



INTERNATIONAL  
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# MIDDLE EAST CRISIS SCENARIOS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Edited by  
**Dr. VIATCHESLAV KANTOR**  
President of the International  
Luxembourg Forum  
on Preventing Nuclear Catastrophe



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**International Luxembourg Forum  
on Preventing Nuclear Catastrophe**

# **MIDDLE EAST CRISIS: SCENARIOS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Edited by **Dr. Viatcheslav Kantor**  
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Prefaced by the President of the International Luxembourg Forum, this book is based on the contributions made by the notable experts at the on-line Conference, organized by the Forum – “New Iranian Crisis: Cessation of Escalation” held on July 14, 2020. The book details the major actors, events and issues that the Middle East is facing and explores the challenges that the crisis in the region presents to the international non-proliferation regime and to international security and stability more broadly.

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## INTRODUCTION BY VIATCHESLAV KANTOR, PRESIDENT OF INTERNATIONAL LUXEMBOURG FORUM

**W**e are all aware of the turbulence in the Middle East, where the interests and actions of virtually all countries of the region, and various other global actors, are intertwined. The situation in Syria; clashes and military interventions in Libya; the lengthy war between Saudi Arabia and Yemen; and mounting conflict between Israel and Palestine, which is supported by Iran – it is pointless trying to discuss each of these entangled issues separately. Existing and constantly emerging tensions preclude any attempt to find rational solutions that would be acceptable to the major players.

Against this backdrop, the crisis surrounding the Iranian nuclear deal, which threatens the runaway nuclearization of the region and beyond, has been overshadowed. Indeed, the effective termination of measures under the 2015 JCPOA, which was the result of many years of arduous negotiations between the US, Russia, China, the UK, France, Germany and Iran, means that the critical situation relating to Iran's nuclear programme has degenerated to the point that Iran is now able to build a nuclear weapons in the shortest possible time (within a year).

Iran is currently violating, one by one, the restrictions and bans established under the JCPOA, openly obstructing the IAEA's legitimate operations by increasing its uranium stocks and enrichment levels and blocking IAEA inspections at suspect locations.

Meanwhile, it continues to test its longer-range missiles and currently possesses a whole range of missile systems capable of striking countries both in the region and throughout Europe.

In late June and in connection with a US resolution to extend the arms embargo on Iran, the Iranian ambassador to the UN, Majid Takht Ravanchi, threatened the US with dire consequences should the Trump administration insist on the re-imposition of UN sanctions.

France, the UK and Germany announced that they would not support a re-imposition of sanctions, but called on Tehran to grant access to two clandestine facilities at which nuclear materials could be held.

The escalation of political tensions and violence in the Middle East is one of the most dangerous regional crises developing amid a confrontation between the major world powers and the tragic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I believe that urgent measures are required in order to de-escalate the crisis in the Middle East. The withdrawal of one of the P5 countries from the JCPOA in 2018 made way for a new Iranian nuclear crisis. The countries of the European Union remain unable to fully implement their obligations under the nuclear deal, owing to the contradictions that have arisen.

The European participants could develop economic ways and means of fulfilling their obligations under the JCPOA, since the further development of Iran's nuclear programme and missile systems poses a particularly severe threat to Europe.

The Government of Iran must cease its provocative actions and return to strict compliance with all provisions under the JCPOA, since all but one of the participants in the deal are fulfilling their obligations. If it fails to do so, Iran will face increasingly damaging sanctions from an increasing number of States.

I believe that the implementation of these proposed measures would serve to de-escalate this new Iranian nuclear crisis, which has the potential to trigger a major war in the Middle East.

## INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM PERRY<sup>1</sup>

**T**he conference of the Luxembourg Forum, planned in June 2020, has been postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic should remind all of us just how vulnerable we are to events beyond our control. And it also should remind us that a catastrophe could occur not just from natural causes: We could be the agent of our own destruction, the likely outcome of a nuclear catastrophe. Each year for the last decade the likelihood of a nuclear catastrophe has increased, according to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, who just set their Doomsday Clock to 100 seconds before midnight, closer to Doomsday than it was at any time during the Cold War.

A pandemic does not respect national borders, as nations all over the globe are finding out, to their grief. Likewise, a nuclear war would not respect borders, with fallout and nuclear winter affecting everyone, even those living in nations not a part of the war. Some nations would be affected later than others, but, in time, all would suffer. In an all-out nuclear war, there would be no place to hide. The entire world would be devastated, and those who survived would envy those who had perished. Just as a nuclear war would affect all of us, so all of us

<sup>1</sup> William Perry – Professor at the Stanford University; Member of the Supervisory Board of the International Luxembourg Forum (former U.S. Secretary of Defense); Ph.D. (USA).



should be concerned about finding ways to avert that disaster.

