁷“Israeli Cabinet Minister Warns Iran Will be Destroyed if It Attacks Israel, Wire Service Reports, April 7, 2008.

<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/04/07/africa/ME-GEN-Israel-Iran.php>.

⁴⁸ As quoted in Herb Keinon, “Iran Threatens to Eliminate Israel”, Jerusalem Post, April 15, 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1208246573612>.

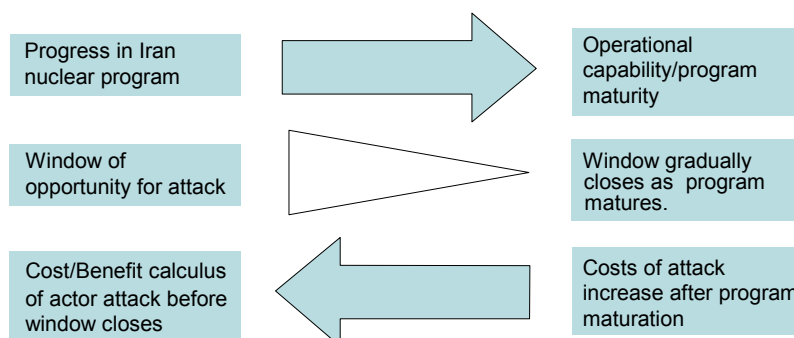
⁴⁹ See for example Benjamin Miller, *States, Nations, and the Great Powers. The Sources of Regional War and Peace*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 233 ; Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, “The Arab-Israeli War of 1967”, in Alexander George (ed.), *Avoiding War. Problems of Crisis Management*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1991, pp. 304-319.

America’s commitment to Israel has not wavered since, perhaps because the lesson learned came at such a high price, and with such perilous risks.

Escalation and the “Window of Opportunity”

As suggested by Schelling, asymmetries in actor interests can complicate the functioning of the bargaining framework for actor participants. As outlined above, the interests and objectives of the participants differ in ways that potentially undermine predictable interactions of the framework participants. Also surrounding these asymmetries in interests are the circumstances of the present, in which there is a growing perception that the “window of opportunity” for preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon may be closing.⁵⁰ This perception creates conditions under which nuclear status quo powers such as the Israel or the United States may contemplate a preventive military strike. The likelihood of such a first strike attack in these circumstances is inversely related to calculations over the size of the window of opportunity.⁵¹ As long as Iran is believed to be years away from achieving operational capability, the prospect of an attack remains low. The more advanced Iran’s capabilities become, the higher the prospect of an attack. The inverse relationship is reflected in figure one below.

**Figure 1:
Window of Opportunity and Actor Attack Decision-making Calculus**



The most likely escalation trigger in the framework is a preventative conventional attack by the United States and/or Israel on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure if either or both actors become convinced that Iran was on the verge of operationalizing a weapon. Estimates vary on when this may

⁵⁰ Press reports indicate that Iran may already possess enough enriched uranium for a nuclear device. William Broad and David Sanger, “Iran Said to Have Nuclear Fuel for One Weapon”, *New York Times*, November 19, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/20/world/middleeast/20nuke.html?th&emc=th>.

⁵¹ This section draws upon treatment of this concept in Janice Gross Stein, “Extended Deterrence in the Middle East: American Strategy Reconsidered”, *World Politics*, vol. 29, No. 13, April 1987, pp. 326-352; also see Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases from 1900-1980”, *World Politics*, vol 36, No. 4, July 1984, pp. 496-526.

occur. The United States Director of National Intelligence, J. Michael McConnell, testified in February 2008 that Iran could compile sufficient quantities of highly enriched uranium to build a nuclear device by 2010-2015 – with 2009 representing the earliest date Iran could achieve this goal.⁵² Israel shares the basic outlines of the U.S. assessment, but takes a more alarmist view. Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz stated in August 2008 that “Our estimation is that already by [2009] Iran will reach enrichment capability and as soon as 2010 will have option to reach [uranium production] at military levels.”⁵³ Israeli plans for a preventative strike on Iranian nuclear sites appear periodically in the press,⁵⁴ and Israel has undertaken a series of military exercises intended to demonstrate its military capabilities to attack Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. In June 2008, Israel mounted an exercise using 100 F-15 and F-16 aircraft traveling over 900 miles with aerial refueling tankers and pilot recovery operations that was widely seen as a rehearsal for such an attack.⁵⁵ The United States reportedly told Israel in the summer of 2008 that it would not actively support a preventative attack.⁵⁶ Despite the absence of a “green light” for the attack, the United States nonetheless agreed in September 2008 to provide \$77 million for 1,000 GBU-39 bunker busting smart bombs that can reportedly penetrate up to six feet of reinforced concrete. The sale bolsters Israel’s ability to threaten Iran’s nuclear sites, IRGC and Hezbollah underground bunkers.⁵⁷

There is little doubt that Iran possesses the technical and industrial capacities to build a bomb. It has spent the last 20 years constructing a physical, technical, and human infrastructure to support the effort that is spread throughout the country. The extent of Iran’s military-related

⁵² Testimony of J. Michael McConnell, Director of National Intelligence, “Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Armed Services Committee”, February 27, 2008,

http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2008/February/McConnell_02-27-08.pdf.

