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Iran Nuclear Armed: Implication for Regional Nuclear Proliferation

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ABSTRACT
This study examines how Iran's nuclear weapons could affect the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East region. International discourse around Middle East issues has intensified, resulting in a closer relationship between the region's security system and the global arena. For security and stability to be achieved in the Middle East, nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament are essential. If further outbreaks are to be avoided, they must be addressed urgently. This needs to be done comprehensively and without bias or preference. A historical research design was used in this investigation. Among other things, the study finds that the Islamic Republic finds nuclear weapons attractive due to two main factors: deterrence and regional hegemony. Iran's efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability have been driven by the current imbalance in the distribution of power in the Middle East, the study concludes. The study suggests, among other things, that Iran-US relations should be given top priority and that, if they continue to be adversaries, little progress is likely to be made in improving bilateral relations in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. This is the most efficient method of ensuring the security and survival of the regimes for both countries. With regard to supporting initiatives intended to bring peace and stability back to the Middle East, including a potential regional security framework, the UN should be more proactive and assertive.
Keywords: Nuclear armed, Middle East, security, nuclear proliferation

INTRODUCTION
The Iranian nuclear issue has turned the Middle East into a focal point of world politics. Along with the United States, Israel, and a few European nations, other regional nations like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Kuwait also have concerns about Iran's nuclear program. In the lack of security architecture, the Middle East's growing nuclear arsenals and energy programs will make it easier for terrorists to obtain nuclear weapons and materials (Edelman & Denis, 2013). By means of detours, errors in judgement, sabotage, and nuclear mishaps, nuclear reserves and power plants raise the possibility of both external and internal threats. International security is increasingly being threatened by nuclear weapons, which are intended to provide governments with security (Chomsky, 2007). Therefore, it is critical to address the threat by determining the elements that pose a risk to Middle Eastern nuclear security. The Middle East's perception of threats has grown as a result of the weapons and nuclear power plants' horizontal and vertical expansion. Nuclear security is vulnerable in the Middle East and it has contributed to the delivery of geopolitical concepts. Israel has widespread nuclear weapons and its nuclear arsenal is expanding with the US support, which has created major concerns for the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has also expressed its desire to achieve nuclear capability (Jordan, 2020).

In particular, Israel has declared that it faces an existential threat from Iran's nuclear program and that they have the ability to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities militarily (Khnat, 2017). Iran's nuclear facilities could become unstable if Israel attacked them. This might put the region's security in jeopardy, have a detrimental impact on the oil market, and ultimately hurt the world economy. Such remarks will worsen the instability crisis across the region while also demonstrating Iran's increased willingness, readiness, and determination to defend its security and national interests (Dalay, 2021). The strategic challenge to the regional security order posed by Iran's nuclear ambitions has international ramifications. The United States, more than any other United Nations Security Council permanent member, was convinced that Iranian goal is to acquire nuclear weapons with the objective to establish regional predominance. On the other hand, Iranian stance remains that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes which solely aimed at meeting energy requirements (Solomon, 2012).

Iran's possession of dual-use technology has presented significant challenges to the non-proliferation regime and regional stability. The situation has become even more complex due to the varied interests and concerns of both regional and international actors. Serious tensions between Iran and the United States, as well as between Iran and Gulf states—especially Saudi Arabia—have shaped the dynamics of Middle Eastern politics (Tabatabai, 2020). The US exit from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 heightened Iran's suspicions and led to an acceleration in uranium enrichment, as well as deviations from the terms of the agreement. In response, European states involved in the deal worked to reassure Iran following Trump's withdrawal decision (Taha, 2021). The assassination of prominent Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020—reportedly carried out by Israeli or American intelligence agencies—might not have a significant impact on the development of Iran's nuclear program, but it poses serious challenges for European efforts to address the issue. The election of Joe Biden sparked hope among Iranians for a

potential revival of the deal and the easing of sanctions, renewing European optimism about the Iranian nuclear program (Norman, 2021). Consequently, this study explores the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran for Middle Eastern security and regional nuclear proliferation

LITERATURE REVIEW

Under Shah, Iran started a number of contentious nuclear projects that depended on support from the US, Europe, and the president of the Atomic Energy Organisation between 1974 and 1978. When the NPT went into effect in March 1970, Iran was already carrying out nuclear research and teaching at Tehran University (Einhorn, 2014). The main focus of the research was a US-supplied five-megawatt research reactor that started up in 1967. Iran had started a comprehensive nuclear energy program by the middle of the 1970s. Shah set a goal in 1974 to use nuclear power plants to produce roughly 23,000,000 megawatts of electricity in 20 years. Iran and nuclear suppliers in the US and Europe came to a number of agreements. Iran and the Kraftwerk Union (KWU) inked a contract for the construction of a 2,012-megawatt reactor in Bushehr (Terrill, 2012). Two more reactors with a capacity of nine hundred megawatts were discussed with a French company called Framemate (Ramon, 2021). On the off chance that it is a European consortium, Iran allegedly took $1 billion out of a French uranium improvement plant that was owned by Europe in 1974. This work was put on hold for a while due to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The 1980–1981 war with Iraq depleted resources and damaged Iran's current nuclear infrastructure. Two force reactors were being worked on in Bushehr that impacted a couple of times (Quillen, 2002) after which Siemens abandoned the project.

