Iran and the International Community: In the Shadow of Iraq

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Introduction

This paper is devoted to an analysis of Iran's nuclear standoff with the international community, and argues that the context for the diplomatic crisis over Iran's nuclear programme was provided by the approaches taken in relation to Iraq in the run-up to war in 2003. In the process, it proposes the adoption of a "levels of analysis" approach for a better understanding of the intricacies of the diplomatic standoff and the forces at play in this crisis. The controversy over Iran's nuclear programme arose at about the same time as the US-led "coalition of the willing" was embarking on a new war in the Middle East and the third major conflict in the Persian Gulf in 30 years, to unseat the Iraqi dictator of some 40 years, Saddam Hussein. The controversy quickly turned into a full blown international crisis as regional concerns about Iran's programme grew and as Iran and the West logged horns over Iran's abidance of the technical and political commitments to the NPT as one of its founding member-state. The rights of states to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and the fears of WMD proliferation by a confrontational state in an already fragile region were juxtaposed in a binary fashion, thus shaping much of the wider diplomatic environment of the crisis.

Subtext

Despite the long-standing tensions in Iran's relations with the West, it would, however, be too simplistic to reduce the international crisis over Iran's nuclear programme to these problems. Indeed, I would argue that there is a strong subtext to the way in which Iran's nuclear programme has come to dominate the international diplomatic, and potentially security, agendas. The subtext, I would suggest is the way in which the international community and the great Western powers dealt with Iraq. The international confrontation with Iraq, which began in 1990 with Iraq's invasion of the neighbouring small and vulnerable state of Kuwait, was arguably a manifestation of the emerging post-bipolar post-Cold War international order, as a consequence of which not only had regional systems grown in strategic importance, but also regional powers were rising in significance as path-shaping actors of the globalising international system. The Middle East and North Africa regional system had emerged as one of the most strategically significant of the new post-bipolar world, and within this subsystem the Persian Gulf arguably had become its most dynamic and unsettling sub-region.

First, there was the issue of Iraq's missing WMDs. Had the IAEA missed Iraq's programme, and how accurate was the intelligence on Iraq's WMD programmes and capability? We know full well that the "intelligence" about Iraq's reactivation of its remaining WMD programmes, which in the end proved to be largely unfounded in any case, was one of the drivers of the 2003 war to unseat Saddam Hussein. The US-led coalition was subsequently heavily criticised for using and indeed abusing, flawed intelligence reports about Iraq's WMDs and delivery systems as justification for an attack on the country.

Secondly, the debate about Iraq's WMDs became a fig leaf for covering the real intention of the United States and its coalition of the willing to remove the Iraqi dictator from power. The WMDs issue was, in the context of 9/11, little more than a cover for the concerted effort to catalyse wider political change in the Middle East.

Could the same ploy be used to drive a war against Iran? Also, clearly, despite diplomatic opposition, Iraq's regional and international isolation worked against it. Iraq's regional isolation and "pariah" status arguably helped the cause of outside powers keen to impose their own agenda of regime change in Baghdad uninterrupted. For Iran too its international and regional loneliness could prove decisive were matters to come to the settlement of the crisis via a fire fight with a coalition of Western powers.

The Iran crisis, then, has brewed in the context of an already unsteady and fractious post-bipolar international system which has had to muster the diplomatic energy and the military means to deal with the post-Cold War order's first crisis – Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

But the Iran crisis was also coloured by the emerging concerns of the major powers about the influence of a band of, let us say "incompatible" regional actors which in the post-9/11 international order were seen as potentially able to wreak havoc against Western interests. The neoconservatives in Washington in particular branded the gang leaders of the so-called incompatible states the "axis of evil" and thus prepared the ground for the use of force as part of the tool kit of pre-emption – which was itself developed as a response to the uncertainties and dangers of the new age of "disorder". The doctrine of pre-emption provided part of the strategic rationale for what the Bush administration saw as a counter-offensive against rogue actors, which was then utilised and applied on an unprecedented scale in Iraq. The logic in this instance was that Iraq is beyond redemption and the country is indeed ever more dangerous in the uncertain post-9/11 era than at any time before. In the face of the (apparent) ineffectiveness of sanctions Saddam Hussein's conduct signalled to the US administration the failure of "containment". At its heart, the "problem" with Iraq was packaged around three, inter-related, issues, all of which resonated strongly with the agendas following 9/11: Iraq was a rogue state and was capable of developing and using weapons of mass destruction against regional allies and Western countries themselves; Iraq was an active supporter of international terrorism and its cultivation of terror networks was a threat to international security; and, Iraq was a vociferous opponent of Israel and the peace process and its active subversion of this process was jeopardising the region's prospects for long-term peace and stability. Iraq was a danger to international peace and security.

This essay will argue argue that the approach to the revelations about Iran's previously undeclared advances in developing and installing production-scale centrifuges for uranium enrichment have triggered the same conditionalities in the West's response.[1] Furthermore, when it came to Iran, then the international community had a legacy to overcome. For some on the right of the spectrum, moreover, the failures of intervention in Iraq could conceivably be covered over through the launch of a more intensive but inclusive international campaign against Iran.

Context

If that is the subtext, what is the context? The context for the Iran-related nuclear crisis is an international system in transition. In concrete terms, Iran's nuclear crisis can be considered through a "levels of analysis" approach which looks at the international, regional and domestic (Iranian) dimensions of the crisis as distinct but inter-related layers.