⁵³ As quoted in “Israel Warns of Iranian Nuclear Aims”, *BBC Online*, August 2, 2008; accessed online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7538524.stm. As for other estimates, please refer to

http://www.isis-online.org/publications/iran/ISIS_analysis_Nov-IAEA-Report.pdf.

⁵⁴ Ralf Beste, Cordula Meyer and Christoph Schult, “Israeli Ministers Mull Plans for Military Strike Against Iran”, *Spiegel Online International*; June 16, 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,559925,00.html>.

⁵⁵ Details as reported in Donald Macintyre, “Israel’s Dry Run Attack on Iran with 100 Jet Fighters”, *The Independent*, June 21, 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israels-dry-run-attack-on-iran-with-100-jet-fighters-851614.html>.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Steele, “Israel Asked for Green Light to Bomb Iran Nuclear Sites”, *Guardian.co.uk*, September 25, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/25/iran.israelandthepalestinians1>.

⁵⁷ “US Plans to Sell Israel 1,000 Bunker Busting Bombs”, *AFP*, September 15, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/09/15/us-plans-to-sell-israel-1_n_126652.html.

Also see David E. Sanger, “U.S. Rejected Aid for Israeli Raid on Iranian Nuclear Site”, *New York Times*, January 11, 2009. Sanger reported that the U.S. Administration/G.W. Bush didn’t accept to transfer to Israel the appropriate ordnance to strike Natanz underground facilities and also rejected the Israeli request to fly over Iraq.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/washington/11iran.html?_r=2&hp

infrastructure remains unclear, and Iran continues to stonewall the IAEA's repeated requests for information about suspected military-related activities. Iran is building a heavy water research reactor at Arak – useful primarily for developing a capacity to produce weapons grade plutonium. It is installing uranium gas centrifuges at Natanz – an underground, bunkered site sized to house up to 50,000 centrifuges. Widely available evidence suggests that Iran is either working on or has completed work on a series of second generation centrifuge designs. One of these, the IR-2, is a variant on the P-2 centrifuge design provided to Tehran by Pakistani scientist A. Q. Khan in the mid 1990s.⁵⁸ The IR-2 gives Iran the capacity to enrich uranium at more than twice the speed of the P-1 centrifuge. There are also reports that Iran is developing a larger capacity IR-3 centrifuge, also a modification to Khan's P-1.⁵⁹ Iran is estimated to have at least 3,000 operational P-1s at Natanz. Iran's statements describing its intent and its nuclear capacity only confirm the worst fears of many observers. In July 2008, Iranian President Ahmadinejad boasted that Iran was employing up to 6,000 centrifuges at Natanz – doubling estimates of the number of operational centrifuges.⁶⁰ Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Reza Sheikh Attar later lowered these claims in to 4,000 in comments to the press made in August 2008.⁶¹ The uranium enrichment site at Natanz is only one critical element in a redundant infrastructure that is widely spread throughout the country – see Figure 2, page 30.

Throughout 2008, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) grappled with evidence suggesting that Iran may have or may be attempting to design a nuclear weapon. Data presented to diplomats in February 2008 by IAEA inspector Olli Heinonen suggested that Iran has been working on exploding detonators for an implosion-type nuclear device. More recent reports suggest that a Russian scientist assisted Iran in conducting the detonator experiments.⁶² In its September 2008 report to the United Nations Security Council, the IAEA noted that Iran had not satisfactorily responded requests for clarification about the "...green salt project, high explosives testing and the missile re-entry project."⁶³ Details of

⁵⁸ David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, "Iran Installing More Advanced Centrifuges at Natanz Pilot Enrichment Plant: Fact Sheet on the P-2/IR-2 Centrifuge", The Institute for Science and International Security, Washington, DC, February 7, 2008, http://www.isis-online.org/publications/iran/ISIS_Iran_P2_7Feb2008.pdf.