With support from Masco, Beijing, and Islamabad, Iran's atomic program was advanced by the early 1990s when it withdrew from the Iraq War once more. Iran and China put on two impressive displays of atomically facilitated exercise in 1985 and 1990, respectively (Zhao, 2019). Iran announced in 1995 that it would cooperate with Russia to finish building a reactor at Bushehr and possibly build a uranium upgrade plant on a flexible schedule. Iran's government and illicit agreements made in the 1990s gave it the ability to make major and crucial progress in its domestic nuclear program. When the extent of its atomic program became evident in 2003, Iran began to demonstrate some proficiency in producing enhanced uranium, one of the materials needed to power atomic weapons. Innovation has advanced since a large portion of Iran's atomic tests violated an agreement with the IAEA, forcing it to provide additional information about the activity and justify its goals (Brewer, 2021). Iran's explanations and the findings of the IAEA evaluation were made public in the organization's June 2003 report (Waltz, 2012). The Iranian nuclear program is designed for two purposes. Dual-use technology's complexity makes it unclear what applications it might be put to. Although the Iranian government claims that its nuclear program is only focused on peaceful uses, the international community has technical proof that it has been attempting to develop nuclear weapons. It is thought that Iran may struggle to develop or obtain such a capability. Theoretically, a potential nuclear weapons program consists of three main parts: weapons-grade enriched uranium or plutonium, a highly developed missile delivery system, and the technology to convert the enriched uranium or plutonium into deliverable warheads. The international community is mainly convinced that Iran has shown the will and capacity to achieve advancements in all these capabilities, and hence has a clear intention of developing nuclear weapons (Yaphe, 2010).

Tehsin (2017) The report presents several pieces of evidence concerning Iran's nuclear capabilities. Iran did not reveal detailed information about its uranium imports in 1991 and provided insufficient details, raising doubts and concerns about the possession and storage of materials at undeclared locations. This is seen as contrary to its obligations under the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) safeguards agreement. In 2003, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the European Union (E3+1), and Iran engaged in extensive discussions to address the nuclear-related issues at the Natanz nuclear reactor. It was decided to stop the nuclear facility's centrifuge development. As the current President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is a conservative leader who chose to continue along the same path. This was because, even prior to the election, there was reason to believe that Iran's polonium-210 extraction experiments would be used to produce weapons. Based on their assumptions about enrichment, the IAEA expressed concerns in its report from 2005 (Thomson, 2014). Nuclear facilities, including centrifuge workshops, are monitored and protected by Iran's defense ministry. According to a Telegraph report from June 2006, Iran operated a covert project named Zirzamin, aimed at acquiring and developing weapons-grade uranium in secret underground laboratories, under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Takeyh, 2021).

According to Un-Nisa, Mustafa, Malik, and Wakil (2020), a nuclear facility was discovered in 2009 near Fordow in the province of Qom. It contains three thousand centrifuges and is capable of producing uranium suitable for use in weapons. In addition, Iran built a heavy water reactor in Arak, a uranium enrichment facility with 50,000 centrifuges at Natanz, and advanced laser equipment for an enrichment facility close to Lashkarabad city. All of this demonstrates Iran's desire to create an internal fuel cycle, which is thought to be a necessary component for the development of nuclear weapons. To increase its enrichment capacity, Iran has installed first-generation centrifuges at the Natanz enrichment facility that have a higher output rate. The Arak heavy water research facility is thought to be comparable in size to reactors used by Israel, India, and Pakistan. Such facilities could potentially be utilized to produce enriched plutonium for military purposes. However, these concerns are based on speculative assessments and interpretations from international media and intelligence reports (Waltz, 2012).

Motives behind Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions

The primary driving force behind the development of nuclear weapons capability is a state's need to address security concerns. A state will attempt to obtain nuclear weapons if it can and if it feels unsafe in a hostile environment on the regional and global levels. It may consider having nuclear weapons to be its only line of defence in a highly

dangerous regional security environment. The desire to gain status, influence, and prestige both internally and abroad can be important driving forces as well (Einhorn, 2014). Ibrahim (2021) asserts that influence will continue to be significant even if prestige is a dwindling factor in the acquisition of nuclear weapons. The main driver of nuclear proliferation during the Cold War was a state's perception of threat from its neighbours in a competitive regional strategic matrix. This perception plays a critical role in the acquisition of nuclear weapons. In addition to the security model, there is the norms model, which observes that states seek nuclear weapons to boost their prestige and address normative issues, as demonstrated by the UK and France. Moreover, states that pursue nuclear weapons to appease domestic public opinion are defined by a domestic politics model (Hussain, 2022).

