



INSTITUT EUROPÉEN DES RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES

WORKING PAPER
5-2013

**IRAN-ISRAEL
AND THE PROLIFERATING COUNTRIES
RISING TENSIONS AND THEIR REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPACT**

Daniel SCHWAMMENTHAL
Director
AJC Transatlantic Institute

Brussels
03-04-2013

© Institut Européen des Relations Internationales
Bruxelles, 3 Avril 2013
Institut Européen des Relations Internationales
27/A, Boulevard Charlemagne
1000 – Bruxelles (Belgique) Tel. : +32.2.280.14.95 – Site Web : www.ieri.be

Citation : Daniel SCHWAMMENTHAL, “Iran-Israel and the proliferating countries. Rising tensions and their regional and global impact”, N° 5-2013, *IERI Working Papers*, Bruxelles, 2013

Iran-Israel and the Proliferating Countries

RISING TENSIONS AND THEIR REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPACT

3th April 2013

Daniel SCHWAMMENTHAL

Director

AJC Transatlantic Institute

TABLE OF CONTENT

1. MORE FOR LESS?.....	2
2. IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRESS.....	3
3. FLEXIBLE FATWAS.....	4
4. CONTAINMENT IS NOT AN OPTION	4
Mad Is No Deterrent for Religious Fanatics.....	4
The Flawed Cold War Analogy.....	7
5. THE THREAT TO THE WEST AND THE REGION.....	8
The Costs of Inaction.....	8

MORE FOR LESS?

The European Union reacted to the upheavals in the Arab world with a quite sensible “more for more” strategy: More political and financial support for more democratic reforms. Two weeks ago, the E3 Plus 3 tried the exact opposite approach, more for less, in their nuclear talks with Iran. While the Iranians upped the ante, announcing just ahead of the Kazakhstan negotiations that they were installing more and advanced enrichment centrifuges, the six world powers offered more sanction relief for less Iranian compliance. Tehran would no longer have to shut down its illegal underground facility in Fordow as previously demanded but merely suspend enrichment there and take steps to make it hard to resume it. The six also agreed, in another concession, that Iran could keep a small amount of 20% enriched uranium.

Not surprisingly, Tehran struck an upbeat note, calling this "a turning point," but equally unsurprising, it did so without accepting any of the softened demands, warning instead that "there is a long distance to reach the suitable point." All the two sides agreed to in the end was to meet yet

again. Tehran won another six weeks or so during which its thousands of centrifuges can continue enriching uranium.

Western officials kept at first quiet but a few days after Almaty, we got a glimpse into what Europeans really think about their Iranian negotiating partners: In a joint statement delivered at a board meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency last Wednesday, the EU called Iran's plans for more advanced centrifuges a "cause for serious concern." That's because these advanced centrifuges can dramatically shorten the breakout time for Iran, i.e. the time it would need to enrich uranium to weapons grade.

IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRESS

After a decade now of fruitless dialogue, Iran must not be allowed to once again exploit the West's readiness to engage to win more time, because time is not our side. There is a common misperception that Iran still has a long way to go as it is enriching uranium only to 3.5% and close to 20% whereas weapons grade requires enrichment to 90%. But as Olli Heinonen, the former Finish deputy director general of the IAEA, has repeatedly pointed out, mastering 3.5% enrichment is actually 70% of the enrichment effort required for an atomic weapon. With 20% enriched uranium, you are 90% there.

Using IAEA data, the [Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control](#) estimates that with "the approximately 9,000 centrifuges operating at its Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant, Iran could theoretically produce enough weapon-grade uranium to fuel a single nuclear warhead in about 1.5 months. Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium is now sufficient, after further enrichment, to fuel approximately five nuclear warheads."

We know that Iran has also worked on all the other elements required for a nuclear bomb, elements that are technically far less challenging than enrichment. The IAEA November 2011 [report](#) revealed that Tehran has conducted experiments on nuclear triggers, created computer models of nuclear explosions and completed advanced research on warheads that could be fitted on and delivered by its missiles.

FLEXIBLE FATWAS

And yet, there are still voices playing down the Iranian threat. Some cite a fatwa by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei allegedly forbidding the production of nuclear bombs as evidence that the concerns about Iran's nuclear program are overblown.