⁵⁹ David Albright, Jacqueline Shire, and Paul Brannan, "May 26, 2008 IAEA Safeguards Report on Iran: Centrifuge Operation Improving and Cooperation Lacking on Weapons Issues", Rev. 2, The Institute for Science and International Security, Washington, DC, May 29, 2008, http://www.isis-online.org/publications/iran/ISIS_Iran_IAEA_Report_29May2008.pdf.

⁶⁰ Jon Leyne, "Iran Announces Nuclear Expansion", *BBC News Online*, July 26 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7526894.stm.

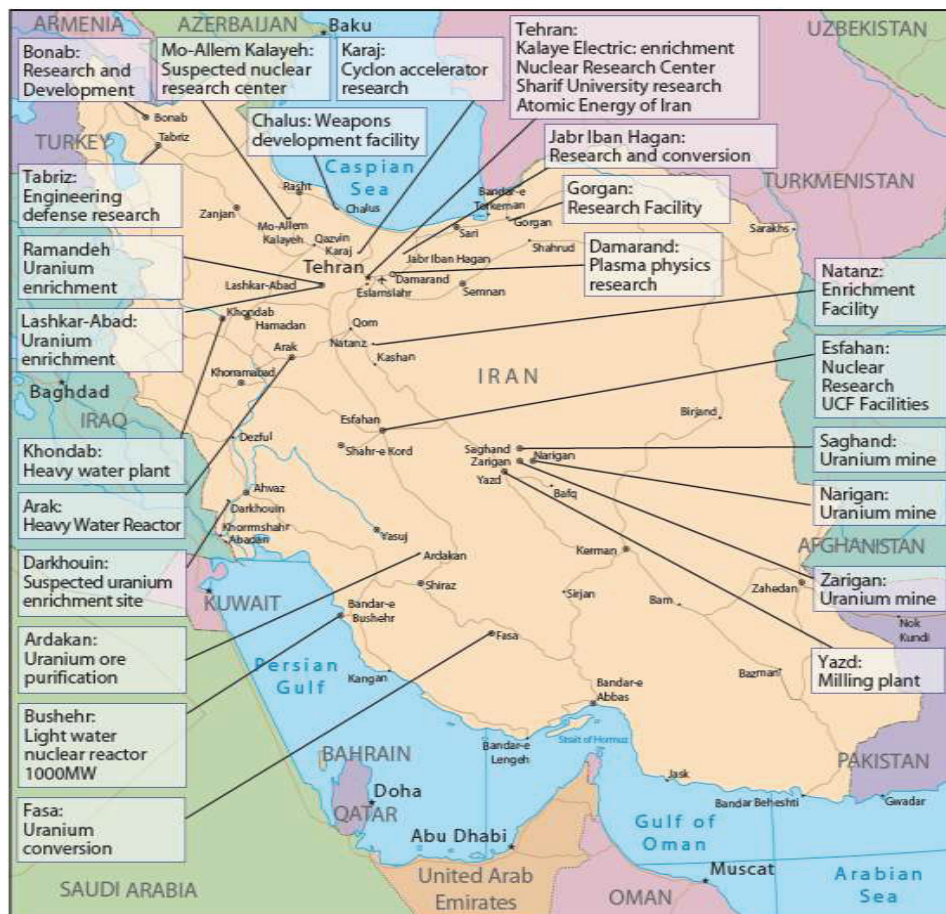
⁶¹ "Iran Claims to Have 4,000 Centrifuges", *Voice of America News*, August 29, 2008, <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2008-08/2008-08-29-voa15.cfm?CFID=53845365&CFTOKEN=93090930>.

⁶² Elaine Sciolino, "Nuclear Aid by Russian to Iranians Suspected", *New York Times*, October 10, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/10/world/10nuke.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>; also see William Broad and David Sanger, "Meeting on Arms Data Reignites Iran Debate", *New York Times*, March 3, 2008,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/03/world/middleeast/03nuke.html?pagewanted=all>
⁶³ *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), and 1803 (2008) in the*

these and other weapons-related projects were revealed on the hard drive of a laptop computer stolen by an Iranian citizen in 2004 and delivered to Western intelligences services.⁶⁴ The Iranians claim that much of the IAEA data are fabricated and they have provided unsatisfactory responses to the IAEA requests for clarifications on activities that many believe could only be related to a bomb program that clearly lies outside allowable activities for Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty signatories.⁶⁵

Figure 2:
Iran Nuclear Sites (Source: NTI⁶⁶)



Islamic Republic of Iran, International Atomic Energy Agency, September 15, 2008; pp. 3-4.