According to Jordan (2020), Iranian decision-making circles clearly think in terms of the security model of acquiring nuclear weapons. They believed that the US and Israel posed serious security risks. However, Tehran's leadership asserts that their program is meant for peaceful civilian uses rather than nuclear weapons. However, in a prolonged hostile regional environment, a state like Iran would have good reason to consider nuclear weapons, given that sanctions prevented it from winning a strategic armaments race in the region and its weak economy. Iran may be forced to consider establishing a nuclear deterrent due to Israel's nuclear weapons, the Gulf States' recent normalization of relations with Israel, their strategic partnership with the US, and their massive arms build-up. Iranians might believe that deterrence and the threat of massive nuclear retaliation could curb the aggressive tendencies of their multiple adversaries in the region. This paradoxical situation has intensified the threat perceptions among major regional players, particularly Saudi Arabia. Consequently, Saudi Arabia may be exploring or acquiring nuclear technology as a response to Iran's motivations and actions in the Middle East. This development could further escalate regional tensions and contribute to an arms race, complicating the security dynamics in the region (Jafari, 2021).

The Islamic Republic of Iran aspirations to obtain nuclear weapons would not be distinct from those of other prospective nuclear weapons states, according to Huwaidin (2015). It's possible that Iranian policymakers were persuaded that having nuclear weapons would give them an advantage over possible enemies and that this non-conventional superiority would meet their security needs. Iran might also try to impose its hegemony over the area by using this superiority. Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program could stem from a number of factors, including the way that nuclear weapons states behave hypocritically and dualistically, the way that the nuclear suppliers group treats weaker states unfairly in international non-proliferation regimes, and more. Iranian aspirations are equally significant since they necessitate both diversifying energy sources and meeting energy needs. It is believed that generating energy through nuclear power could mitigate the problems associated with relying on fossil fuels, as fluctuations in fossil fuel prices can create pressures on energy production and supply. Bugos (2019) argues that one of the fundamental economic motivations behind Iran's nuclear power strategy is the desire for low-cost and clean energy. This consideration of economic efficiency and energy security is a key driver in Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology.

According to some other researchers, Iranian nuclear ambitions are primarily motivated by a desire for prestige. Iran has long been proud of its rich past, which was fueled by the conquests and glories of its empires. Iran had a wonderful experience with Persian imperialism in both the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. Iranians possess a distinct sense of dignity that they owe to the Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus the Great in pre-Islamic times and a number of kings and sultans in the Islamic era. Remarkably, the governments that emerged following the Iranian revolution permit certain mythical and customary festivities, as Iranians do hold a sense of pride in their historical heritage (Thomson, 2014; Blumberg, 2022). For instance, Iran's theocratic governments forbid people from promoting Cyrus the Great Day, which is celebrated in October. Nevertheless, Iranians and a large number of political figures support the memorial days because they are proud of their civilization. Iran still aspires to greatness and status and sees itself as the guardian of ancient customs dating back thousands of years. The Iranian nuclear program has the potential to restore their lost glory as a Persian source of pride in their Islamic identity, in addition to providing them with a means of achieving prestige. According to Patrikarakos, Iran's status as a nuclear power can offer it a sense of dignity and a level of prestige comparable to that of other nuclear powers and its peers. He further notes that regardless of the regime type and the leadership, from the Shah to Rouhani, has attached power, prestige and progress with nuclear capability (Huang, 2016).

The ideology of Iran is a significant contributing factor to the explanation of its nuclear ambitions. Every government that has come after the Iranian revolution has adhered to its revolutionary strategy, which is largely focused on Iranian culture and divinity. Historically, revolutionary ideas have called for new political, social, and economic trends and structures in addition to a shift in the global pattern of state-to-state relations (Bugos, 2019). From this angle, Iran views Western powers with scepticism and believes that their selective approach to Iran stems from its refusal to follow US policies. Iran is especially pessimistic about the United States and other European countries' application of double standards when it comes to the development and acquisition of uranium enrichment. Comparing Iran to other nuclear-armed states like Israel, Iran claims that it has been treated unfairly on this matter. The concepts of independence, justice, fair play, and opposition to hegemony and imperialism have influenced the ideological stance of the conservative Iranian leadership, which has given Iran's nuclear policy a new focus and course (Aljazeera, 2021).

The leadership in Tehran appears to be convinced that nuclearizing Iran would allay its security worries and grant it a historic status in the international community a significance that is ideologically significant in accordance with the tenets of the Islamic revolution. The supreme leader of Iran is also of the opinion that nuclear deterrence only serves to protect Iran's Islamic revolution from the schemes of adversaries such as the United States, Israel, and others. Khamenei reaffirmed that Iran's nuclear capability will bolster God's soldiers and act as a deterrent to God's adversaries (Economist, 2021). Iran has a reason to pursue nuclear deterrent capability because of the regional security environment, power imbalances, and the influence and presence of major powers in the area. Bowen and Brewer highlighted that Iran's goal to obtain nuclear weapons capability is primarily driven by the need to maintain security on the outside. They claim that there are numerous external threats facing Iran, and that the leadership is worried about its survival,

particularly the survival of the regime, due to foreign meddling and the perception of possible external aggression. Bahgat also portrays the same point of view, that it is the security matrix in the region that has played a crucial role in the thinking of Iranian policy making circles that indigenous nuclear weapons capability would satisfy their security needs (Hobbs & Mathew, 2012).