At the international level, the diplomatic community is concerned with the fact that that it should try and hold the line against nuclear proliferation – and not just the proliferation of weapons and delivery systems themselves, but also the prevention of the spread of bomb-making knowhow and related technologies, ingredients and software. Iran's announcement that it has prepared its nuclear technologies knowledge with others countries, apparently outside of the safeguards of the IAEA, naturally intensified international concerns about Iran's potential as a weapons proliferator.

Then there has been the concern about the efficacy of the NPT regime itself and the impact of the IAEA's wrangling with Iran for the non-proliferation regime. The problem has been as much about suspicions that Iran has violated the spirit, as well as the letter of the NPT, as about Iran's subversion of the NPT. Regarding the former, the secrecy of Iran's nuclear-related activities, which only came to light in 2002 as part of an intelligence operation, was seen by IAEA members as evidence of Iran's weapons-related activities. Others have been concerned that Iran's relationship with the IAEA before 2002 and also after 2005 has done much to undermine the NPT regime. Thus, while Iran has insisted on its "rights" as an NPT member to access and make peaceful use of nuclear technologies and nuclear

power, it has been much less forthcoming in clarifying issues relating to the undeclared or suspicious aspects of its programme. For example, after five rounds of UNSC resolutions and four rounds of sanctions, Tehran has still not given access to some military sites which the IAEA suspects of having hosted nuclear weapons-related research; nor has it given a credible account of why it had acquired blueprints for nuclear-weapons assembly, or why its missiles programme experimenting with delivery systems compatible with nuclear warheads. Iran's unwillingness to even discuss its extensive uranium enrichment activities, let alone compromise on its scale, has fed the same international fears that Iran's enrichment effort is driven by its desire to become self-sufficient in the production of nuclear fuel and also able to accumulate highly enriched uranium for bomb-making.

The NPT dimension is important for another reason: North Korea abandoned its membership of it in order to develop its nuclear weapons and India, Pakistan and Israel (three important "regional" nuclear-weapons states that do not belong to it. The IAEA has to make the NPT relevant to ensure that its credibility is not further eroded and in this endeavour the tussle with Iran has become the litmus test for global relevance and future credibility of the NPT.

Therefore much of the debates between Iran and the international community has taken place in a binary in form and has largely come down to the differences of approach. In Iran's case, it has been about the scale of "rights" vs "might". Iran's narrative, rooted in its revolutionary ideology of course, has been about its rights as an NPT member to generate nuclear technology and knowhow domestically and its resistance to being forced to curtail its peaceful nuclear effort. For the international community, on the other hand, Tehran's obligations as an NPT member, lack of clarity in its declared programme, and responsibilities towards the Security Council have formed core of the issues.

In the wider debates about Iran's programme one also detects the emergence of a "post-modern" international system as a framing phenomenon, which is done in two ways. The first is located in the strategy of "pre-emptive action" as articulated by the Bush administration's actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. In this doctrine state sovereignty becomes a relative notion and contextualised with reference to the norms of the international system said to be threatened or violated. Military action, thus, against violators of international norms becomes a peace-enhancing measure warding off disaster later. The second aspect is exemplified in the way in which the sacred cow of state sovereignty is set against the dangers posed to international security by rogue actors. Curtailing perceived state excesses becomes an imperative of the international community, and this can only be done through decisive action (like the imposition of intrusive and debilitating sanctions) by the United Nations.

Iran has found itself in this bind of post-modernity, and sees itself as a victim of unjustified intervention in its internal affairs by hostile Western powers. Its revolutionary narrative states this is the price it has to pay for its independence from imperialist and "world-devouring" powers and for standing up for an fair and equitable international system. Tehran's internationalist populism, it has to be said, resonated well with China and Russia, as well as scores of other fragile and/or authoritarian regimes across the continents that saw in Iran's resistance a strike for justice in an inequitable international order.

In this regard, the international crisis over Iran's nuclear programme and the treatment of Iran by the international community has come to mark the direction of travel of the –post-polar – international system. Moreover, the crisis has emerged as a watermark for the shape and form of the post-modern international order in which state sovereignty can no longer be accepted as sacrosanct and in which the responsibility to protect, and indeed the responsibility to prevent, become the drivers of international action.

Precedent is arguably another strand of the international crisis over Iran's nuclear programme. There is on all sides an acute awareness of Iraq's treatment as a pariah state by the international community. But one interpretation of the 2003 war sees the destruction of its ruling regime by predatory forces due to its surrender of its main deterrence (its arsenal of WMDs) to international monitoring agencies. In this narrative, the West is said to have known all along that Iraq had not WMDs on its soil and as such was totally vulnerable to attack. The same is said of Libya in 2011: Qaddafi's surrender of the regime's WMDs in the early 2000s – its most important deterrent in times of crisis – paved the way for the regime's eventual destruction through external intervention.

These cases are often cited in juxtapose to the example of North Korea (PDRK). Pyongyang, weak economically,

brittle politically and isolated diplomatically, has skilfully used the country's nuclear programme not only to deter aggression and to insure the security of the regime, but also to extract concessions from the very hostile powers bent on forcing the regime out. Far from yielding to pressure, Pyongyang has consistently defied the will of the international community: not only did it chose to leave the NPT when it felt that international pressure was no longer tolerable, but it also went much further and even built at least one nuclear device and alternative delivery systems in spite of remaining part of the six-party talks (PDRK-Republic of Korea-US-Japan-China-Russia)[2].