⁶⁴ Dana Linzer, "Strong Leads and Dead Ends in Nuclear Case Against Iran", *Washington Post*, February 8, 2006, A1.

⁶⁵ An authoritative overview of Iran's nuclear program is Paul Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status", Congressional Research Service, June 23, 2008, <http://www.fas.org/sqp/crs/nuke/RL34544.pdf>; also see brief compiled by Anthony Cordesman, "The U.S., Israel, The Arab States, and a Nuclear Iran", September 23, 2008, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/081006_iran_nuclear.pdf.

⁶⁶ Posted online at www.nti.org/e_research/profiles_pdfs/Iran/iran_nuclear_sites.pdf

The near-term scenarios outlined in the third section (which are not mutually exclusive) all reflect a cost-benefit calculus for attack so long as actors perceive that the window of opportunity for a successful attack remains open. Some argue that the window is already closed due to the military difficulties of destroying Iran's program.⁶⁷ Difficulties faced by military planners include: Iran's sources of centrifuge equipment and technology are unknown; its production facilities for centrifuges are widely dispersed; the infrastructure for its clandestine military program are unknown; and it is unknown where Iran stores its uranium hexafluoride – a stockpile estimated to total 300 tons.⁶⁸ These are just a few of the uncertainties that must be addressed by target planners. As the window begins to close, the actor contemplating the attack realizes that the costs of attack will dramatically increase – particularly if the adversary reaches operational capability and the attacker is faced with a nuclear armed adversary. The motivation for attack is thus highest when the attacker perceives that the window of opportunity is closing. The actor seeking to forestall the attack will take two actions: (1) try and demonstrate military strength to delay the attack and, in parallel, (2) use deception about the status of his actual capabilities to keep the attacker uncertain as to how wide the window remains open for the attack.

US calculations in this framework are complicated. Preventative military action against Iran based on alleged Iranian nuclear capabilities will be politically difficult to justify due to the recent experiences of Iraq in which the counterproliferation rationale for the war was largely manufactured before the war. In other words, the political costs of mounting a preventative attack before Iran has achieved a nuclear capability may be unacceptably high for the United States – to say nothing of the destabilizing consequences throughout the region. These cost/benefit calculations do not improve for either the United States or Israel once Iran gets nuclear: what could be gained in terms of legitimacy would be more than compensated by the perils involved in trying to disarm a nuclear adversary. Throughout these interactions Iran would logically maintain a strong interest in a pre-emptive attack if it believed an attack by Israel and the United States was imminent. Iranian President Ahmadinejad referenced this prospect on September 21, 2008 in remarks at a military parade in Iran when he stated: "If anyone allows themselves to invade Iranian territory and its legal interests... our armed forces will break their hands before they pull the trigger."⁶⁹ Iran's interest in a forestalling preventative attack is a profound source of crisis instability.

An added pressure to strike before the window of opportunity closes is the attacker's long-term assessments about its ability to construct a

⁶⁷ See David Albright, Paul Brannan, and Jacqueline Shire, "Can Military Strikes Destroy Iran's Gas Centrifuge Program? Probably Not", *ISIS Report*, Institute for Science and International Security, Washington, DC, August 7, 2008, http://www.isis-online.org/publications/iran/Centrifuge_Manufacturing_7August2008.pdf.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ "Iran Will 'Break Hands' of Invaders: Ahmadinejad", *AFP*, September 21, 2008, http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20080921/wl_mideast_afp/irannuclearpoliticsmilitary;_ylt=AiTvMwamNL9i5_DkymLGgQ0LewgF.

stable deterrent with the adversary seeking the nuclear capability. In the case of the U.S.-Soviet relationship, the Soviet detonation of its nuclear device in August 1949 presented the United States with a *fait accompli* that could not be reversed.⁷⁰ However, the Soviets could not reach U.S. territory for quite some time, and even after that the U.S. enjoyed a very significant superiority in numbers; because of these asymmetries, there were serious debates about a preventive attack in the United States up to the Eisenhower Administration. But over the next 20 years, the superpowers gradually constructed a stable deterrent relationship, in part because each party had little choice – in spite of their ideological differences. In the case of Israel and Iran, it is not clear that either country shares an interest in a stable deterrent relationship. Israel remains opposed to any existential threats to the nation and shows little understandable interest in relying on deterrence to manage the threat from an adversary that has repeatedly indicated its unmitigated hostility to the Jewish state. Iran casts its hostility to Israel in the language of ethno-national and religious conflict and also shows little interest in engaging in negotiations or other measures to reduce tensions. While Iran did make several moves in an effort to signal its willingness to negotiate circa 2002, these fell on deaf ears within the Bush Administration. Ultimately, if Israel and/or the United States don't believe they can build a deterrent relationship with Tehran under any circumstances, this is a further incentive to strike before Iran explodes a device.