Implications of Nuclear-Armed Iran on the Middle East

The Iran Nuclear Deal represents a dramatic shift in a lot of areas, not only internationally but also, and perhaps more significantly, in the dynamics of power in the region. Given that the Middle East is a volatile region susceptible to both internal and external influences, opinions on the deal have been divided. There is fear, shock, and rage; for others, it's a question of satisfaction and, in a way, a sense of domination. However, one thing is certain: despite the obvious consequences it bears, this agreement will undoubtedly change some of the interactions and policies among the states in the region, which will ultimately lead to the creation of new realities. Perhaps these will then bring some changes to how the international order looks upon Middle East and Iran (Saunders, 2013).

According to Iran's former president, Hashmi Rafsanjani, who applauded the nuclear agreement, America wishes to put the past behind it and admit that it has done reasonably well in the nuclear talks so far (Fraser, 2015). Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif even suggested nuclear cooperation with the Arab States and the creation of a regional platform with Nazir Hussain and Sannia Abdullah in an effort to address and peacefully resolve security issues in the region. According to him, a regional platform would cover civil nuclear cooperation as well as Syria and Yemen. This could be achieved by technical cooperation among the Islamic nations in the region and would involve central nuclear enrichment to general nuclear fuel (Takeyh, 2022). But Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, denounced the deal as 'historic mistake' which makes the region and world at large more dangerous (Ephron, 2020). Saudi King Salman raised concerns over the verification and lifting of sanctions. The US Secretary of State, John Kerry did try to assuage the fears of Arab States in lieu of strict compliance and verifications (Katouzian, 2020).

As a result, the implications touch on not only the diplomatic front but also the geopolitical, strategic, and economic fronts. However, it is impossible to predict how much this scenario will affect any particular state because there are a number of variables that have the power to both forge and destroy diplomatic ties. However, because most Middle Eastern states interact with one another in a certain way, almost all of them will be impacted in some way. Particularly with nations like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran that are thought to control the majority of Middle Eastern dynamics. There is no doubt that it was an exceptional deal forged between uncommon parties and it will bring some unusual end results (Shay, 2018).

The Possibility of Regional Nuclear Proliferation

The challenge of security instability poses a significant risk, as regular conflicts could unintentionally escalate into nuclear ones. This risk is heightened by the potential for conventional warfare to become nuclear when atomic weapons are involved. It is not surprising that speculation about such scenarios is intense, and even minor provocations could potentially escalate a routine conflict into a nuclear confrontation, particularly in unstable environments where atomic weapons are present. The situation in the Middle East exemplifies this instability and could inadvertently lead to a nuclear exchange between Iran and Israel, akin to the tensions observed in South Asia. In the heat of a conventional conflict, parties may be tempted to mobilize their nuclear arsenals, potentially leading to catastrophic outcomes. The threat of nuclear proliferation only increases the likelihood of such disasters and nuclear threats. As the number of nuclear states grows, so does the risk of accidental or unauthorized nuclear use, making the global security environment more precarious (Un-Nisa, Mustafa, Malik & Wakil, 2020).

Proliferation breeds more proliferation is an old adage. Regional rivals will acquire nuclear weapons if a nation does (Economist, 2021). One of the most often mentioned risks connected to Iran's nuclear aspirations is the possibility that an armed Iran could start a chain reaction of regional proliferation. Former US President Barack Obama famously stated that other countries in the region would almost definitely feel pressured to acquire nuclear weapons if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons. Additionally, representatives from the UK claimed that Iran's nuclear aspirations would probably spark a new Cold War in the Middle East (Hobbs & Moran, 2012). The three nations that are frequently brought up as potential members of the nuclear club after Iran are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. For instance, Haaretz senior correspondent Ari Shavit contended in a March 2012 New York Times op-ed that an Iranian atomic bomb will compel Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt to obtain their own atomic bombs. Thus, in the world's most volatile region, a multi-polar nuclear arena will be established (Khnat, 2017). However, more investigation is needed into the widely held belief that Iranian nuclearization will unavoidably lead to regional proliferation. Reactive proliferation has been extremely uncommon in the past. Furthermore, every ambitious state faces significant risk when considering nuclear power in the current environment. It is important to go into great detail about each candidate state:

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia might feel compelled to develop its own nuclear program if Iran successfully creates a nuclear bomb. On July 14, 2015, a nuclear agreement was signed between Iran, the US, and other major global powers. This agreement faced criticism from various quarters, including the US and Iranian hardliners, as well as from other regional actors such as some Arab nations. From Saudi Arabia's perspective, this deal appears to endorse Iran's nuclear ambitions. As a key rival of Iran, Saudi Arabia announced plans to initiate its own nuclear program, including the construction of at least 16 nuclear reactors, with the goal of addressing this perceived imbalance (Samaan, 2018). The kingdom has expressed concerns about the potential acquisition of nuclear weapons from external sources. Given Saudi Arabia's history of secretive nuclear activities, it is plausible that the country might pursue the development of a Sunni

nuclear capability as a countermeasure to Iran's Shiite nuclear ambitions.

