

Iran and the Bomb

Events: Iran's pursuit of civil nuclear power dates back to the 1950s, when it took place with the support of the USA and under the UN's 'Atoms for Peace' programme. After Iran's 1979 'Islamic Revolution', a clandestine nuclear programme was disbanded, although small-scale research into nuclear weapons may have been restarted during the Iran-Iraq War. The 'exposure' in 2002 of Iranian nuclear facilities in Natanz and Arak convinced many in the USA, Israel and elsewhere that Iran's civil nuclear programme was being used as a cover for the development of nuclear weapons. Less than full cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) inspection regime also led to escalating economic sanctions being imposed on Iran. The launching in 2009 of Iran's first domestically-made satellite into orbit not only gave Iran an official presence in space but also provoked concerns about the possible development of long-range ballistic missiles. In 2010, Iran announced that it had become a 'nuclear state', based on the ability to produce uranium enriched up to 20 per cent, intended for medical usages.

Significance: The possibility of Iran building nuclear weapons continues to be at the forefront of debates about global security, despite assurances on the issue given by Hassan Rouhani since his election as Iranian president in 2013. But what would be the consequences of Iran getting the Bomb? Does the prospect of Iran becoming the world's tenth nuclear power pose profound and unacceptable risks to regional and global security? At least three major concerns have been raised about Iran 'going nuclear'. In the first place, a nuclear Iran would constitute a threat to the very existence of Israel. It is claimed that this is because the politico-religious nature of the Iranian regime makes it both an implacable enemy of Israel and immune to the conventional logic of nuclear deterrence. A first-strike nuclear attack by Iran on Israel, almost regardless of its consequences, can therefore not be ruled out. Short of a full-scale attack, Iran may pass on nuclear weapons to groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which could be used against Israel. Second, the advent of a nuclear Iran would deeply upset regional stability, transforming the balance of power in the Middle East and encouraging states such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia



to acquire nuclear weapons in order to prevent Iran becoming the regional hegemon. Third, a nuclear Iran would pose a threat to the USA, either through the possibility of an intercontinental ballistic strike, or through the support an emboldened Iran may give to anti-American terrorism around the world.

On the other hand, it can be argued that such fears are either greatly exaggerated or based on fundamental misunderstandings. Instead of seeking nuclear weapons for offensive purposes, Iran may be motivated more by a fear of both Israel (which has enjoyed a nuclear monopoly in the Middle East, probably since the 1960s) and the USA, underpinned by a history of adverse treatment by western powers (especially the UK) dating back to the nineteenth century. Moreover, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons may improve, rather than inflame, relations with Israel, as a nuclear balance of power tends to engender more responsible and risk-averse behaviour by all parties. Similarly, it is by no means clear that a nuclear Iran would spark a nuclear arms race across the Middle East, since states such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia did not initiate nuclear weapons programmes while Israel stood as the region's sole nuclear power; and, anyway, if regional nuclear proliferation did occur, it may generate greater stability rather than instability (Waltz 2012). Finally, if the logic of nuclear deterrence effectively rules out an Iranian attack (whether conventional or nuclear) on Israel, such an attack on the enormously more powerful USA is surely unthinkable.