The prospect of an attack by Israel and the United States (and conflict escalation) decreases after program maturation due to the potential costs to the actor contemplating the attack. In other words, Israel and/or the United States are less likely to start a war with a nuclear armed-Iran – an idea that has surely occurred to the religious hierarchy exercising political authority in Tehran.

This analysis of the Middle East strategic framework suggests that structural uncertainties could, both in the short and long term, result in an escalation process culminating with the use of nuclear weapons.

⁷⁰ A device based on a stolen design of the U.S. bomb dropped on Nagasaki provided by Klaus Fuchs and others. See the gripping tale of the Soviet espionage program in Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb*, New York, Touchstone, 1996. A different historical interpretation, arguing that while the Soviets were assisted by espionage, this was not the only reason for their thermonuclear capability, is presented by David Holloway in his book *Stalin and the Bomb*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995.

Nuclear Use in the Middle East ?

The previous analysis of the regional bargaining framework suggests both near- and long-term scenarios of a breaking of the “taboo” on the use of nuclear weapons. The near-term scenarios are predicated on the assumption that nuclear use can occur either directly against Iran or as a result of an escalation during a conflict with Iran. Longer-term scenarios are less strictly focused on the Iranian case, but also flow from the same unstable regional dynamics.

Near-Term Nuclear Use Scenarios

In describing near-term regional scenarios that could lead to the use of nuclear weapons, three parties present themselves as principal candidates to cross the nuclear threshold: Israel, Iran and the United States. While another regional state or non-state actor may possess nuclear weapons, publicly available information suggests that Israel is the only nuclear weapons state in the region. It is also possible that Iran has already crossed the nuclear threshold and is already a nuclear weapons state. A massive intelligence failure allowing Iran to quietly become a nuclear power must be factored into potential near-term scenarios for nuclear use.

Various Israeli officials have openly stated that Israel will attack Iran before it achieves a nuclear capability. In June 2008, then Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz stated: “If Iran continues its program to develop nuclear weapons, we will attack it. The window of opportunity has closed. The sanctions are not effective. There will be no alternative but to attack Iran in order to stop the Iranian nuclear program.”⁷¹ For its part, the United States has explicitly extended its nuclear umbrella over Israel and a variety of Gulf States that host American military forces. In extending a nuclear umbrella over Israel,⁷² senior American officials have repeatedly made veiled references of their commitment to use all means at their disposal to defend Israel up to and including nuclear weapons. Vice President Dick Cheney offered the following representative formulation of the American commitment to Israeli security in 2008 when he stated: “America’s commitment to Israel’s security is enduring and unshakable,” he said, “as is our commitment to Israel’s right to defend itself always against terrorism, rocket attacks and other threats from forces dedicated to Israel’s

⁷¹ “Israeli Politician Threatens Iran with Attacks Over Nukes”, *CNN*, June 6, 2008, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/06/06/israel.iran/index.html>.

⁷² Strongly implied in the *Nuclear Posture Review*, January 8, 2002, Department of Defense, Washington, DC, 16; posted on the *Global Security.org* website, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>.

destruction.”⁷³ President Bush specifically stated in February 2006 that the United States would defend Israel militarily in the event of an attack by Iran.⁷⁴ In October 2007, President Bush stated that a nuclear-armed Iran might lead to World War III.⁷⁵ In remarks that received no disavowals from government sources, then Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton stated in April 2008 that the United States would “obliterate” Iran if it ever attacked Israel with nuclear weapons.⁷⁶ While these commitments don’t contradict the American policy of not supporting an Israeli preemptive strike on Iran’s nuclear infrastructures, borne out in former President Bush’s refusal to greenlight an Israeli request for overflight rights to cross Iraqi airspace, they do strongly suggest that the United States would retaliate forcefully in the event the Iranians attacked Israel with nuclear weapons, since it would be Iran committing nuclear first use and breaking the long taboo in place since 1945. America’s disapproval of Israeli pre-emption may reflect a reduced national appetite for military action in general, and for unilateral strategic action. However, the intensity of U.S.-Israeli bilateral relations places the United States in an extremely awkward position: on the one hand, a cherished ally could openly be calling for the fulfillment of security commitments⁷⁷ for its protection and security in response to an external threat; on the other hand, U.S. security commitment to its allies include deterrence and defense, but are widely regarded as excluding preventative actions.