Allowing Iran to acquire a nuclear bomb is perceived as a significant threat to global security and could lead to further proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Despite these concerns, Iran has used the US invasion of Iraq to advance its own nuclear ambitions. Experts believe that permitting Iran to develop nuclear weapons would likely prompt Saudi Arabia to pursue its own nuclear program (Huwaidin, 2015). Saudi Arabia fears becoming a mere pawn in Iran's quest to assert dominance in the Islamic world. By establishing itself as a nuclear power, Iran could gain an unparalleled level of influence, which other leading nations would be reluctant to challenge.

Saudi Arabia, a staunch adversary of Iran, is not overly concerned if Iran were to use a nuclear bomb against it, Israel, or the United States. However, the principle of deterrence remains in place, and Saudi Arabia is unlikely to accept the diplomatic, political, and military influence that Iran could gain if allowed to develop nuclear weapons. In response to the growing threat of Iranian nuclear proliferation and the provocative statements and policies of Ahmadinejad, Saudi Arabia has been compelled to reassess its position in the Middle East and explore its own nuclear options. This situation raises important questions about the measures that could be taken to provide a global counterbalance against Iran, particularly if the Iranian government threatens the economic interests of oil-exporting nations (Yazicioglu, 2019).

If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia would face significant, though potentially more intense, pressures similar to those experienced by Egypt. As a major power in the Persian Gulf region, Saudi Arabia naturally competes with Iran, especially following the fall of Saddam Hussein. Saudi leaders have long perceived Iran as a regional adversary, and since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Tehran has become increasingly central to Riyadh's strategic calculations. Currently, the Kingdom views the Islamic Republic as its primary geopolitical rival (Taha, 2021). Iran's Shia revolutionary leadership has also regarded the Saudi monarchy as a key pillar of the regional Pax Americana. The Saudi family's control over Mecca and Medina, along with its support for the ultra-conservative Sunni Wahhabi doctrine, has been particularly provocative to the Islamic Republic, which sees itself as the rightful leader of the Islamic world. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was especially antagonistic toward the House of Saud, accusing them of distorting the true spirit of Islam and labeling them as infidels unworthy of managing the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (Nader, 2013). More broadly, Saudi leaders fear that Iranian nuclear capabilities would advance the Islamic Republic's ambitions for regional dominance. For over forty years, Saudi Arabia and Iran have vied for regional influence, with the House of Saud positioning itself as the capital of Sunni Islam and a conservative defender of the status quo, while the Iranian regime has championed Shia interests and promoted resistance against Israel and the West. This ongoing Saudi-Iranian cold war has manifested in various forms and across multiple fronts, including the Iran-Iraq War, and current proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and even Afghanistan (Taha, 2021).

Saudi Arabia has long sought to develop its own nuclear capabilities as a countermeasure to Iran's nuclear ambitions. The Kingdom has openly declared this intention, informing the US as early as 2009 that it would pursue nuclear capability if Iran crossed the threshold. In 2018, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman stated in an interview with CBS that while Saudi Arabia does not currently wish to acquire nuclear weapons, it would inevitably pursue them if Iran developed a nuclear bomb (Economist, 2021). King Abdullah had previously expressed a similar stance in 2012. However, such statements should be viewed within the broader context of Saudi Arabia's strategy to encourage the US to adopt a more assertive approach toward Iran. These warnings are reminiscent of the 2006 declarations from Riyadh threatening military intervention in Iraq if the US did not take stronger action against sectarian violence and Iran's influence (Shay, 2018). Many experts argue that the likelihood of Saudi reactive proliferation is lower than commonly assumed (Taha, 2021). This perspective aligns with Etel Solingen's theory on the relationship between economic liberalism and nuclear restraint. Solingen posits that political coalitions supporting economic liberalization are more likely to embrace compromise nuclear policies that do not jeopardize their economic interests. In this context, Saudi Arabia's focus on fostering foreign investment is significant. The Kingdom has developed extensive trade relationships with numerous international partners, and by 2012, was recognized as one of the leading global economies for business-friendly regulations. The Saudi government has prioritized foreign investment to reduce dependence on oil and gas, create local employment opportunities, and revitalize the private sector. Given this emphasis, acquiring nuclear weapons would have profound implications, potentially hindering economic progress and leading to increased international isolation, which would disrupt the Kingdom's trade relations and economic growth (Hobbs & Moran, 2012).

