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Published on *Arms Control Association* (<http://www.armscontrol.org>)

Drawing a Bright Redline: Forestalling Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East

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[Mark Fitzpatrick](#)

If Iran goes nuclear, so too will more of its neighbors, or so says the established wisdom.

It is a logical deduction given the extent to which Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey feel a need to maintain power and political parity with Iran and the security concerns that Persian Gulf countries already harbor about the would-be regional hegemon to their northeast. If any of them follow Iran or if Israel abandons its policy of nuclear opacity, the domino effect could spread further and include counties, such as Algeria, that have sparked proliferation concerns in the past.

A proliferation cascade in the Middle East is not a foregone conclusion. Adroit policy choices and practices by the Obama administration can build a bulwark against a Middle East nuclear tipping phenomenon.

Of course, the best is to dissuade Iran from going nuclear in the first place. Given that Iran is already producing enriched uranium, however, clarity is needed on what it means to "go nuclear." Operating gas centrifuge cascades does not equate to having the bomb. Treating Iran's enrichment capabilities as equivalent to nuclear weapons status empowers its hard-line leaders and exaggerates the perception of danger among Iran's neighbors, increasing their own security motivations for keeping open a nuclear weapons option. Iran's enrichment technology gives it a latent breakout capability, but size matters, as does warning time. The West has several policy tools to help keep Iran's enrichment program constrained.

Deterrence is one of the most important tools. Not just deterring Iran's use of nuclear weapons but also deterring any production of them is a reasonable policy objective. Iran must be convinced that crossing the redline of weaponization would result in dire and certain consequences. The problem is that today the line between latent capability and weaponization is almost invisible. If Iran were to withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), expel inspectors, and reconfigure its enrichment facilities at Natanz in an overt breakout, it would not be difficult to calculate the small number of weeks before one weapon's worth of highly enriched uranium (HEU) could be produced using declared facilities. In the more likely case of Iran continuing ostensibly to adhere to the NPT, it would not be possible to know if it were operating clandestine facilities. Some things would be clear indicators of a weapons decision, however, including the discovery of clandestine enrichment facilities, HEU production, new or ongoing weaponization work, a declaration by Iran that it indeed possessed nuclear weapons or the unveiling by intelligence of such a status, and a nuclear test explosion. Meanwhile, the line between a latent capability and weaponization can be made wider and more visible in various ways.

Accepting the reality of Iran's enrichment progress does not mean that it or Iran's plutonium-production program based on the Arak heavy-water reactor should be granted legitimacy. The history of concealment and nature of these activities gave the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors reason in September 2005 to conclude that Iran's actions could threaten international peace and security. There is no economic justification to these programs and ample evidence that their purpose is military. Operating the cascades in defiance of five UN Security

Council resolutions is an ongoing violation of international law. If Iran is seen as "getting away with it," there will be inevitable repercussions elsewhere, including increasing the potential for a proliferation cascade.

By contrast, sanctions that make Iran pay a price for defying the Security Council send an important signal to others who might wish to follow the same route. As long as Iran remains under increasing pressure to stop its sensitive nuclear activities and is penalized for failing to do so, its neighbors have a disincentive to seek enrichment or reprocessing capabilities of their own. Sanctions on Iran thus must remain in place and be strengthened significantly to complement the engagement that then-Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama said he would pursue and the incentives already on the table, in order to try to persuade Iran and to deter others. The most defensible redline for triggering military action against the facilities, however, is compelling evidence of Iran crossing the line to weaponization.

An admission of past weapons development work need not trigger punishment if the admission were part of a strategic change on Iran's part that also facilitated international inspection and dismantlement of associated work and facilities. Iran's coming clean on past activities should not be a sufficient condition in itself for legalizing uranium enrichment if there were still grounds for suspecting its intentions.

The United States and its allies should continue to seek to restrict Iran's fissile material production capability through tight export controls, financial isolation, the Proliferation Security Initiative, and other means. Tough sanctions can help to keep the capability latent by denying Iran technology and investment in industries that contribute to the programs and by creating negotiating leverage for insisting on conditions that would contribute to keeping the programs limited and more transparent. The legal barrier between latent capability and weaponization could be strengthened if Iran were to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which will require the United States to exercise leadership in following through with its own ratification. It may be argued that the CTBT has little significance for Iran if it acquired a weapons design from the Abdul Qadeer Khan network that it would not need to test anyway, but CTBT ratification would add to the overall legal framework constraining Iran's options.

Controlling Enrichment and Reprocessing

The Obama administration should continue the Bush administration goal of controlling the spread of enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing technologies. One way is to offer access to state-of-the-art nuclear power technology with fuel cycle services provided externally.

It is far better for states to decide of their own sovereign will not to pursue the sensitive nuclear technologies. Given the ready availability of enriched uranium fuel on the international market, enrichment does not make economic sense for states newly seeking nuclear power. In most cases, states that agree voluntarily to purchase enriched reactor fuel on the international market rather than develop indigenous facilities will find it easier to attract foreign support for nuclear power projects. Reprocessing is an expensive operation subject to large economies of scale and is unjustified on economic grounds. (Until fuel leasing arrangements can be worked out or an international repository for vitrified nuclear waste can be created, temporary spent fuel storage remains the fallback option for the back end of the fuel cycle.)

Realizing this, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2008 all affirmed an intention to forgo sensitive indigenous fuel-cycle technologies. The UAE did so most explicitly in a nuclear energy white paper published in April 2008. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia made the commitment in memoranda of understanding with the United States (one of the little-heralded nonproliferation achievements of the Bush administration).