One would think that a regime that over 30 years has murdered tens of thousands of its own people, orders the public hanging of homosexuals, the stoning of women, tortures and executes dissidents and religious minorities, is the world's chief sponsor of terrorism, and has been repeatedly caught lying about its nuclear program would be met with a little more skepticism—Even when the leader responsible for all these crimes couches his reassuring messages in religious terms.

It was Ayatollah [Khomeini](#) himself who pointed out that fatwas are not written in stone: "The government can unilaterally abrogate any religious agreement made by it with the people if it believes that the agreement is against the interests of the country and Islam. The government can prevent any Islamic law from being implemented if it sees its implementation as harmful to the interests of Islam," he said in 1987.

Mehdi Khalaji, one of the foremost scholars of Iranian Shiite doctrine in the West, (he studied in the religious seminaries of Qom, the traditional center of Iran's clerical establishment, where also Khomeini and Khamenei studied) warns against taking the Supreme Leader's words at face value. "Should the needs of the Islamic Republic or the Muslim umma change, requiring the use of nuclear weapons, the Supreme Leader could just as well alter his position in response. This means that, ultimately, the Islamic Republic is unconstrained—even by religious doctrine—as it moves toward the possible production and storing of nuclear weapons."

So really, on the issues of fatwas, there is no need for us to be more Shiite than the Ayatollah.

CONTAINMENT IS NOT AN OPTION

MAD IS NO DETERRENT FOR RELIGIOUS FANATICS

At the same time as some commentators try to play down the possibility of Iran even desiring nuclear weapons, others present an Iranian bomb almost as a fait accompli and encourage us to

simply live with it, if not learn to love it. Former German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger, for example, the host of the annual Munich Security Conference and a big voice in Germany's foreign policy debate, believes the danger could be contained. "If it was possible to deter the Soviet Union successfully, then that will probably be possible with Iran as well. And former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who together with French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin and his German colleague Joschka Fischer led the unsuccessful talks with Iran in the early 2000s, argued in a recent Daily Telegraph op-ed that "Containment is a better response than conflict."

Even though Mr. Straw complains in this same op-ed about how opaque the Iranian regime is, he feels nevertheless confident to predict that an Iranian attack on Israel or an Arab country would be "highly improbable" and that in his "own best judgment," Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, "probably" will stop short of producing an actual bomb. Mr. Straw doesn't find it necessary though to provide any evidence in support of his thesis.

But the containment idea is deeply flawed, and simply accepting a nuclear armed Iran would be failure dressed up as strategy. First, the fact that we survived the previous nuclear standoff is hardly evidence that deterrence was bound to succeed. On more than one occasion during the struggle with Communism, the threat of mutually assured destruction did not prevent the two sides from stepping right to the brink, most famously during the Cuban Missile Crisis. So any nostalgia for another few decades of nuclear standoff, this time with the Islamic Republic of Iran, seems utterly misplaced.

As dangerous as it was to play MAD with the Godless Soviet Union, it would be far more dangerous to try to replay it with the God-fearing mullahs in Tehran. This is not just because mutually assured destruction might be more of an incentive than a deterrent for some regime members. To cite [Bernard Lewis](#), the eminent British scholar on the Middle East: "We know already that [the mullahs ruling Iran] do not give a damn about killing their own people in great numbers. In the final scenario, they are doing them a favor. They are giving them a quick free pass to heaven and all its delights."

It is quite baffling to me why in Europe, with its recent history of totalitarianism, genocide and ethnic cleansing, the idea that the mullahs may really mean what they say about Israel is considered by many as too absurd to be taken seriously. [Gregory Stanton](#), the founder and director of Genocide Watch, is less complacent.

"One of the best predictors of genocide is incitement to genocide and I believe that is exactly what Iran is doing today." Ignoring these early signs, he said, "dismissing them as diabolical rhetoric or as a tactic meant to advance a different goal, is to enable the perpetrators."

When it comes to such issues as the environment, we have here in Europe adopted the "precautionary principle," allowing us for example to ban substances without conclusive scientific evidence that they are harmful. But when it comes to possible nuclear war and genocide, the advice we get from politicians like Mr. Straw boils down to "It will probably work out just fine." This is neither responsible nor serious security policy.

