

# Chapter 23

## Regional Rivalries and Their Implications for the Security and Nuclear Non-proliferation Regimes



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In this note I will consider two regions where the risks of nuclear proliferation and of possible nuclear use are particularly relevant. These two regions are the Middle East and South Asia. I would not discuss here the situation of North East Asia and the crisis of the US-Russia arms control regime, that are also a very relevant part of a global “nuclear” picture, that is worrisome on many aspects. Also I need to add that the nuclear problems are themselves part of a global situation where conflicts, antagonistic attitude, economic warfare and internal unrests are very much on the rise. Some remarks have been added here about the wars that are affecting in particular the Middle East. These are not easy times.

*Risks of Nuclear Proliferation coupled with instability and wars in the Middle East*—The discussion about eliminating the presence of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, as well as the possibility of introducing new ones, has been going on for about five decades. In 1974 Iran and Egypt proposed to create a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. In 1995 the Review and Extension Conference of the NPT “noting the danger of nuclear proliferation, especially in areas of tension” declared to “endorse the aims and objectives of the Middle East peace process and recognizes that efforts in this regard, as well as other efforts, contribute to, inter alia, a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons as well as other weapons of mass destruction”.<sup>1</sup> The above declaration was a key element that guaranteed the approval of the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995.

In the conclusions of the 2010 NPT review conference, it is stated that “The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the co-sponsors of the 1995 Resolution, in consultation with the States of the region, will convene a conference in 2012, to be attended by all States of the Middle East, on the establishment of a Middle East zone

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<sup>1</sup>Resolution on the Middle East (1995 NPT Review Conference).

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free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by the States of the region, and with the full support and engagement of the nuclear-weapon States. The 2012 Conference shall take as its terms of reference the 1995 Resolution". We all know that this conference was never convened in 2012 or in the following years.

Israel is, up to now, the only Middle Eastern state that possesses nuclear weapons. Israel is of course not a member of the NPT. Israel, while refusing to participate in the proposed 2012 conference (or in any similar initiative<sup>2</sup>), stressed the fact that the elimination of nuclear weapons from the region should not be disconnected from a general discussion about enforcing or strengthening the general security of the region. Yet, a lasting security for all in the Middle East cannot be achieved without the resolution of the Palestinian issue, and Israel refuses the two-state solution or any meaningful accommodation with the Palestinians.

The questions we would like to ask here are: (1) Has the risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East been reduced? (2) Has the general security of the region improved? (3) Are nuclear risks in the (extended) region decreasing? I am afraid that the answers to these questions are in general negative. And unless some steps are taken to pacify the situation, the dangers will increase possibly to a critical level.

*Present risks of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East*—Let us start with the Iranian nuclear deal a.k.a. the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). It was an excellent deal as it was putting all nuclear activities of Iran under close scrutiny of the IAEA. And this was the most important element. Moreover, it was limiting the level of enrichment of Uranium, the production of Plutonium in heavy water nuclear reactor(s), the number and the efficiency of centrifuges, forbidding reprocessing, etc. Iran was subjected to many constraints that are not applied to any other country, that has a peaceful nuclear energy program. Iran accepted these very severe constraints, in exchange for the removal of the sanctions and the access to the financial and commercial international market that would be very important in promoting economic development. Iran, in particular, was and is interested in selling oil. When President Trump decided to abandon the JCPOA and to reinstate the full array of sanctions, this created a chain reaction that led to the impossibility for Iran to have a sanction-free environment, even though all other signatories of the JCPOA, but the US, did not formally abandon the agreement. The key issue was of course the problem of secondary sanctions imposed by the US on companies and entities that did not abide by the US sanction regime. The EU tried to create a mechanism (INSTEX) that in principle could allow to preservation of economic interactions with Iran, despite the US sanctions. But as the Iranians clearly pointed out, up to now, there is "no money in INSTEX", the list of goods that can be exchanged with Iran is limited, export of Iranian oil is not guaranteed by INSTEX, and so on. The present Iranian Government, that supported the JCPOA, has not been able to deliver the result of opening Iran economically and financially to the outside world. And this has been visibly noticed by the more conservative opponents to the present government. The consequence of the sanctions on the quality of life of the Iranian people is

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<sup>2</sup>The last of these initiatives has been the Conference held at the UN in New York (November 2019).