Today, the two nations with the largest store of nuclear weapons are in the early stages of a new nuclear arms race, one that will entail the expenditure of trillions of dollars. These new weapons, far from making us safer, will actually increase the risk of a nuclear catastrophe.

During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized the danger posed by our huge nuclear arsenals and negotiated arms control treaties intended to lower those dangers. The reduction in numbers was not sufficient to do that, since we were still left with tens of thousands of these deadly weapons. But the dialog entailed in the negotiation and enforcement of these treaties led to a level of understanding between our two countries that did lower the danger that these weapons would be used.

Today the United States has withdrawn from all but one of the nuclear treaties negotiated during the Cold War and has given no indication that it intends to renew New START, which is due to expire next year. So, by early next year there could be no treaties regulating nuclear arsenals; and there could be no dialog on nuclear dangers between our two countries.

Thus, in this period of unprecedented danger to our countries and, indeed, the world, there could be no ongoing dialog between the leaders of our two countries on how to lower nuclear dangers. So, an especially great burden falls on Track 2 dialog to fill that void. But even Track 2 dialogs have decreased. During the Cold War, even during the periods when there was little or no official nuclear dialog, there was a robust Track 2 dialog that played an important role in achieving a better understanding of nuclear dangers; additionally, this Track 2 dialog created an environment that stimulated the vitally important official dialog; a dialog that resulted in the Cold War nuclear treaties, now defunct.

Today the burden of Track 2 dialog on nuclear dangers falls to a few organizations, most notably the Monterey Institute and the Luxembourg Forum; so, the postponement of the Luxembourg Forum's

June conference is a matter of serious concern. It will be important for the Forum to reschedule the conference as soon as the pandemic has passed. In the meantime, we should all pursue virtual meetings to keep alive the dialog on nuclear dangers. It is hard to focus on nuclear issues when the world's attention is understandably focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, but a nuclear war would be an even greater catastrophe for the world, and that danger has in no way decreased. It is critically important to reenergize dialog on nuclear dangers, and the Luxembourg Forum remains the most important Track 2 dialog whose sole focus is alerting the world to nuclear dangers and formulating practical ways of decreasing those dangers.

# MAJOR WORLD POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

*Dmitry Trenin*<sup>1</sup>

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in 2020, has greatly exacerbated pre-existing trends in the international system: primacy of domestic politics; securitization of economics and technology; reassertion of the nation state as the principal actor on the world scene; waning US global leadership; emergence of US-China bipolarity; further exacerbation of US-China rivalry to the level of confrontation; and continued deterioration of US-Russia relations.

The pandemic has had a significant effect on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It hit Iran particularly hard. All long-running conflicts – civil wars with foreign participation in Syria, Libya, and Yemen; the Israeli-Palestinian dispute; the tensions in the Gulf region – continue. Economic hardships have struck a number of countries – the oil producers like Saudi Arabia, that has had to scale back its budget expenditures, and those that depend on financial services like Lebanon, that has become almost paralyzed economically. The oil price, the region's most important economic factor, has dropped dramatically, with the prospects of their recovery to the levels of the past five years uncertain.

<sup>1</sup> Dmitry Trenin – Director, Carnegie Moscow Center; Ph.D. (Russia).

This essay will discuss the policies and interactions of the world's major powers in the Middle East: the United States; China; the European Union; Russia; and India. The changes in the global system impact as much on the Middle East as they do on any region. The behavior of the major powers and the patterns of their interaction point to the direction in which the global system is going. The Middle East may be losing some of its importance to the global players, but it may also serve as a bellwether of things to come that will reshape the world.

## The United States

2020 is not only a COVID year. It is also a presidential election year in the United States. Never in the last 50 years has the US had to deal with such a combination of crises as now: political; social; cultural; ideological; and now also a crisis in public health and race relations. Faced with the steep economic and technological rise of China coupled with Beijing's refusal to liberalize its political system, US foreign policy has had to turn away from its long-standing strategy of prioritizing the US-led Western system and put American interests ahead of those of its allies and partners.

The United States, of course, cannot and would not isolate itself from the world. Washington's foreign policy is in transit from hegemony often described as leadership to primacy. This reflects the beginning of a fundamental change from a policy that was designed to make the world more in line with US interests and values to a policy that would seek to adjust the United States to a changing world. This promises a long and painful process.

It is no wonder that the United States, more self-absorbed than ever in the last 80 years, continues to slowly dial down its involvement in the Middle East. The era of sustained sharp US focus on the region, which started at the end of WWII, and saw its peak with the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq is coming to an end. No more attempts to "drain the swamp" that breeds terrorists and dictators and to modernize the region under enlightened American leadership.