The lesson being learnt is that despite international isolation, the imposition of a multitude of sanctions, a weak economy, and unpopularity on the home front, there is little that the West can do to unseat a dictator if the ruling regime has in its possession the wherewithal for deterrence. And this deterrence can best be secured through the WMD path, even if it remains undeclared. "Stealth deterrence" in this view is as effective as a declared one!

The stark contrast, then, between the treatment of these pariah regimes is not only shaping Iran's thinking, but also that of the international community, as none of the permanent members of the Security Council want Iran (or any other country) to follow the example of North Korea. Nevertheless, the strategy towards Iran signals to Tehran that the so-called "arrogant powers" want to do to this exactly as in the same way as it has been done to the authoritarian regimes in Iraq and Libya. More on this issue will be assessed later, in the context of the domestic political dynamics in Iran.

At the regional level too there is a strong security dynamics which is shaping the context for the crisis arising from Iran's nuclear-related activities. Foremost among the regional factors is Israel's perception, which assumes that Iran's nuclear programme has only one purpose: the development of a nuclear-weapons capability. More specifically, Israel, the region's only nuclear-weapon capable regional actor, has three sets of concerns arising from Iran's activities. First is the fear that Iran's programme is aimed at weaponisation for the destruction of Israel. Daily anti-Israeli rhetoric out of Iran constantly reinforces this fear. Secondly, Tel Aviv sees Iran's nuclear programme as part of a wider drive for regional domination, which would not only further radicalise the neighbourhood but also weaken the regional role of the remaining pro-Western Arab states. Thirdly, Israel fears that Iran's programme can only encourage other states – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, for example – to develop their own capability, or at the very least secure a credible deterrence of their own which could bring other non-conventional forces into this unpoliced regional system. Extension of a nuclear umbrella, as might happen in the case of Pakistan and the Gulf monarchies, would be nothing short of disaster for Israel as it would create more proliferation pressures and at the same time bring the weak, but large nuclear-armed state of Pakistan into the MENA regional system.

However, the story does not end with Israel. For the Gulf Arab monarchies, whose relations with Iran have deteriorated markedly over the last decade, a nuclear-armed Iran would be as dangerous and equally unacceptable.

At the heart of the regional concerns are the potential dangers of WMD proliferation, which are magnified in terms of their effects due to the region's existing structural instabilities and its highly dynamic nature. In this regional system not even six consecutive months free of conflict have been recorded in the last 60 years.

But it is at the domestic level that the crisis is slowly unfolding. The issues are bound up with the regime's perceptions and its calculations.[3] Firstly, and particularly in the context of the deep political tensions arising from the country's disputed 2009 presidential elections, the dominant elite (which has lost virtually all of its reformist allies) is aware that it will need to have a deterrence as insurance against external intervention and as a means of guaranteeing the country's national security in an increasingly volatile and also hostile regional environment. As already noted, the restructuring of the Arab order since 2010 and the fall of several pro-Western Arab regimes may have weakened the West's alliance structures in the region, but these have not strengthened Iran's position and Tehran is more exposed today to opposition from "legitimate" regimes in such transition countries as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen than what it called "illegitimate" regimes of Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak.

Another element of the domestic level is that of regime legitimacy. Tehran has banked its domestic popularity, and international standing for that matter, on the success of the strategy of resistance to undue external pressure and the pursuit of all the aspects of its declared nuclear programme at all costs. It is in no position to climb down this

maximalist ladder without something tangible to show for it. And the regime's room for manoeuvre has also been affected by the self-inflicted hype of nationalism. The regime's drive for drilling additional pillars of legitimacy for its nuclear programme has fanned the flames of nationalism in a country in which nationalist sentiment has always been strong. The power of nationalism, a force that ironically the regime had tried to subdue (or control) in the intervening years since the revolution, has helped propel the regime forward in its negotiations with the international community. But, on the other hand, nationalism has also shown its power to control and limit the regime's manoeuvres. Having fanned the flames of nationalism in this dispute, and having resurrected the spirit of resistance to unjust external pressure, it can hardly negotiate a compromise with the international community which could be interpreted as capitulation domestically. What were all the sacrifices for, one can almost hear the question ring on Iranian streets, if the end game was no more than just the protection of the regime's interests. In a country which has been asking this question of itself in the devastating aftermath of the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war, such questions can quickly become corrosive to the institutions of the regime.

And it is important to note that the sacrifices being asked of the Iranian people are indeed enormous: the UNSC sanctions and those of the European Union and the United States have imposed a heavy toll on the average Iranian, making many basic commodities scarce, raising food inflation to over 40 percent a year, increasing the cost of housing, transportation and travel, and generally making daily life unbearable for the average family. These are in addition to the effects of rising unemployment, consequences of the collapse of the national currency, and dropping oil output and exports (and therefore lower national income).

Given the corner in which the regime has negotiated itself into, some (both inside and outside of the country) argue that for the more astute members of the Iranian elite see the status quo (maintain the veneer of negotiations while intensifying the nuclear programme) as long as possible as the most desirable strategy to follow. The maintenance of the status quo means, arguably, greater control by the security-linked establishment over the institutions of the state, as well as for maximum rent extraction in an economy which is dominated by the state-controlled elements. Sanctions help profit maximisation for those in control of inward trade and for those in possession of revenue generating businesses and investment opportunities.