To summarize, systemic weaknesses in the coercive bargaining framework induce the prospect of strategic instability in which escalation could unfold in a number of scenarios leading to the use of nuclear weapons by either the United States, Israel, or Iran. For purposes of this paper, escalation means an expansion of the intensity and scope of the

⁷³ “Cheney Affirms U.S. Commitment to Israeli Security”, *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/mar/23/world/fg-cheney23>.

⁷⁴ Glenn Kessler, “Bush Says U.S. Would Defend Israel if Necessary”, *Washington Post*, February 2, A18, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/01/AR2006020102134.html>.

⁷⁵ Bush made his comments at a press conference on October 17, 2007 in which he said: “We got a leader in Iran who has announced that he wants to destroy Israel. So I’ve told people that if you’re interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from [having] the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon.” Text posted on the MSNBC website, <http://firstread.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2007/10/18/417347.aspx>.

⁷⁶ As quoted in “Clinton Warns Iran of US Nuclear Response”, *MSNBC*, April 21, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24246275>.

⁷⁷ In addition to various executive-branch agreements that commit the United States to provide defense equipment to Israel, American political commitments to defend Israel have taken the form of repeated declarations by American presidents and senior officials. For example, then President Bush stated in May 2006: “I told the prime minister [Olmert] what I’ve stated publicly before: Israel is a close friend and ally of the United States. And in the event of any attack on Israel, the United States will come to Israel’s aid.” Secretary of State Hilary Clinton reiterated the Obama Administration’s commitment to the defense of Israel during her March 2009 visit, when she stated: “It is important that the United States always underscores our unshakeable, durable and fundamental support for the state of Israel.”

conflict.⁷⁸ The common denominator for the proposed scenarios is that nuclear use occurs in the context of conflict escalation – a conflict that could be initiated by a variety of different parties and in a variety of different circumstances.⁷⁹ It is extremely unlikely that either the United States or Israel would initiate the use of nuclear weapons as part of a pre-emptive attack on Iran's nuclear sites.⁸⁰ However, there are escalation scenarios involving state and non-state actors in the coercive bargaining framework that could conceivably lead to nuclear weapons use by Israel and/or the United States.

Iran's response to what would initially start as a sustained stand-off bombardment (Desert Fox Heavy) could take a number of different forms that might lead to escalation by the United States and Israel, surrounding states, and non-state actors. Once the strikes commenced, it is difficult to imagine Iran remaining in a Saddam-like quiescent mode and hunkering down to wait out the attacks. Iranian leaders have unequivocally stated that any attack on its nuclear sites will result in a wider war⁸¹ – a war that could involve regional states on both sides as well as non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah. While a wider regional war need not lead to escalation and nuclear use by either Israel or the United States, wartime circumstances and domestic political pressures could combine to shape decision-making in ways that present nuclear use as an option to achieve military and political objectives. For both the United States and Israel, Iranian or proxy use of chemical, biological or radiological weapons represent the most serious potential escalation triggers. For Israel, a sustained conventional bombardment of its urban centers by Hezbollah rockets in Southern Lebanon could also trigger an escalation spiral. Assessing relative probability of these scenarios is very difficult and beyond the scope of this article. Some scenarios for Iranian responses that could lead to escalation by the United States and Israel are:

⁷⁸ Robert Osgood and Robert Tucker, *Force Order and Justice*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, p. 188.

⁷⁹ For background on this idea, see Daniel S. Geller, "Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence, and Crisis Escalation", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 34, No. 2, June 1990, pp. 291-310; Barry Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991.

⁸⁰ Israel would likely be restrained from nuclear use, knowing full well that much of its own populace, in addition to the world community, would express revulsion from its nuclear use, and knowing that its allies would likely oppose such action. Even its limited and relatively precise application of force in Gaza resulted in a rapid erosion of international support, especially from Europe, and a notable lack of enthusiasm from the Bush White House, even after several years of rocket attacks against southern Israel.

⁸¹ Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei stated in February 2007 that any U.S. attack on Iran would result in "...comprehensive reaction to the invaders and their interests all over the world." In July 2008, the head of the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps, Gen. Mohammed Ali Jafari Ali Shirazi stated that any attack on Iran's nuclear sites would be the start of a general war. See "Iranian Military Warns U.S., Israel Against Attack", *Associated Press*, July 7, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/07/08/iran.military.ap/index.html>.