The failure of costly US interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), that left a mess behind, did sink in. The Barack Obama administration took a back seat in Libya, supporting the 2011 NATO-led intervention, rather than spearheading it. That operation, however, turned out no more successful than the other two. The campaign against the so-called Islamic State or ISIS in 2016-2018 was fought with the aim of destroying ISIS infrastructure and ending it as an organized force, without an attempt at rehabilitating the liberated territories.

The lessons of three unwinnable wars were amplified by the emergence of the United States itself – thanks to shale oil and gas – as the world's top energy producer. This practically eliminated US dependence on Middle Eastern energy resources and turned the United States into a major exporter of liquified natural gas, including to its allies in Europe and East Asia.

Geopolitically, Washington's designation of China as the principal adversary of the United States demanded a shift of US attention to East Asia and the Western Pacific. Europe remained America's secondary priority, due to the renewed objective of containing Russia. The strategic importance of the Middle East, which still hosts a number of US military bases with dozens of thousands of US personnel, has decreased with the arrival in the mid-to-late 2010s of major power rivalry as the principal US national security concern, to replace the post-9/11 focus on anti-terrorism.

The Trump presidency saw no new wars started by the United States in the region – or anywhere else in the world. This happened for the first time since the end of the Cold War. This relative restraint signaled a change in methods of using force that became evident even during the Obama administration. Nation building that required a permanent occupation and large infusion of resources was replaced by missile or drone strikes against America's enemies throughout the region; support for US allies, partners or clients, as in Libya, Iraq and Syria; and a more limited role for US military in Afghanistan and Syria.

Like Barack Obama before him, Donald Trump resisted calls for a more robust US role in Libya and Syria, deeming those countries peripheral to the US interests. While President Obama sought to limit Iran's nuclear program by means of an international agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in 2015, President Trump, very critical of the JCPOA, negotiated in 2019 an agreement with the Taliban on a complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan. In doing so, both US presidents, sharing little with each other in terms of political philosophy, had to do deals with America's most reviled enemies in the Middle East.

In the new environment which sees more activism and greater role for regional actors, the United States has also had to adjust its relations with key American allies in the Middle East: Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The Trump Administration gave unqualified support to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. It recognized Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel and moved the US Embassy there. It supported Netanyahu's policies of expanding Israeli settlements on the West Bank and annexing them. It also proposed a peace plan to Israel and the Palestinians that accommodated Israeli interests and offered the Arabs a \$50 billion-worth financial assistance package to be financed by the Gulf Arab states. The Palestinians rejected the plan, which was also criticized by the Europeans.

US-Turkey relations have been changing ever since the 2003 arrival in power in Turkey of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In that same year, Turkey denied the United States the use of its territory for an invasion of Iraq. In contrast to his predecessors' unsuccessful attempts at integration into the European Union, Erdogan's policies clearly aim at rebuilding Turkey as the dominant regional power in the territory of the former Ottoman Empire. Capitalizing on the strategic importance of Turkey for the United States as a NATO ally in a volatile region, Erdogan has managed to get Washington to accept, silently or grudgingly, Ankara's autonomous policies with regard to the neighboring countries such as Iraq, Syria, Iran, Israel, the Kurds and the Palestinians, Egypt, Libya



and the Gulf States, as well as its outreach to America's adversaries like Russia and China.

The US relations with Saudi Arabia are also going through a transformation. The Arab Spring of 2011, when the Obama administration did not even attempt to save long-time US allies like Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak, produced a chilling effect in Riyadh. Under Trump, the Saudi kingdom has not only lost much value as the principal energy ally of the United States: the arrival of US shale oil and gas has turned the US-Saudi energy relationship into a competitive one. In 2020, Saudi Arabia started a price war, ostensibly against Russia, that nevertheless did great damage to the US shale industry. The US support for the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen has been less than enthusiastic. In public relations terms, the US-Saudi relationship had been on a downward slide since 9/11, and the murder of the journalist Khashoggi in 2018 led to a public outcry in the United States. Yet, despite all this, the fundamentals of the relationship are still in place. The Saudi Kingdom remains a key stronghold for US forces in the Middle East and a major buyer of American arms. Realpolitik wins out, even though the Saudis know that the US commitment to their regime is less than complete. Riyadh feels the need to diversify its foreign policy somewhat, by striking or strengthening relations with Beijing and Moscow.

Egypt continues to be a major recipient of US military assistance in the region. However, the lesson of Washington having pulled the plug on Hosni Mubarak and engaged with the Muslim Brotherhood is not lost on President Al-Sissi and the Egyptian military. For a long time, Cairo has been content with playing a low-profile role in the region, but the developments in neighboring Libya and tense relations with Turkey are changing that. The Egyptians know they cannot rely on the United States for all their needs, and are strengthening ties with the Saudis, their financial backer, and the world players, such as China and Russia.