severe, as it has been shown recently by the popular revolts that happened after the doubling of the price of gasoline. Hence other sectors of the Iranian leadership may be interested in promoting a more aggressive attitude towards that part of the international community that is pressuring Iran, despite the “good will” showed by Iran in accepting the JCPOA. One year after the US exiting from the JCPOA, Iran decided to increase slightly the level of enrichment allowed by the JCPOA (from 3.67 to 5%) and to keep in Iran a larger quantity of enriched uranium. This has been a clear message that Iran wanted to convey to the signatories of the JCPOA. It should be noted that paragraph 36 and 37 of the JCPOA recognizes the right of Iran to exceed the limit set by the JCPOA itself, if the sanction system will not be eliminated or reduced as stated in the JCPOA. As the Iranians clarified openly, this exceeding the limits set by the JCPOA, is fully reversible if the European (and the other) countries that are still member of the JCPOA, will help maintaining the economic and financial opening with Iran. Otherwise other steps in the nuclear area could be taken by Iran. This may increase the possibility of Iran acquiring an effective military nuclear capability. At this point, other countries inside or outside the region can decide to attack the places of Iranian nuclear activities, generating a conflict with possibly very severe consequences. Finally, the possibility of Iran exiting the JCPOA and even the NPT itself is somehow discussed in Tehran and should not be considered as an empty threat. Although, Iran has stated on several occasions that it is committed to the Fatwa forbidding acquisition and use of nuclear weapons, it has to be seen what will happen in the future if the threats against Iran keep increasing.

Other countries in the region are developing (civilian) nuclear energy programs. Of course, we know that access to civilian nuclear energy is an “inalienable right” for all the NPT countries. The problem arises when, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, the country does not accept the additional protocol with the IAEA and does not accept any specific limits to its nuclear activities. We all know that there is no clear-cut distinction between civilian and military nuclear programs. The key issues are the level of enrichment and, mainly, the international control over nuclear activities (by IAEA). Setting a system of centrifuges that can perform any required tasks maybe not easy. But if one combines instruments provided by some states with some technical (engineering) assistance provided by other nations (such as Pakistan e.g. as far as this region is concerned), then the result in terms of risks of proliferation can be serious. Saudi Arabia said very clearly that if Iran develop a military nuclear capability, they will do the same. The US has announced that it is willing to help the Saudi (civilian) nuclear efforts. Hence the risks of further nuclear proliferation in the region of conflicts not to be underestimated.

All in all we can safely say that, under the Trump presidency, the U.S. has stimulated in various ways the possible nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, by killing the JCPOA, by supporting other countries that are planning to develop nuclear activities and by keeping refraining from pressuring Israel to participate to the meetings addressing the issue of a Middle Eastern zone free of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

As far as other Weapons of Mass destructions are concerned, notice that the Middle East is the only region that, in recent times, saw the systematic use of chemical weapons (in Syria, Iraq, and Iran) and this is far from being reassuring.

*Increasing tensions and instability in the Middle East*—The Israeli-Palestinian antagonism reached recently new heights. Abu Mazen suspended all existing agreements with Israel. The situation in Gaza is catastrophic for the civilian as it has always been in the last ten years: Gaza is like a large prison camp where we had thousands of civilian deaths and the large-scale destruction of the civilian infrastructure. Israel declared that the settlements in Palestine should be part of Israel. Moreover Trump declared that Jerusalem should be the location of the US Embassy.

The war in Syria, that caused up to now more than 400,000 deaths, is far from being over despite the collapse of ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. ISIS has been organizationally supported by some rich donors possibly in the Wahabi communities. The US withdrew its troops by leaving the Kurds at the mercy of Turkey.

The Yemen war that caused the direct death of about 18,000 civilians, while the number of deaths including the effect of famine can be in the order of magnitude of 100,000.

The civil war in Libya between the Haftar and Al Sarraj camps is likely not going to end soon.

In all these wars, we have seen the participation in various ways of different countries in and outside the region: Russia, Iran and Turkey operate in Syria; the Saudi and the Emirates<sup>3</sup> supported the attacks on the Houthis in Yemen who are in turn supported by the Iranians; the Saudis supported the military coup against the Government of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; the Saudis, Emirates, Egypt are supporting Haftar in Libya while UN recognized Al Sarraj government, etc.

Moreover, there is a general hostility between the different branches of the Muslim religion: Shias against Sunnis, Alawites against Sunni, Zahidis in Yemen against Sunnis. The Sunni Shia antagonism is particularly visible in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also affects Lebanon, Bahrain and Syria as well (in Syria the Alawites are considered de facto close to the Shias). But this sectarian infight affects also the internal climate of several countries, including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and some central Asian republics. The slaughtering of the Yazidi should also be mentioned when talking about religious antagonism.

