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A nuclear Iran and the challenge to international security

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The IAEA latest report on Iran's nuclear program has rekindled the international debate about Tehran's nuclear ambitions. The report and its somewhat ambiguous setting highlight once again the failings of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. The regime, matured after World War 2 with the establishment of IAEA in 1957 and the launch of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in 1970, is meant to pursue two equally important goals. One is to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons among non-nuclear countries and the other is to secure nuclear disarmament. It's the failure of the nuclear powers to comply with the latter commitment that leaves the system open to a seeping proliferation. Nuclear powers, either individually or as a group, can hardly claim the political credibility or high moral ground to decide which sovereign states should have nuclear weapons – and which ones should not be allowed to have them.

At any rate, the latest IAEA report doesn't provide any hard evidence that Iran is building a nuclear bomb. Rather, it connects the dots of available intelligence, mostly related to research and design activities, pointing to the likely pursuit of a program with military ends. Assuming the information is accurate, Iran's intention may be to develop the full cycle for the production of nuclear armaments rather than actually building a nuclear stockpile, let alone wage nuclear war. This lesser road has been followed by countries such as Japan and, lately, by South Korea. Its main purpose is to use potential nuclear military capability as a deterrent against foreign interference.

For a long time the government of Shia Iran has considered itself a victim of aggression by the West and its Sunni allies in the Persian Gulf (see my «ISPI Policy Brief», n. 142 of June 2009). This conviction was reinforced in the last couple of years well beyond the mutual war of words. The economic sanctions, the covered operations against civilian and military targets, and the intelligence, training and financial support provided to separatist movements in Iran from Kurdistan to Baluchistan are different expressions of what Tehran sees as a deliberate effort towards destabilization. Hence, the added appeal of nuclear deterrence. In pure military terms, however, Mr. Netanyahu's scenario of an immediate existential threat to Israel is overblown. Israel – a non-IAEA member that does not adhere to the Non-proliferation Treaty – has an estimated 200 air, land and sea-based nuclear missiles and one of the world's most effective conventional armies. Its defence capability is reinforced by the protective umbrella of the US presence in the Gulf and in Iran's neighbouring countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. Any form of nuclear aggression by Iran would be suicidal.

However, the conservative Israeli government may be tempted by a pre-emptive strike against Iranian nuclear installations at a time when president Obama can't afford to antagonize the Jewish and conservative Christian lobbies, Europe is enmeshed by its financial crisis and neighbouring countries are divided and in turmoil. An Israeli intervention may even secretly please some regional antagonists of the Tehran regime such as Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, however, the price to be paid would be disproportionately high; unilateral Israeli action may hatch greater threats to international peace and security than

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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any Iranian nuclear adventure. Israel would become further alienated from the regimes born from the Arab Spring, preventing their constructive engagement in the fundamental and urgent question of Palestine. At the broader level, Al Qaeda and newly emerging jihadist groups would rush to exploit a strike on Iran – by necessity accompanied by the forbearance if not connivance of the United States and Europe – to gain fresh support as the sole champions of the Islamic world. The overwhelming display of military hardware would add lustre to terrorism as the weapon of the downtrodden in their asymmetrical war against a powerful and arrogant enemy. This is why, beyond the obligatory expressions of concern and American reiteration that all options are on the table, from Moscow to Berlin, from Washington to Israel's own military establishment there is either outright rejection or precious little appetite for disposing of Iran's nuclear program through open military intervention. For the time being a more opportunistic approach is likely to prevail through renewed efforts at sabotage along the lines of the recent planting of the STUXNET software virus and the assassination of Iranian scientists associated with the program. A further tightening of international sanctions, if necessary without the blessing of the United Nations Security Council, may help to create some additional internal difficulties for the Tehran regime. However, recent history confirms that sanctions alone, especially when there are difficulties in clamping down on Iranian oil exports, can hardly be decisive.

Barring the early demise of the despotic regime of the mullahs through a mix of internal rebellion and external pressures, there are only two options in facing Tehran's challenge. The first one is to prepare to live with a nuclear Iran. After all, the catastrophic scenarios that preceded China's development of the atom bomb in the mid-1960ies proved unwarranted. If anything, after building its nuclear arsenal China became a more responsible actor on the international stage. And more recently, the international community has accepted the acquisition of nuclear weapons by an Islamic country, Pakistan, whose government is surely no more trustworthy and in control than Iran's. The second option would be to engage in broad negotiations where the nuclear issue can be tackled in the context of those security concerns that may be leading Iran to seek nuclear deterrence. Such negotiations would also recognize that, in spite of its military supremacy, Israel – and from a different perspective Saudi Arabia – feel threatened by a nuclear Iran. Everyone's concerns can only be addressed by moving collectively towards a Middle East free from all weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, governments should subscribe a pledge of non-aggression, with international guarantees of non-interference and regional security. This is a difficult pursuit requiring courage and vision. However, it would not be more difficult than confronting the consequences of yet another Middle East showdown.

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