According to UAE officials, a nuclear cooperation agreement between the United States and the UAE that was signed on January 15 usefully locks in this commitment in the form of a provision specifying the right of return of technology and material if the commitment is abrogated. It would be inadvisable to hold up the proposed 123 agreement with the UAE on other grounds, such as the past history of Dubai as a hub for the Khan nuclear black market network. The UAE is implementing new export control laws put in place at Washington's recommendation. In order to crack down on Iranian front companies, the UAE in 2008 sharply reduced the number of business licenses and work visas to Iranian citizens. Nevertheless, UAE export controls still need to be tightened, particularly in the emirate of Dubai, in order to stem the flow of illicit transshipments to Iran in contravention of UN sanctions. One way to assist the UAE in this effort would be to give the UN Iran sanctions monitoring committee real responsibility and a hands-on role by stationing customs experts in Dubai.

Delaying the 123 agreement with the UAE would weaken the strong political signal that is sent by offering nuclear cooperation to a country that has accepted all of the nonproliferation conditions asked of it and that can make a legitimate economic case for nuclear power. If a state that forswears any interest in weapons-usable technology and accepts full transparency is thereby able to hasten its prospects for nuclear energy development, this can be a powerful lesson for others and serve as an important regional precedent, in stark contrast with Iran. The Iranian people might well ask their leaders why they pursue policies that lead to increasing isolation and economic sanctions while their neighbors can benefit from peaceful nuclear cooperation with the world.

If market mechanisms and guaranteed fuel-cycle services do not persuade recipient states to forgo enrichment and reprocessing, the responsibility for ensuring that nuclear energy in the Middle East does not become a proliferation risk will have to be borne by suppliers. Exporting states could make it clear they will not supply nuclear power plants unless the buyer makes a commitment to sign a version of the 1997 IAEA Model Additional Protocol, which grants inspectors greater rights, and forgo enrichment and reprocessing.

Although there is no legal prohibition on these technologies, a consensus is emerging that they need somehow to be controlled. In the case of the Middle East, this will certainly be necessary if nuclear power is ever to flourish in a manner that does not spark proliferation concerns.

Ideally, the entire Middle East would be a zone free of enrichment and reprocessing. The WMD Commission headed by former UN weapons inspector and IAEA Director-General Hans Blix recommended that all states in the region commit themselves for a prolonged period of time not to have any enrichment or reprocessing activities. This would mean that Iran's uranium enrichment at Natanz and Israel's production of plutonium at Dimona would halt. If estimates are correct that Israel has produced enough fissile material for some 200 weapons, it might be argued that this is sufficient to meet its deterrence needs. Unfortunately, prospects for a regional agreement at the moment are not bright given the compliance problems with existing nonproliferation norms, the challenges of verification, and the need for an accompanying peace process if any country is to unilaterally reduce its security posture. These must all be addressed, including by more meaningful enforcement of the existing nonproliferation rules and obligations. In the meantime, a Middle East enrichment- and reprocessing-free zone is still a useful goal to which to aspire.

This goal was given a boost in November 2007 when Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC), publicly announced an offer to launch a regional joint enrichment consortium to establish an enrichment facility under the supervision of the IAEA in a neutral country, such as Switzerland, for all users of enriched uranium in the Middle East. The GCC suggestion would offer a face-saving way for Iran to forgo enrichment as part of a voluntary regional arrangement. By doing so, Iran would at the same time meet its obligation to respect UN mandates and provide the best means of assuring the world that its nuclear program is not intended for weapons purposes. The GCC plan also would be a practical step toward a zone in the wider Middle East free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, Iran is more interested in the technology than the fuel, which is why it dismisses the idea of obtaining its reactor fuel from Russia's international enrichment center at Angarsk or through proposals such as the Nuclear Threat Initiative project for a fuel bank under IAEA auspices, for which the UAE has pledged \$10 million.

Deterrence

As a vital component to the mix of strategies necessary to forestall a regional proliferation cascade, the United States must also pursue robust deterrence and reassurance policies in the Middle East. It should be made clear to Iran that the major powers would take whatever action was necessary to stop it from crossing the line to weapons acquisition.

Such action should not include providing an extended nuclear deterrence to Middle Eastern states, as has sometimes been proposed as a measure to contain Iran and to pre-empt any felt need to seek nuclear options themselves. Under current circumstances, the idea is problematic and without credibility. Would the United States really want to tie its nuclear policies to the volatile politics of the Middle East? The potential recipients of the nuclear umbrella are not formal U.S. allies, and after the war in Iraq, the U.S. public is unlikely to want to take on new defense obligations in the Middle East, especially with countries seen as not sharing the same values of democracy and civil rights. Meanwhile, public opinion in most Arab states is strongly opposed to the U.S. nuclear posture, and a nuclear assurance could damage rather than bolster such states' security by sparking domestic upheaval and possibly terrorist attacks.

Instead, reassurance should include the reaffirmation of security commitments to Israel, Turkey, and the Gulf states; the deployment of theater ballistic missile defense systems; and the continuation of Bush administration policies

regarding enhancement of other in-theater capabilities and strengthening the defensive capabilities of Iran's neighbors through joint training and other measures. By addressing their security concerns, the United States can reduce the motivations that states in the region might otherwise have to seek a nuclear hedge.

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Mark Fitzpatrick is director of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Program at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. He is author of *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes* (2008) and editor and chief author of *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East: In the Shadow of Iran* (2008).

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1313 L St., NW, Ste. 130
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: (202) 463-8270 | Fax: (202) 463-8273

Source URL: http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_01-02/Fitzpatrick