In all the region the term “terrorists” is used in a sectarian and instrumental way: the antagonists often accuse their opponents of “supporting terrorism”. Even Qatar has been accused of supporting terrorism by Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E.

Moreover, the collapse of the JCPOA has induced hostilities among different oil producers. If Iran is forbidden to sell oil and send around oil tankers, then Iran will try to do its best to block oil tankers belonging to other countries in the Hormuz strait in particular.

In conclusion there is hardly a region in the world where antagonism, sectarianism and hostility are larger than in the (extended) Middle East.

*Nuclear risks and tensions in South Asia*—India and Pakistan are antagonistic countries that possess significant arsenals of nuclear weapons (about 140–150 each). The situation in this (extended) region can evolve easily in a catastrophic way. For instance if there is a serious “terrorist attack” in India, and India believes that Pakistan

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<sup>3</sup>Fortunately, just recently the Emirates stopped to support the military activities in Yemen.

has organized it, then India will likely attack Pakistan with conventional weapons, and Pakistan, that is largely inferior to India in terms of conventional weapons, is in principle oriented to use tactical nuclear weapons in response to a conventional Indian attack.

Things changed for the worse on Aug. 5th, 2019. On that date the Indian Government obtained from the Parliament the removal of all the specific regional autonomy laws for the Jammu and Kashmir state. The valley of Kashmir, where Muslims are the large majority, has been isolated from the rest of India. As we speak now, it is forbidden for normal citizens or foreigners to go to the Kashmir valley. Political leaders of Kashmir are either in jail or under house arrest. This applies also to the former “chief ministers” of the state of Jammu and Kashmir (Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah) who were democratically elected and who are under house arrest without being accused of any crime. The people in general in the Kashmir valley have been under extreme pressure: they have been repressed politically, they lack jobs, the economy of the valley without visitors and tourists being allowed to come and is under severe strain. In conclusion the internal problems for the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir are extreme. The Kashmiris who leave in Pakistan are of course sympathetic to the Kashmiris who live in India. Some of the groups of Kashmiri supporters from Pakistan may very well attack the Indian military in the Indian Kashmir. This can happen very well without direct or indirect intervention from the Pakistani State or its structures (like the Secret services known as ISI). But it is in the Indian interest to portray all possible troubles as the result of Pakistani malicious intervention.

In this way the tension between India and Pakistan increases. Any serious attack against Indian structures can be ascribed to Pakistan. If a serious attack happens in India, India’s strategy is to occupy militarily the part of Pakistan where the attack has been supposedly originated. Pakistan strategy, in the case of a serious Indian conventional attack, is reportedly, to use tactical nuclear weapons against India. And this will start a nuclear war. Notice that the Pakistani strategy is in fact similar to the NATO strategy during the cold war, when NATO and the US were planning to use tactical nuclear weapons to compensate a conventional inferiority vis a vis the Warsaw Pact.

As a final remark we should notice that the Indian minister of defense has declared that India should abandon its nuclear no-firs-use policy, lowering further the nuclear threshold.

*What could be done?*—There is of course no easy recipe for a solution to the severe problems we have just mentioned. Few points should be nevertheless be highlighted. The international community should work seriously to calm down the difficult situations in the Middle East and in South Asia. In particular the international community should work in order to

- Restore the substance of the Iran nuclear agreement and guarantee that the respect of the JCPOA will yield Iran’s access to the financial and commercial world market.

- Refrain from granting international support to local nuclear programs, unless the IAEA will be able to fully supervise the programs (incl. the additional protocol) and reasonable limitations to the programs will be set.
- Promote international dialogue and cooperation among the Middle eastern countries with the aim of achieving a reciprocal understanding and the limitation of hostile activities.
- Guarantee the freedom of movement of people and goods in the region to the maximum possible extent.
- Promote the end of conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya.
- Operate in order to restart the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.
- Promote India-Pakistan dialogue with the aim of preventing nuclear use.
- Pressure India in order to reduce the political tension in the State of Jammu and Kashmir and make again the State open to Indian nationals and Foreign visitors as it was before.
- Induce India to free the political leaders who have not been accused of any wrong doing.
- Induce India and Pakistan to put back in place the aerial communications between the two countries. Bring back the road communications between the two countries and particularly the communications across the line of control in the Kashmiri region.

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