Now, whether this highly self-interested elite can be persuaded to change course will depend on the incentives provided as well as on its calculation that it can contain the nationalist rage and the rise of forces who would openly and effectively challenge the regime's legitimacy. The regime is today is at the vortex of domestic and international forces which it has itself encouraged. This logjam can arguably only be broken by a "Grand Bargain" which gives the regime the assurance of survival and the tools for buying-off the disgruntled masses. Thus far, none of the foreign powers involved in the crisis have articulated an acceptable (to Iran's nervous neighbours and the international community as well as the regime itself) bargain which could be introduced as an antidote to the rising clamour for military action.

In the absence of a credible grand bargain which could satisfy the interests of the many interested parties, much of the focus has been on the options available to the international community for breaking the nuclear impasse. The various positions can be packaged around three approaches, as discussed below.

Options

The debate about "what to do with Iran" has been at its most intensive in the United States and Israel, where policy makers, think tankers and former officials have all weighed in advocating a particular course of action. Essentially, the options have circled around two schools: strike Iran militarily; and, do not use force. A third position is Waltz's, advocating proliferation as the best course of action and will be dealt with separately.

Those advocating military action argue that Iran is a dangerous country whose irredentist regime will do everything in its power to acquire nuclear weapons and wreak havoc across the world. Its ideology, messianic character and aggressive intent mark it out as one of the greatest sources of danger to stability of the international system. Military action, thus, is the only sure way of preventing Iran from realising its evil plans. Then there are those who argue that a military strike on Iran is the only way of containing a wider conflagration in the region – strike now in order to avoid a

wider destructive war! This line of argument is also supported by those who claim that the Iranian regime is so weak and vulnerable that it will not be able to retaliate with any conviction, or in a threatening way, thus making a bigger war less likely. Moreover, the regime is so weak, fragmented and vulnerable that a military strike could provide the trigger for a decisive mass uprising against the regime and herald its downfall.

For others, the mere (credible) threat of use of force could bring the regime to its senses. The regime will capitulate in the face of clearly communicated military preparations for a strike, as it has already done so in the past – for example in 1988. And, finally, a military strike might become necessary to undo the regime's calculation that sanctions are always preferable to a devastating war.

Those who argue against military action are equally passionate about their reasoning and argue that Iran is such an important and influential, as well as militarily robust, regional power that if it is struck it will ignite many uncontrollable security fires across the region and beyond. What is the rush to war at this juncture when both Israeli and Western intelligence agencies concur that Iran is still three years away from a nuclear weapon? To strike now, the argument goes, would inevitably see an increase in Iranian-inspired and –supported acts of violence against civilian targets in the West – as was the case in the 1980s in Europe. Thirdly, it is said, if struck, Iran will itself then strike at Israel in order to cause a wider regional conflagration. There is no prospect of restraint. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has noted, "rushing to war is not a wise course of action. You can always start a war, and you know pretty much what happens when you start it. But you don't know how long it will last, what its consequences will be – and they will be certainly very costly for the United States".[4]

Furthermore, far from collapsing, the chances are that a military strike will provide the hardliners in the Iranian elite with the golden opportunity of consolidating their power base in the regime and cement the influence of the security apparatus in Iran at the expense of the country's civic institutions and still vibrant civil society. Indeed, as the masses rally in support of the regime, the security elite will take the necessary steps to remove the vestiges of the so-called Green Movement from society and all those actually or figuratively associated with it. The dark shadow of dictatorship would then fall across the region, possibly threatening the democratising clamours of the Arab masses and intellectuals. In the last analysis, any military action on Iran will inevitably change the dynamics of the region and make even less predictable. Action against Iran would radicalise the region, provide a boost for both radical Islamist forces and hardened Arab dictatorships such as Assad's in Syria, and set back the cause of democratic reform for decades.

However, if there has to be intervention then surely the least damaging of options (to Iran and to the rest of the region) would be to use the West's superior military machine to disrupt Iran's nuclear facilities, its painstaking-assembled personnel and infrastructure, and as a matter of routine use computer viruses to destroy its most sensitive operations.

In any case, the intrusive sanctions are doing the necessary job and are weakening the regime from within. One must allow more time for the effect of the sanctions to spread and for the regime's failure to manage the weakening economy. Voices in the United States, Europe and Israel are heard saying that time is on the West's side in this game, and not against it, as others imply.

More broadly, the West should also think more pragmatically about the costs to itself of a strike on Iran. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example, has made the argument that "A war in the Middle East, in the present context, may last for years. And the economic consequences of it are going to be devastating for the average American. High inflation. Instability. Insecurity. Probably significant isolation for the United States in the world scene. Can you name me any significant country that's going to be in that war together on our side? That's something no one can afford to ignore".[5] Then there is oil – in terms of security of access and price stability. The chances are that oil prices will skyrocket after a strike and could exceed $200 per barrel, despite other producers' efforts to flood the market with additional supplies. Western economies are in no position to ride such high oil prices and the world economy is not robust enough to absorb such a shock. The negative economic consequences of the war could be long-lasting and devastating, adding to global uncertainties and insecurity. No-one will thank the Western powers for bringing such misery to the world economy and the more vulnerable communities and countries.