Moreover, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia would engage in a nuclear arms race, as doing so could exacerbate its strategic challenges rather than alleviate them. Pursuing nuclear weapons would complicate the Kingdom's national security, risk damaging its relationship with the United States, harm its international reputation, and potentially lead to global sanctions (Shay, 2018). Saudi Arabia's economy is heavily dependent on its petroleum sector, which, in 2021, accounted for nearly 87 percent of budget revenue, 42 percent of gross domestic product, and 90 percent of export earnings. Consequently, the Kingdom could be highly susceptible to energy-related sanctions (Economist, 2021). Compared to Iran, Saudi Arabia is less economically self-sufficient and lacks the infrastructure necessary to support a nuclear weapons program and the associated delivery systems. Developing its own nuclear forces would thus be a lengthy and challenging process, leaving Saudi Arabia vulnerable during the interim period. Given the substantial risks and costs associated with such a move, it is likely that Riyadh would prefer to seek a nuclear security guarantee from either Pakistan or the United States (Mallard, Sabet & Sun, 2020). While the rationale for seeking a US nuclear guarantee is clear, Pakistan's role requires further explanation. Saudi Arabia has historically provided significant financial support to Pakistan, including a $1 billion contribution that helped sustain Pakistan's nuclear program, particularly during times of international sanctions. This cooperation has fueled speculation about a potential arrangement where Saudi Arabia could access Pakistani nuclear technology if needed (Shay, 2018). However, Pakistan would face immense pressure to avoid transferring complete nuclear weapons to another nation. Additionally, a US nuclear guarantee might be more appealing to Saudi Arabia than a potential Pakistani alternative, given the extensive economic and military interests the US has in ensuring Saudi security (Taha, 2021). The United States has demonstrated its commitment to Saudi security

through various means, including military involvement, and the Saudis are accustomed to robust security cooperation with the US. Thus, it is likely that Saudi Arabia would favor a US nuclear guarantee over pursuing its own nuclear program.

Turkey

Turkey is also likely to be concerned about the potential for a nuclear weapons capability in neighboring Iran, due to both security and prestige considerations. In response to these concerns and to reduce its reliance on imported energy, Turkey has embarked on a significant nuclear energy initiative. As part of President Erdogan's Vision 2023, which marks the centennial of modern Turkey, the country has committed to building three nuclear power plants. This effort began in earnest in 2007 with the passage of The Law on Construction and Operation of Nuclear Power Plants and Energy Sale, signaling Turkey's intent to develop its nuclear energy sector. In early April 2018, President Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin officially launched the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant during a ceremony in Ankara. The Akkuyu project is based on an intergovernmental agreement signed between Russia and Turkey in May 2010, highlighting the close collaboration between the two nations on this energy initiative (Un-Zaman, 2011). This project reflects Turkey's strategic approach to enhancing its energy independence while also positioning itself within the broader regional power dynamics.

Despite the historical differences between Turkey and Iran following the Islamic Revolution, the turn of the millennium saw a shift in their bilateral relations. In recent years, Turkey and Iran have built robust energy and economic partnerships. Notably, Iran is Turkey's second-largest supplier of natural gas, after Azerbaijan. Additionally, Turkey has shown a degree of sympathy toward Tehran's nuclear ambitions. In 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan criticized Western nations for applying a "double standard" in their treatment of Iran's nuclear program. Furthermore, in 2010, Turkey voted against imposing additional sanctions on Iran at the United Nations Security Council (Hobbs & Moran, 2012). Turkey's strategic positioning is also influenced by its NATO membership, which it has held since 1952. Under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement, Turkey, alongside Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, hosts US tactical nuclear weapons. At Incirlik Air Base, Turkey stores approximately 50 B61 nuclear gravity bombs, the highest number among NATO states (Bugos, 2019). Consequently, Turkey benefits from the US nuclear umbrella and does not need to pursue its own nuclear weapons program. Moreover, Turkey is keenly pursuing European Union (EU) membership, which remains a significant political priority for Ankara. The Turkish government is likely to avoid actions that could jeopardize its relationship with European powers, such as developing its own nuclear arsenal (Shay, 2018).

Despite the overall stance of Turkey, under President Erdogan, there have been indications of interest in nuclear weapons. In 2006, General Hilmi Özkök, Turkey's Chief of Staff at the time, alluded to the nuclear option in a statement regarding the security challenges posed by countries with or suspected of having weapons of mass destruction. He highlighted the Middle East as a significant and pressing threat to Turkey. General Özkök suggested that if diplomatic efforts by the international community failed to resolve these issues, Turkey might face critical decisions in the near future. He expressed concern that without taking decisive action, Turkey risked losing its strategic advantage in the region (Yazıcıoğlu, 2019).

Turkey's interest in developing nuclear capability can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Turkey's relationship with Iran has historically been marked by rivalry, driven by competing expansionist and religious ambitions. This tension has persisted despite various diplomatic efforts (Hobbs & Moran, 2012). The outbreak of the Arab Spring further exacerbated this rivalry, as the upheaval and demands for change heightened the strains in Turkish-Iranian relations. The two nations have clashed on several fronts (Nader, 2013). A significant source of tension has been Turkey's support for the opposition against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Given that Syria is Iran's only significant ally in the Middle East, the potential downfall of Assad represents a major strategic setback for Iran. Such a development could enhance Turkey's influence in the region, further intensifying the rivalry between the two countries (Bensaid, 2020).