- Terrorist-type asymmetric attacks on either the U.S. or Israeli homelands by Iran or its proxies using either conventional or unconventional (chemical, biological, or radiological) weapons. Escalation is more likely in response to the use of unconventional weapons in populated urban centers. The potential for use of nuclear retaliation against terrorist type attacks is problematic, unless of course the sponsoring country takes official responsibility for them, which seems highly unlikely.
- Asymmetric attacks by Iran or its proxies using unconventional weapons against U.S. military facilities in Iraq and the Gulf States (Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar);
- Long-range missile strikes by Iran attacking Israel and/or U.S. facilities in Iraq and the Gulf States:
- Conventional missile strikes in and around the Israeli reactor at Dimona
- Airbursts of chemical or radiological agents in Israeli urban areas;
- Missile strikes using non-conventional weapons against US Gulf facilities such as Al Udeid in Qatar, Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, and the 5th Fleet Headquarters in Manama, Bahrain. Under all scenarios involving chemical/biological attacks on its forces, the United States has historically retained the right to respond with all means at its disposal even if the attacks come from a non-nuclear weapons state.⁸²
- The involvement of non-state actors as part of ongoing hostilities between Iran, the United States, and Israel in which Hezbollah and/or Hamas became engaged presents an added dimension for conflict escalation. While tactically allied with Iran and each other, these groups have divergent interests and objectives that could affect their involvement (or non-involvement in a wider regional war) – particularly in ways that might prompt escalation by Israel and the United States. Hezbollah is widely believed to have stored thousands of short range Iranian-supplied rockets in southern Lebanon. Attacking Israel in successive fusillades of missiles over time could lead to domestic political demands on the Israeli military to immediately stop these external attacks – a mission that might require a wide area-denial capability provided by nuclear weapons and their associated PSI overpressures, particularly if its conventional ground operations in Gaza prove in the mid- to long-terms as indecisive or strategic ambiguous as its 2006 operations in Lebanon.
- Another source of uncertainty is the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – referred to here as “quasi-state” actor. The IRGC

⁸² As discussed in James A. Russell and James J. Wirtz, “Negative Assurances and the Nuclear Posture Review,” *op. cit.*

manages the regime's nuclear, chemical and missile programs and is responsible for "extraterritorial" operations outside Iran. The IRGC is considered as instrument of the state and reports directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. So far, the IRGC has apparently refrained from providing unconventional weapons to its surrogates. The IRGC also, however arms and funds various Shiite paramilitary groups in Iraq and Lebanon that have interests and objectives that may or may not directly reflect those of the Iranian supreme leader. Actions of these groups in a wartime environment are another source of strategic uncertainty that could shape crisis decision-making in unhelpful ways.

- The most likely regional state to be drawn into a conflict on Iran's side in a wider regional war is Syria, which is widely reported to have well developed missile and chemical warfare programs. Direct Syrian military involvement in an Israeli-U.S./Iranian war taking the form of missile strikes or chemical attacks on Israel could serve as another escalation trigger in a nuclear-use scenario, in particular if chemical or bio-chem weapons are used by the Syrians, technically crossing the WMD-chasm and triggering a retaliatory strike using any category of WMD including nuclear weapons.
- The last – and perhaps most disturbing – of these near-term scenarios is the possible use by Iran of nuclear weapons in the event of conventional strikes by the United States and Israel. This scenario is built on the assumption of a U.S. and/or Israeli intelligence failure to detect Iranian possession of a nuclear device that had either been covertly built or acquired from another source. It is possible to foresee an Iranian "demonstration" use of a nuclear weapon in such a scenario in an attempt to stop an Israeli/U.S. conventional bombardment. A darker scenario would be a direct nuclear attack by Iran on Israel, also precipitated by conventional strikes, inducing a "use them or lose them" response. In turn, such a nuclear strike would almost certainly prompt an Israeli and U.S. massive response – a potential "Armageddon" scenario.

Longer-Term Use Scenarios

The preceding scenarios are all based on the premise that near-term systemic weaknesses in the coercive bargaining framework surrounding Iran's nuclear program could lead to war and conflict escalation. It is also the case that use of nuclear weapons could of course occur much further in the future. Like the short-term scenarios, the main long-term source of strategic instability are Iran's nuclear program and Israel's implacable commitment to maintaining its nuclear monopoly. The region's entire nuclear posture currently is in a state of uncertainty. During 2006 and 2007, 13 states in the Middle East and North Africa region unexpectedly announced plans to pursue nuclear energy.⁸³ Some of these plans admittedly represent a minimal proliferation threat. Various regional states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have all indicated that their programs would not include an indigenous uranium

⁸³ As noted in *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East*, London, IISS, 2008, p. 7.