In this context, the West should consider more carefully the damage to its own reputation. Can it fathom another "civilisational war" with Islam?! What about the lasting damage to its ability to mobilise the international community in the interest of humanitarian action elsewhere in the world? Being seen as morally bankrupt is unlikely to win the West many friends in defence of other international causes. And an attack on Iran will play straight into the hands of Russia and China who have recently felt the heat from the Arab world for their vetoing of UNSC resolutions against the Syrian regime.

We are currently in the no-man's land of debates. Obviously, no-one really knows how close Iran is to acquiring a nuclear device, assuming that it wants the bomb in the first place. No-one really knows what impact on Iran a military strike will have and we are even less certain about Iran's reaction and the consequences of a military action on the world economy and the Middle East's security. But all sides assume that the consequences will be grave. So, one thing is clear: the parties are playing high-stakes chicken and while dancing around the fire of war are at the same time careful not to push each other in. We have not yet reached the tipping point, which partly provides the reason for so many policy debates and confusions.

It is in this atmosphere of uncertainty that a third option has been put forward: let us do nothing, for "a nuclear-armed Iran… would probably be the best possible result… and most likely restore stability to the Middle East".[6]

Banality as a precursor to insanity

This third approach is not new but it has reared its head again after many years of discredited isolation. The argument of "more is better" was first put forward by Kenneth Waltz in 1979 in his landmark work,*Theory of International Relations*,[7] which he then developed further in an Adelphi Paper entitled *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better*, which was published in 1981, at the height of the Iran-Iraq war. He said then that as nuclear weapons had reduced the chances of war between the superpowers and also between the Soviet Union and China, "one may expect them to have similar effects elsewhere".[8] Nuclear weapons in Waltz's view had been a major force working for peace in the post-War world. Nuclear weapons moreover would tend to induce caution in the behaviour of weak states. Upon acquiring such weapons the so-called "lesser powers" become cautious because they cannot risk war and be sure that the protagonists cannot retaliate with nuclear weapons. It is the uncertainty of response which breeds caution in a world of nuclear-weapons states, even amongst the weaker nuclear-weapons states. Even maverick states become more inhibited and behave more carefully in this situation.

Writing at the height of the Cold War, he argued that a gradual spread of nuclear weapons to lesser powers would be stabilising. Furthermore, he said, even if "lesser powers" were to use such weapons that would not be the end of the world, as he put it, for the dominant nuclear-weapons states of the United States and the Soviet Union would not allow the "central balance" to be shaken. Actions at the periphery, allegedly, can safely be bolder than at the centre! But, in Waltz's happy world, the weak can deter one another in any case and therefore will not use nuclear weapons against one another. Countries become defensive instead of offensive. One reason is that they are at once more vulnerable to the other side and also because they cannot be sure that the protagonist does not have a second strike capability knock-out punch. Proliferation then breeds moderation as it extends recognition of the dangers of nuclear war to more countries. So, while the chance of nuclear war between these lesser powers may exist, as Waltz notes in the earlier part of his 1981 essay, such nuclear-weapons states are unlikely to fight it because nuclear weapons deployment across protagonists makes them all the more conservative and moderate. Happily, another side-effect of nuclear-weapons proliferation is conventional disarmament: in this scenario new nuclear-weapons states are likely to decrease the size of their conventional arsenals for they have acquired a credible deterrence capability. Once they are satisfied that they can deter attack then not only will they not indulge in an arms race; they will not even bother too much about how much conventional force is being accumulated around them.

Nuclear proliferation thus spreads risk averseness, which is of course the best guarantor of peace. Ultimately, this is why "more is better" for this school of thought. Consistent with his realist worldview, Waltz confidently predicts that no regime, no matter in what garb, will risk catastrophe: the spread of nuclear weapons make wars less likely. Even if deterrence was to fail then firing a few such weapons by the deterring party will quickly bring the parties to their senses, Waltz cautions. This, I guess, is what Waltz means by nuclear weapons responsibly used! The end result:

even a nuclear strike will bring about rapid de-escalation in a world of nuclear-weapons states and not the wrongly assumed response of escalation.

With an echo of the current debates about Iran, Waltz speculated that a preventive strike, of the type that Israel made on Iraq's nuclear facilities in 1981, could only be counterproductive for it merely increases the resolve and desire of the protagonists to develop their own nuclear-weapons capability. But today, it is interesting that even the whiff of Iran's nuclear programme is creating strange coalitions for the containment of Iran, which have at their heart the common view that if Iran cannot be stopped through negotiations then it must be stopped through the use of force. Here, a preventive strike is therefore not only not likely to be counterproductive, in terms of spurring proliferation elsewhere, but rather as the last chance to stop Iran acquiring a nuclear-weapons capability – which unstopped would encourage proliferation.

In 2012 Waltz has resurrected the same arguments made in 1979 and 1981, in places verbatim, to argue that the only way for the regional balance of military power (which Israel has dominated) to be restored is to let Iran play its nuclear plans out because even if "Iran goes nuclear, Israel and Iran will deter each other, as nuclear powers always have".[9] Waltz confidently concludes that as no other country in the region will have an incentive to go nuclear after Iran, "the current crisis will finally dissipate, leading to a Middle East that is more stable than it is today".[10]

I had argued against his wider thesis back in 1989, pointing out that the argument in favour of "more is better" is not situated in actual geostrategic realities.[11] I had made the point that it was an error to generalise the conditions of deterrence between the East and West blocs and to universalise the reality of a "nuclear truce" between the two superpowers as the condition of stability for the international order. The superpowers-managed world has long gone and those conditions of relative stability no longer apply. In 2012 in the Middle East regional system, particularly, peoples are making history again as they take these countries through the traumas of anti-authoritarian struggles which have brought to the surface complex patterns of relationships across and within states, complex patterns of identity formation, complex notions of statehood. In this environment of transition from the conditions of the post-colonial state, I am even more assured of my objections to Waltz's ahistorical and non-contextualised world of nuclear states than it was in 1989.