In 2015, Turkey openly supported Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and called for Iran's withdrawal from the country. Turkey also joined Saudi Arabia's so-called Islamic military alliance against terrorism, which was perceived by many as targeting Iran. During this period, President Erdogan accused Iran of seeking to dominate the Middle East, a goal he claimed was contrary to Turkey's interests (Dalay, 2021). Publicly, Turkey has minimized the perceived threats of Iran's nuclear program, emphasizing that Iran has the right to develop a peaceful nuclear program. Despite this, the differences between the United States and Turkey on the Iranian issue primarily revolve around tactics rather than strategic objectives. Both nations aim to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power, but they differ on the most effective methods to achieve this goal. Turkey has traditionally opposed sanctions against Iran, although it has reluctantly implemented UN sanctions due to international pressure. This stance is partly informed by Turkey's negative experiences with sanctions during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. At that time, Turkey faced significant economic losses due to sanctions imposed on Iraq, one of its key trading partners. Learning from this history, Turkish officials now believe that quiet diplomacy is likely to be more effective in moderating Iranian behavior over the long term than overt isolation or punitive measures (Bugos, 2019).

Secondly, there is debate regarding the United States' commitment and capability to defend its regional partners against a nuclear-armed Iran. Some argue that the U.S. might be questioned on both its willingness and ability to provide effective defense in such a scenario (Bensaid, 2020). Conversely, others note that although President Erdogan previously advocated against nuclear weapons in the region, recent geopolitical shifts have altered Turkey's position. For example, the crisis surrounding the S-400 missile system and the exclusion of Turkey from the F-35 program have impacted Turkey's strategic calculations (Yazıcıoğlu, 2019). Turkey has claimed that it sought to acquire the U.S. Patriot missile system to address its domestic defense needs but was not offered the system by the U.S. This led Turkey to pursue the Russian S-400 missile systems instead (Fraser, 2019). The experience has led Turkey to question the reliability

of the U.S. as a defense partner. Turkish officials have argued that the S-400 system better meets Turkey's security needs compared to the Patriot missiles, which they found to be defective (Bensaid, 2020).

Thirdly, the European Union's executive body stated in October 2021 that Turkey's bid to join the EU had effectively stalled due to significant democratic deficiencies. The EU criticized Ankara for failing to advance the reforms necessary for membership, highlighting ongoing concerns about the decline in democratic standards, the rule of law, fundamental rights, and judicial independence. The situation was seen as worsening, with little progress made on addressing these critical issues (Al Jazeera, 2021). The Economist referred to the accession process as essentially 'dead,' noting that many European voters view the prospect of Turkey joining the EU with apprehension (Daily Sabah, 2021). This growing disconnect between Turkey and the EU suggests a waning of the bloc's influence over Turkey, particularly regarding its nuclear ambitions. As Turkey faces diminishing prospects for EU membership, it is increasingly motivated to achieve defense independence. President Erdogan has expressed a commitment to reducing reliance on foreign defense technology, with nuclear capability seen as a key step towards self-sufficiency in defense (Bensaid, 2020).

Erdogan has already expressed his desperation on developing the 'caliphate atom bomb' to fulfil his neo-Ottoman aspiration. The emergence of a China-Pakistan-Turkey nexus on nuclear proliferation and Pakistan coordinating on capacity building of the three countries have already been flagged by watchdogs and media (Fassihi, 2020); given Erdogan's dream of reviving Ottoman time, his vision of Turkey as regional power in the Middle East, and nuclear arms as a source of national prestige Turkey has to join the regional nuclear race. Otherwise, Turkey will remain second class a position that Erdogan cannot and will not accept (Shay, 2018; Yazicioglu, 2019).

Egypt

Egypt and Iran are natural rivals in the region due to their similar geographical sizes, historical imperial legacies, and contrasting religious identities—primarily Sunni Arab versus Shia Persian. This rivalry has manifested through a history of contentious relations, such as Egypt's support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's backing of Hamas and Hezbollah, the Egypt-Israel peace treaty signed in 1979, and Egypt's strategic partnership with the United States (Hobbs & Moran, 201). Additionally, Egypt's historical leadership in the pan-Arab movement and its position as the most populous Arab country have created expectations for it to develop a nuclear weapons program (Taha, 2021). Given this context, it is understandable that Egypt has consistently been wary of Iran's nuclear ambitions. Cairo has hinted to U.S. officials that it might be compelled to initiate its own nuclear weapons program should Iran succeed in acquiring nuclear capabilities. The prospect of Iran achieving nuclear status undoubtedly raises concerns for Egypt, driven by both prestige and security considerations.

Egypt once had an active nuclear energy research program, which raised concerns about the potential for it to evolve into a nuclear weapons program. The country possesses the technological and scientific capabilities necessary for such advancements and has recently renewed its focus on civilian nuclear energy. In 2015, Egypt signed an agreement with ROSATOM, the Russian state nuclear energy corporation, to construct a nuclear power plant at Al Dabaa, located on the northern coast, west of Alexandria. This agreement marks the culmination of nearly six decades of discussions and plans aimed at harnessing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Currently, Egypt operates two research reactors (Taha, 2021). Some analysts suggest that, without active U.S. diplomacy and strategic assurances, Egypt might be inclined to pursue its own nuclear weapons program in response to regional developments (Oswald, 2021).