The usual counterargument is that the power in Iran is supposedly held by more rational, moderate people than say President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. But is that really true? The West lacks good intelligence about the inner workings of Iran's decision-making process. But one thing we do know is that at the center of power is the Supreme Leader. Former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Aznar [recalled](#) a meeting in which the Supreme Leader Khameini quite bluntly told him: "Israel must be burned to the ground."

Besides, who counts as a moderate anyway? Former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani—usually counted among the so-called pragmatic or moderate—[suggested](#) in 2001 that his country would not be deterred by the fear of nuclear retaliation: "Application of an atomic bomb would not leave anything in Israel, but the same thing would just produce damages in the Muslim world."

These statements and I could have added countless more by Revolutionary Guard commanders, religious authorities and others, underline that it is rather dangerous to assume that Iran's clerical regime shares the West's concept of "rationality" or "moderation." The 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in a Washington restaurant, which would have also killed many American civilians, is a case in point. If successful, it would have constituted an act of war against the world's only remaining superpower—probably not exactly what at least in this room would be considered rational behavior.

One theory holds that this planned attack may have been the work of rogue elements in Iran. If correct, though, this would hardly be reassuring. It would raise serious questions about Iran's unity of command. What if such "rogue" elements would also get their hands on nukes?

And even if we could be confident that deterrence would work with Iran's current leadership in the present circumstances, it's impossible to give any reassurances for the future. For example, imagine another uprising in Iran like the one in 2009, but this time turning more violent and successful. Would Iranian leaders facing their imminent demise and possible death in case of the rebels' expected success still be deterred by MAD?

THE FLAWED COLD WAR ANALOGY

But there is a more fundamental problem with the Cold War analogy even if we could say with absolute certainty that Iran's threats are just posturing and that its decision-making is forever guided by rational thought in the Western way.

One absolutely essential element for containment to work is that the two sides have clear channels of communications, and share a modicum of trust and knowledge about their opponents. Despite the US-Soviet Union rivalry, the two sides had such direct channels (remember those famous red telephones?) and a good understanding of the other side's political system, partly thanks to exchanges of major embassies in Moscow and DC. Nothing of this sort exists between the U.S. and Israel on one side and Iran on the other. There are no diplomatic relations. Far from having "red telephones," you cannot even make regular phone calls between Israel and Iran. The absence of such direct contacts raises the chance of either side misreading its opponent's intentions.

The idea of trying to contain a nuclear Iran also overlooks the fact that Tehran's acquisition of the bomb would kill the Non-Proliferation Treaty and trigger a nuclear arms race in the region. Countries such as Saudi Arabia or Turkey will not rely on Western promises to protect them from a nuclear Iran after the same West reneged on its promise to prevent a nuclear Iran in the first place. Unlike during the Cold War, when there were only two main nuclear players, we would be facing a fragile standoff among several, unstable actors, greatly enhancing the risks of accidental atomic war. With so many nuclear actors, any of the region's numerous unresolved conflicts could suddenly become the trigger for a nuclear exchange.

A quick word about the concerns raised by some former Israeli spy chiefs, which have been somewhat misinterpreted in the West, including by Mr. Straw in his recent op-ed. Let's focus on

Meir Dagan, the Former Mossad Chief credited with substantially delaying Iran's nuclear program through covert operations. He is probably the most important critique cited in the Western press and his quote that an attack on Iran is the "Stupidest Idea' I've Ever Heard" went around the world. His later qualifications received less attention though. Mr. Dagan subsequently explained: "This was a miserable quote that was said absentmindedly. Let's set the record straight. I think the Iranian nuclear capacity is a threat with strategic implications for Israel."

When Mr. Dagan was asked about his original quote last year on 60 minutes, a famous US political affairs program, he elaborated that what he meant was that an "attack on Iran now before exploring all other approaches is not the right way how to do it [sic]."

THE THREAT TO THE WEST AND THE REGION

THE COSTS OF INACTION

While Israel has been the country most directly threatened by Iran, a nuclear armed Islamic Republic would be a menace to the entire region and the West. Tehran's missiles can not only reach Israel but also parts of Southern and Eastern Europe and will soon be able to target the entire EU. Tehran is also working on a space program, providing it with the technology for intercontinental ballistic missiles that in a few years may bring the US within its reach. The fact that Iran is spending a lot of money and scarce resources to upgrade its missiles to bring Western cities within its range should be a matter of grave concern for European policy makers.