At one level, his argument that no other country followed Israel's weaponisation and therefore no other country will follow Iran's example is totally spurious. I say this for three main reasons. First, the bulk of the Arab countries were locked in superpower relationships which inhibited them from pursuing nuclear-weapons programmes of their own without endangering the much more strategically important external alliances. The Arab states were in dependent relationships with external global powers which appeared to be managing the region. Second, in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Israel's relations with its neighbours had sufficiently stabilised – either as cold peace (with Egypt in 1979) or unspoken truces (Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, etc.) – as not to lead to the pursuit of nuclear weapons by the Arab side for deterrence. Despite their rhetoric, Israel was no longer posing a direct security threat to these states, and even its annexation of Arab territories in the early 1980s went unchallenged. Thirdly, both the Soviet Union and the United States had provided sufficient security guarantees (and weapons) for their regional allies as to discourage them from pursuing nuclear weapons programmes. Indeed, where nuclear weapons programmes were being nurtured they had little to do with the Israel: Iraq's intended target was Iran and Libya's purpose was status and regime preservation! No wonder then that Israel's monopoly was not tested!

But, evidence of Syria's secret nuclear programme in the 2000s illustrated that contrary to Waltz's operating assumption some on the Arab side were not prepared to accept the status quo and were more willing to flirt with the nuclear option as the shadow of superpower control receded. Waltz's often repeated assumption that no Arab state followed Israel's nuclearisation would arguably not hold true in the post-bipolar world of today. It follows, then, that there is also no good reason to assume that no Arab party is likely to follow Iran's nuclearisation lead. So, historically Waltz's argument does not stack up; nor does is it make it possible to argue today that "if Israel did not trigger an arms race then, there is no reason a nuclear Iran should now".[12] In fact, Saudi Arabia has already made it clear that were Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, or not have its programme checked, then it would be obliged to follow its own strategy of access to a nuclear deterrence. For many states, Iran's actions will trigger a nuclear arms race, and this is another reason why Israel would like to halt Iran's programme. Not only will it break Israel's monopoly, but it

will also trigger wider proliferation.

As the global Cold War bipolar conditions no longer apply, in such dynamic regions as the Middle East states are more likely to emulate each other in a desperate bid to maintain pace. Nuclearisation of Iran begets nuclear proliferation, as the signs already show, and massive arms procurement will beget an arms race. Moreover, despite his assuredness, Waltz did concede in his 1981 essay that in a post-bipolar world the risk of miscalculation rises and the chance of certainty decreases. Well, that world is the one in which we live today. In a multi-polar, or more accurately non-polar world today, the dangers of a nuclear arms race being fuelled across regional systems has grown and proliferation can increase the risk of miscalculation as well as misconduct. The prudence on which Waltz had set out his pro-nuclearisation stall can easily give way to recklessness when countries in different regional systems come to fear each other, and particularly where states no longer have the all-important knowledge of the others' capabilities. This is an important point as Waltz's own definition regards prudence as vital to the creation of the condition of deterrence among the smaller/weaker/lesser states.

Weaker states, minor states, lesser states are terms that Waltz uses interchangeably, which for a man who is obsessed with state power and its uses, is quite remarkable. The oversight to define these terms has major implications for the consequences of his argument in such regions as the Middle East, for here size matters and size is increasingly measured not in landmass or even population, but in economic capacity and international networks. In the Middle East, such so-called "minor states" as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are actively influencing and changing the region. Israel too has shown that territorial space is no barrier to regional supremacy and as Waltz himself maintains that once nuclear weapons are acquired then size and territory become irrelevant, one has to ask by what criteria are we to separate the nuclear-potential states of the Middle East? Would a minor nuclear-weapons state in the Middle East deter a bigger one?!

More broadly, it can be argued that violence has become so embedded in the Middle East theatre that little room exists in the region for stabilisation of relations between its nuclear-weapons states. Although Waltz would argue that it is precisely because power is not balanced that violence is rife, the counter argument might be that as violence is so endemic in the Middle East's intra-regional relations, and arguably embedded, the prospects of weaponisation somehow moderating state behaviour simply cannot be accepted as a given. It certainly cannot be assumed. Also, as the "connection between the prevailing political conditions and the arms race seems strongest in the nuclear realm… a more stable and benign political environment in which states do not perceive threats to their survival is bound to be more conducive" to the development of nuclear capabilities as instruments of "existential deterrence".[13]

Secondly, Waltz is totally oblivious to the dynamics of the Middle East regional system, which is today in the grips of a major cold war between Iran and a coalition of Arab states. What Iran does will not go unchallenged and any sign of Iran moving towards weaponisation will not only force the United States to extend a strategic deterrence umbrella over its allies, but encourage Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies to seek intermediate cover from Pakistan. Far from ending it, this kind of indirect proliferation can only encourage a regional arms race. Additionally, surely it can be recognised that this is a region in the throes of revolutions and so inherently unstable that any move by Iran towards weaponisation would generate a radical response.