Egypt faces several significant obstacles in pursuing a nuclear weapons program. First, the country is heavily reliant on the United States for conventional weaponry. Should Egypt decide to develop nuclear weapons, it is likely that the U.S. would suspend this military assistance, creating substantial political turmoil within Egypt. Second, Egypt is economically dependent on foreign aid, with the U.S. being a major contributor. In 2020, Egypt received USD 1.43 billion in foreign assistance from the U.S., making it the third-largest recipient after Israel and Jordan (Oswald, 2021). A move towards nuclear weapons could jeopardize this economic support. Third, with Israel already possessing nuclear weapons and Iran potentially on the brink of becoming a nuclear state, Egypt would face both conventional and nuclear vulnerabilities during the period it sought to develop its own nuclear arsenal. Historically, Egypt has employed a strategy of nuclear diplomacy, leveraging the Non-Proliferation Treaty and other international platforms to press for the dismantlement of Israel's nuclear arsenal over the past four decades. Given this longstanding approach, it is unlikely that the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran would lead Egypt to abandon its diplomatic strategy. Moreover, Egypt has not engaged in major military conflicts with Iran nor is it involved in territorial disputes with the country (Hobbs & Moran, 2012).

Furthermore, while Egypt considers Iran a regional competitor, it does not perceive Iran's nuclear ambitions as an existential threat (Taha, 2021). Consequently, the security challenge posed by a nuclear-armed Iran is arguably less severe compared to other threats Egypt has encountered. Therefore, it is unlikely that Egypt would allocate its limited financial resources to developing nuclear weapons, jeopardize its peace treaty with Israel, or face international sanctions by pursuing such a program. In the authors' view, Egypt is not positioned to bear the substantial risks and costs associated with nuclear proliferation. Instead, it appears more feasible for the United States and the European Union to offer a combination of assurances and incentives that would be acceptable to Egypt. During the Cold War, the U.S. extended the protection of its nuclear deterrent to several allies who did not possess nuclear weapons (Taha, 2021).

It is likely that the United States would extend its nuclear umbrella over its key Middle Eastern allies if necessary. This approach mirrors past U.S. strategies during the Cold War, such as its nuclear assurances to South Korea and Japan after China acquired nuclear weapons. Similarly, South Korea opted not to develop its own nuclear arsenal despite North Korea's nuclear capabilities, due to the protection offered by the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Extending this security guarantee to Arab allies would also serve U.S. interests by reinforcing its position with Gulf oil exporters (Taha, 2021). Additionally, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explicitly mentioned that the United States would consider providing a "defense umbrella" for the Middle East in such scenarios. Consequently, Egypt would have little reason to fear the nuclearization of Shia Iran (Thomson, 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

The uneven allocation of power in the Middle East at the moment has forced Iran to pursue the development of nuclear weapons. It is the best strategy for ensuring the safety and continued existence of the government and state. However, it has sparked conjecture about the possible responses of other Middle Eastern nations. One concern is that a nuclear arms race in the region could be sparked by Iranian nuclearization. This scenario, which is consistent with offensive realist theory, implies that nations like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or any other Gulf state would create their own nuclear weapons programs in order to maximize their power capacities. This anxiety is rooted in the thought that placing additional nuclear weapons in such a volatile area could lead to even more catastrophic outcomes. It is premature to fear unintentional escalation of consequences for a number of reasons. A diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear problem is widely expected to eventually lead to increased collaboration between Iran and the West as well as among the Gulf states. However, there are worries that the JCPOA could short- to medium-term escalate tensions in the region by focusing solely on the nuclear issue and ignoring non-nuclear concerns about Iran. For a lasting resolution of the nuclear issue and long-term peace in the region, therefore, a regional security framework that considers the concerns of all parties, both nuclear and non-nuclear, is desperately needed. While it is unlikely that such a framework will be realized in the current circumstances especially while the wars in Yemen, Syria, and Russia continue world powers, especially the United States, will need to press their allies to make the goal a reality. In this way, the UN can be a significant facilitator.

Coercive diplomacy was successful in reaching the Iranian Nuclear Agreement, which was signed on July 14, 2015, between Iran and the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany). From the start of the Iranian nuclear crisis, the United States and its major international allies have extrapolated Iran's 'alleged' aspirations to obtain nuclear weapons and have demanded that it stop and abandon its weapons development path. Iran, on the other hand, dismissed these accusations as mere accusations and went on to build advanced centrifuges, a heavy water reactor at Arak, and subterranean undeclared infrastructure in order to finish its fuel cycle. Sanctions were used to convey the threat, and ideas for limited military strikes were being considered. In view of the findings made in the course of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Iran-US relations matters most and if they remain enemies, unsubstantial improvements in international relations in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East are unlikely to take place. The UN should be more proactive and assertive in supporting efforts aimed at restoring peace and stability to the Middle East, including a possible regional security framework.
2. America's allies should place more emphasis on strengthening their ability to address the various threats posed by Iran toward their security, whether it enhance cyber security, regional maritime security cooperation, or deterring radical Shia factions from exacerbating sectarianism in the region.

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