Europe must also not overlook Tehran's role as the world's chief sponsor of terrorism. Hezbollah, for example, with its global network of supporters, including here in Europe, is fully integrated into the command structure of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Osama bin Laden's son-in-law, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, now on trial in New York, is one of several Al Qaeda operatives who has spent years living in Iran under still unclear circumstances. The Iranian regime could simply circumvent the logic of MAD by passing on a bomb, dirty or fully operational, to terrorists, thus escaping retaliation altogether. If a bomb went off in Western city, it could be months before it was ever identified as possibly Iranian. And even then, according to US officials cited in a November 2011 *New York Times* report, confidence in the conclusions might be too low for any president to order retaliation. It is hard to imagine any Western leader ordering a nuclear strike, and thus the deaths of untold numbers of Iranian civilians, on the basis of inconclusive evidence months after the initial attack. Tehran would be quite *rational* to count on Western scruples in such a case. This is a

threat that Europe, with its open and porous borders, large Iranian communities that could give easy cover for regime agents, and networks of Hezbollah activists and Al Qaeda cells, will ignore at its own peril.

Finally, containment advocates fail to contemplate the strategic and regional implications of a nuclear Iran even if atomic war could really be avoided. Iran would be able to leverage the mere possession of the bomb to advance its destabilizing policies. Iran has for years armed and trained insurgents and terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan, causing the deaths of numerous allied soldiers. Tehran was also directly involved in terror attacks around the world, from Saudi Arabia to Argentina and now, through its proxy Hezbollah, also here in Europe, as in the recent terror attack in Bulgaria. Its forces are assisting in the butchery in Syria to keep Assad in power. If this is what a conventionally armed Iran is doing, imagine what a nuclear-armed Iran, one that may consider itself, rightly or wrongly, untouchable, will do. Using threats and proxies, Tehran could use its nuclear leverage to bring the Gulf region under its control. This is exactly what Iran's Arab neighbors fear.

One of the most revealing exchanges brought to light by the WikiLeaks were of Arab leaders urging Americans to attack Iran. “Cut off the head of the snake,” is how the Saudi Ambassador in Washington put it to General Petraeus, for example. That’s the same Saudi Ambassador, by the way, the Iranians then tried to assassinate. Now we know why.

What we have here is an explosive cocktail of Arab-Persian rivalry that dates back to pre-Islamic times, compounded by the increasingly vicious and violent Sunni-Shiite split, and fueled by an Islamic Republic that to this day remains a revolutionary regime, one eager to expand its power to assume what it considers its rightful place: at the center of the Muslim World. Tehran is thus fanning the flames of violence in neighboring Bahrain, where a majority-Shiite country is controlled by a Sunni-minority. Saudi Arabia, which controls Islam’s holiest sites, Mekka and Medina, has its own, suppressed Shiite minority that make up about 15% of the population. And just to make things more interesting, they happen to reside primarily in the oil-rich Eastern Province of Al-Qatif, just opposite Iran on the other side of the narrow Persian Gulf and right next to Bahrain. Who would really stop a nuclear-armed Iran from “coming to the help” of its Shiite brothers in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and elsewhere?

Those worried about the risks of doing what it may take to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, and those risks are real, usually fail to contemplate the equally real and, potentially much more dangerous risks of inaction. Let's just focus on the economic costs alone for a moment. Much has been said and written about how a military strike would lead to a spike in oil prices. Prices, though, would likely return to their previous level after the end of any confrontation.

The day after an Iranian atomic test, however, when oil traders will have to factor in all the implications of a nuclear Iran, oil prices will also rise. But given the nature of the problem, this price rise might be permanent. A [study](#) by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, co-authored by Dennis Ross, estimates that once Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, oil prices could rise by 10% to 25% in the first year alone and 30% to 50% within three years. The effects would be much graver, of course, if a nuclear Iran were to take military action against any of its neighbors.

Policy makers, just like business leaders, often focus too much on the immediate implications of their actions. Strategic thinking requires that Europe's leaders also consider the long-term costs of allowing Iran to go nuclear.

Thank you very much for your attention.