Thirdly, the fluid nature of power in the region breeds fear and also underscores its instability. It is indeed the fluidity of power and the region's increasing multi-polarity which has prevented its stabilisation and much less Israel's monopoly of nuclear weapons preventing balance – as Waltz argues. Israel's possession of nuclear weapons and its strategy of maintaining its nuclear monopoly have not helped matters of course, but this is not the reason – as Waltz argues – for the absence of balance of power. External intervention and specific regional dynamism are the root causes of that. In such an environment, therefore, it would be highly irresponsible of the international community to not try and limit proliferation. The solution to the region's instability is not to be found in proliferation and the argument therefore has been, rightly, all about why Iran should not get the bomb and why Israel should surrender its nuclear weapons on the basis that it will be able to live in peace and security in a nuclear-free Middle East. With the prospects of this still being long-term, regional solutions would have to be found for a modus vivendi, which must be in terms of confidence building measures and mutual recognition, and not caressing the flames of nuclear proliferation.

Fourthly, the regional balance of power is in flux and regional powers here engage in arms races precisely because other regional powers do, to paraphrase Waltz himself. Iran's acquisition of a nuclear-weapons capability will not change this situation. Indeed, Waltz himself acknowledged in the conclusion to his 1981 essay that in a multi-polar world, unlike the one in which he articulated his vision of a world of nuclear-weapon states, miscalculation is more likely. Well, this is the world in which we now live and in which he again writes – in *Foreign Affairs* – to advocate proliferation by Iran. In the Middle East's multi-polar – and unstable – environment are not the prospects of miscalculation even greater? In a region in which several of its members do not even recognise each other, let alone having such lines of communication which now exists between India and Pakistan, what guarantees do we have that they can accurately interpret each others' actions and not overreact? Miscalculation by an isolated and strategically lonely country like Iran is more probable than in a situation in which a country's leaders have access to others and also have access to independent sources of information and intelligence. Iran cannot be said to be enjoying such luxuries, whereas both India and Pakistan have done so. Also, just to digress, the nuclear truce between Pakistan and India is simply more than the application of deterrence. The conditions for the truce holding must be found in the wider relationships which shape and constrain the behaviour of these neighbouring states. And it is increasingly clear that India's weaponisation has always been much more about its relationship with China and not its "regional" balance of power competition with Pakistan.

One can further ask how a greater number of nuclear-weapons states would contain the competitive edge which drives so much of the MENA regional actors' policies. In this environment of uncertainty, the survival instinct – which Waltz relies upon so heavily to temper policy – can in fact lead to catastrophic behaviour. Instead of having a moderating (rationalising) influence, as Waltz expects, it could lead to its opposite.

So, for me, Waltz's arguments just do not make strategic sense, and I am deeply concerned by his cavalier faith in what he seems to regard as the iron law of deterrence. As Karim Sadjadpour notes, had Waltz been living in the Middle East region he would probably be thinking very differently: "he has the luxury of theorising from thousands of miles away".[14]

In addition, I am not at all sure that past conduct is any guide to the future, or an indicator of any state's behaviour! And this is true of all states. To overlook the textures and contours which shape states is frankly so nineteenth century. Waltz builds all his case around the argument that the nuclear age has not witnessed massive proliferation, and it has contained military confrontation between the nuclear-weapons states. History, as we know, is not a linear process and precisely because it is unpredictable that the international community tends to try and contain potential threats instead of fanning potential dangers. Furthermore, as any equity investor – whose world is also determined by rational behaviour and a strong logic – knows, markets are unpredictable and madness does occur; and as all investment brokers often remind their clients: past performance is no guarantee of future success. Can we trust the uniqueness of the previous 70 years as sufficient assurance that the future will follow the same path? I do not believe so.

Furthermore, to speak about deterrence in such an abstract and absolute way belies the policy, ethical and institutional complexities of satisfactorily reaching such a state. Before we envision the condition of deterrence as the norm between adversarial nuclear-weapons states surely we must first understand the conditions of nuclear warfare in the concrete settings in which deterrence is being considered. In the Middle East no such scenario building has taken place and as no open discussion of the conditions of nuclear war has been considered, on what basis can we assume that deterrence will somehow emerge in an organic way if and when Iran realises a nuclear-weapons capability? Moreover, how do we know that these regimes are not comfortable with the notion of "limited nuclear war", under which they assume in their military planning that a nuclear war is possible, winnable and without long-term consequences? If the P5 nuclear powers have contemplated limited nuclear war, then surely will the new lesser nuclear-weapons states. I certainly cannot see Iran or Israel committing to a no-first-use position if they are to truly wed to the idea of nuclear weapons deterring attack, for adoption of no-first-use ends their ability to deter. This then means that the nuclear option will be at the forefront of their military posture. The "tolerance margins" between nuclear adversaries in the Middle East would in all likelihood be narrower than those between the nuclear superpowers, and possibly even between India and Pakistan.