enrichment capability – a critical building block for a weapons program. Despite assurances by Middle Eastern regional leaders that their programs will represent “models” for other states seeking peaceful nuclear programs,⁸⁴ however, many fear that these programs create opportunities for clandestine nuclear programs and a new and destabilizing nuclear arms race.⁸⁵ This situation creates prospects for a series of long-term scenarios as outlined below:

- The chances of clandestine program development increases as more states enter the nuclear business. The motivations for clandestine development increase in the region if Iran successfully crosses the nuclear threshold – a situation greatly feared by the Sunni-led states in the Persian Gulf and Middle East. The emergence of clandestine programs in the region creates incentives for preventative attack by a number of actors, some of whom may be nuclear armed. As with the case in the near-term scenarios, any wartime scenarios create the prospect of escalation and nuclear use.
- Regional powers might also, under extreme circumstances, be tempted to resort to nukes with the belief that it can successfully break the will of its opponent, much like the United States did against its Japanese opponent in 1945.
- While it currently appears remote, regime(s) change that brings to power millennial extremists constitute another prospect that might factor into long-term use scenarios. Extremist religious and/or ideologically motivated leadership may view nuclear weapons as a useful tool in pursuit of their objectives.
- The prospect of use by a clandestinely-armed state cannot be dismissed over the longer-term either as a calculated attack on an unsuspecting adversary or in the context of a war for national survival.
- A nuclear “bolt-from-the-blue” attack by violent non-state actors or a resort to nuclear use in the belief that it can successfully break the will of its opponent, much like the United States did against its Japanese opponent in 1945, is possible both in short- and long-term scenarios, but is deemed a remote possibility in this analysis. In the Middle East, most terrorist groups fall into the category of “religious nationalists” that seek localized political objectives. It is difficult to see how using a nuclear weapon advances the cause of groups like Hamas or Hezbollah. On the other hand, millennial extremist groups like Al Qaeda might be more attracted to the possibility of using a nuclear weapon should they come into possession of one. Terrorist

⁸⁴ As asserted by Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal in Mariam Hakeem, “GCC’s Nuclear Programme Will be a Role Model”, *Gulf News*, January 14, 2007, <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/07/01/14/10096775.html>.

⁸⁵ Joby Warrick, “Spread of Nuclear Capability is Feared”, *Washington Post*, May 12, 2008, p. A1.

groups would face significant technical and political obstacles in acquiring a nuclear weapon from a state, since the supplier would be held responsible by the attacked actor. Another limiting factor is constituency constraints. Even millennial extremist groups serve political constituencies.⁸⁶ In the case of Al Qaeda, and though it could try to hide behind a veil of deniability, it must conduct operations in pursuit of its broader political objective of unifying a purified ummah and cannot afford to use tactics that may compromise its ability to achieve this objective by giving rise to global revulsion and also potentially killing large numbers of Muslims.

⁸⁶ See William Browne III, "Constituency Constraints on Violence: al Qaeda and WMD", in *Globalization and WMD Proliferation: Terrorism, Transnational Networks, and International Security*, James A. Russell and James J. Wirtz (eds.), New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 79-101.

Conclusion

Strategic stability in the region is thus undermined by various factors: (1) asymmetric interests in the bargaining framework that can introduce unpredictable behavior from actors; (2) the presence of non-state actors that introduce unpredictability into relationships between the antagonists; (3) incompatible assumptions about the structure of the deterrent relationship that makes the bargaining framework strategically unstable; (4) perceptions by Israel and the United States that its window of opportunity for military action is closing, which could prompt a preventive attack; (5) the prospect that Iran's response to pre-emptive attacks could involve unconventional weapons, which could prompt escalation by Israel and/or the United States; (6) the lack of a communications framework to build trust and cooperation among framework participants.

These systemic weaknesses in the coercive bargaining framework all suggest that escalation by any the parties could happen either on purpose or as a result of miscalculation or the pressures of wartime circumstance. Given these factors, it is disturbingly easy to imagine scenarios under which a conflict could quickly escalate in which the regional antagonists would consider the use of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.

It would be a mistake to believe the nuclear taboo can somehow magically keep nuclear weapons from being used in the context of an unstable strategic framework. Systemic asymmetries between actors in fact suggest a certain increase in the probability of war – a war in which escalation could happen quickly and from a variety of participants. Once such a war starts, events would likely develop a momentum all their own and decision-making would consequently be shaped in unpredictable ways.

The international community must take this possibility seriously, and muster every tool at its disposal to prevent such an outcome, which would be an unprecedented disaster for the peoples of the region, with substantial risk for the entire world.

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