And, where does "parity" lie in the calculations of the Middle East nuclear-weapons states as the basis for establishing nuclear balance and the conditions of stability that Waltz alludes to? We simply have no idea, as we cannot even be certain how large is Israel's nuclear arsenal – a country which has had nuclear weapons since the early 1970s.[15]

In practice we have no sure way of knowing whether it will be deterrence or nuclear escalation which follows Iran's possession of the bomb. Additionally, the nuclear balance that Waltz talks about is unlikely to be reducible to that between Iran and Israel. I have already alluded to the strategic reality that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons will lead to wider regional proliferation, but here I am also thinking of the existing medium-sized nuclear-weapons states of Pakistan, India, Britain and France. Given these countries' extensive security, commercial and energy interests in the Middle East, they are unlikely to be far behind Iran in adding nuclear-capable armour to their presence in the region. Which powers in such circumstances are going to set the parameters of deterrence, and indeed deployment of nuclear weapons? Will non-regional nuclear powers be abiding by a no first strike? The region as a whole, as a consequence, will become more vulnerable to the dangers of nuclear confrontation.

But my greatest objections to Waltz's line of reasoning are to be tabled at the human, and by extension, moral levels. As Richard Falk observes, the problem lies in the moral dangers inherent in Waltz's position.[16] What about the wider cause of peace, of efforts to eradicate nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, of the environmental dangers inherent in the development of such weapons? Surely, a world embarking on the path of disarmament, as it is doing methodically in relation to chemical weapons for example, is far more sustainable than one in which nuclear-weapons states define behaviour.

And what about the domestic consequences of nuclearisation? The possession of such weapons makes states more secretive and security conscious, as we have seen, often to the detriment of civil society. In democratic India, for example, groups and individuals arguing for nuclear disarmament have found themselves vulnerable to harassment and prosecution. In a country like Iran, with strong authoritarian instincts, such weapons can only make it less responsive to domestic demands for democratisation as they put the security elite firmly in charge. Hardening the shell of authoritarian states like Iran while also fanning their chauvinistic nationalism, as the possession of a nuclear-weapons capability will do, will make regional relations more problematic.

Finally, encouraging proliferation in the Middle East, in the face of intense international opposition and sanctions, will send completely the wrong message; that defiance not only yields results but that it can actually increase an intransigent regime's credibility. It is therefore the wider international implications of inaction, or the wrong action, which are driving the international community's debates and negotiations strategy. The differences in the approaches between, say Turkey and Brazil, and the European Union and the United States are to be found here.

In sum

The world again finds itself at an important cross-roads and again the cross-roads is situated in the Middle East, just as it had been in 1990 when Iraq set the tone for conflict management in the post-Cold War order, just as it had been when 9/11 set the conditions in 2001 for pre-emption as the operational doctrine of the world's remaining superpower which ultimately led to an unwise and devastating war in Iraq in 2003. This time, the international community is struggling to contain the regional and international ramifications of its diplomatic stand-off with Iran over its nuclear programme. The outcome of this crisis will have implications for the international non-proliferation regime, relations between the declared nuclear-weapons states and non-nuclear states, and Middle East regional security. It is for this reason that opinion remains widely divided about how to proceed. Some see Iran through the same lens that they saw Iraq, as a problem state whose corrosive effect on the wider region must be stopped at all costs – even war. For others, Iran is a problem, but a manageable one. Applying international and multilateral pressure on its body-politic will persuade it to abandon its dogged devotion to the mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle and the internationally unpalatable aspects of its diverse and extensive nuclear programme. In fact, some have suggested, Tehran has ensured that its nuclear programme is sufficiently extensive so as to be able to surrender some of its more objectionable components without loss of face or legitimacy.

In the middle of these often heated but rather nuanced debates has re-entered Waltz with his old mantra of "more is better". His uncontextualised and frankly ill-advised advocation of Iran "getting the bomb" seems to be missing the whole point of both the dramatically changed international order and fast-transforming MENA regional system. No party to the diplomatic negotiations, I suspect, is going to take his intervention seriously, not even Iran, which is yet to decide the endgame in its nuclear programme. But in the region Iran's adversaries and those who fear its influence will not be thrilled to see on the cover of *Foreign Affairs* the call for Iran to acquire a nuclear-weapons capability.

For the rest of us, however, living with the uncertainties of uneven power relations emerging to dominate our non-polar world in the twenty first century, and the strategic interdependencies which can quickly spread risk and insecurity across regional systems, differentiating between blanket support for "limited spread" of nuclear weapons and the long-term goal of limiting their spread and eradicating them, is quite important.

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[1] See for example, Mohamed Elbaradei, *The Age of Deception: Nuclear Diplomacy in Treacherous Times*, London: Bloomsbury, 2011.

[2] The International Atomic Energy Agency [online available at] http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/2007/sixpartytalks

[3] For a perceptive analysis of this, see Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012.

[4] Interview given to Newsmax, 18 July 2012.

[5] Interview given to Newsmax, 18 July 2012.

[6] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 4, July/August 2012, p. 2.

[7] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Relations*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1979.

[8] Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better*. Adelphi Paper no. 171, London: IISS, 1981, p. 30.

[9] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 4, July/August 2012, p. 5.

[10] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean

Stability', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 4, July/August 2012, p. 5.

[11] Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Nuclearisation of the Middle East*, London: Brassey's, 1989.

[12] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 4, July/August 2012, p. 5.

[13] Shai Feldman, *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control in the Middle East*, Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 1997, p. 3.

[14] Quoted in Christina Lamb, '"Want Peace? Let Iran Have Bomb'", *The Sunday Times*, 15July 2012.

[15] Shyam Bhatia, *Nuclear Rivals in the Middle East*, London: Routledge, 1988.

[16] Richard Falk, 'Kenneth Waltz is Not Crazy, But He is Dangerous: Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East', *Foreign Policy Journal*, 7 July 2012.

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