A telling illustration of the US-Iranian relations is the case of the US-Iranian brief stand-off in January 2020. Following a series of

suspected Iranian attacks at Saudi oil facilities and at tankers in the Gulf; the downing of a US drone by Iran; and incidents with US forces in Iraq and an attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad by pro-Iranian groups, the US carried out a missile strike killing General Omar Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). By assassinating a senior official of a hostile country, Washington raised the stakes steeply in its decades-long confrontation with Iran.

Americans, however, made it clear from the start that they were not looking for an escalation of the conflict. Iranians, of course, had to respond. Yet, they chose a one-off retaliatory attack against two US bases in Iraq, and informed the Baghdad authorities, formally allied with the US but also friendly with Iran, about the impending strike, thus also signaling their intention to limit the exchange. In the end, this is how the US-Iranian duel ended. The two seemingly most resolute opponents, the IRGC and US President Trump, were satisfied with having made their points.

No less interesting was the reaction of the rest of the world. China and Russia condemned the assassination of a senior official in the territory of a third country, but they did not call an emergency session of the UN Security Council. NATO countries condemned the Iranian strike against their senior ally, but otherwise took no action against Iran, and some European nations deemed it wise to redeploy their contingents from Iraq. The Saudis, Iran's implacable foes, and themselves targets of attacks blamed on pro-Iranian forces, kept a very low profile. The duel has remained a duel, and it ended in a demonstration of capabilities rather than a decisive battle.

## China

The 2010s saw Beijing adopting a more pro-active foreign policy strategy. China's Belt and Road Initiative stands for global economic expansion leading to a much higher degree of Beijing's political influence abroad. Thus, China is evolving into a full-fledged global power,

but very much unlike the United States, the former Soviet Union, or the European great powers of the past. Still an economic superpower par excellence, it is also a rising technological power competing with the United States, but not a country with a big military footprint beyond its borders or a powerful ideological appeal. Yet, after the Libyan upheaval of 2011, which left dozens of thousands of Chinese workers and specialists in that country stranded, Beijing has seen the need to back its economic presence with some power projection capabilities. It chose the Middle East/Horn of Africa – Djibouti – for its first overseas naval base.

Still, China's interests in the region continue to be mostly economic. It relies on Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States, including Iran and Iraq, for oil supplies. Beyond the Gulf, which is the center of Chinese interests, Beijing is engaged in infrastructure projects across the entire MENA region, usually with other state partners. In the eastern Mediterranean, China's interest is in port facilities – from Israel's Haifa and Ashkelon to Greece's Piraeus to the Italian facilities. Beijing is also looking at Lebanon's Tripoli and Syria's Latakia.

Even though, as an economic superpower, China has gained great clout in the Middle East, it keeps a distance to the region's conflicts. Beijing is a party to the JCPOA and stays within the accord despite the US withdrawal. Yet, China's political support for Iran is limited. The Chinese often vote with Russia at the UN Security Council on Syria-related issues, but despite being courted by Damascus, they are wary of US sanctions to engage economically. Beijing yet to commit any financial resources to the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country. China has essentially withdrawn from doing business in Libya and Yemen after the start of armed conflicts there. However, the Chinese are not shy to offer arms to a number of Arab countries. In particular, Beijing has been selling unmanned aerial vehicles, much demanded in the region, to the Saudis, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. Thus, in the Middle East China remains largely pragmatic and profit-oriented. At the same time, it is using soft power – amid the COVID pandemic, in

the form of so-called mask diplomacy – to win over the publics of such countries as Iran and Saudi Arabia. The United States, for its part, is seeking to get its allies and partners, such as Israel, to reduce their economic, financial and technological exposure to China.

## The European Union

The European Union (EU) does not have a common policy worth the name on the Middle East – which can be said of other regions and countries too. This logically flows from the fact that the Union is not a geopolitical or a security actor. Some leading Europeans, like France's President Emmanuel Macron, call for Europe's strategic autonomy. Even though the EU's autonomy does not mean independence and would even in theory mean little more than its complementarity with NATO, that appeal from Paris does not have universal support within the EU. For too long, Europeans have grown accustomed to US leadership and guidance on traditional foreign policy, security and defense issues. It is the waning of that leadership and the dwindling American desire to closely engage with their allies that makes the Europeans, particularly the Germans, highly nervous.

Essentially, the Europeans have been able to get their act together in the Middle East on a few issues only. Europe has been a member of the Middle East Quartet alongside the United States, the United Nations and Russia. Europeans have been the principal financial sponsors of the Palestinian Authority. Their voice on a range of issues – e.g., Israeli settlements, the status of Jerusalem – differs from what one can hear from Washington. The Middle East Peace Process itself, of course, was facilitated by a country closely linked to the EU, Norway. The Europeans are also engaged in many parts of the region as principal providers of humanitarian assistance. Of course, in 2011 Europeans constituted the bulk of the NATO forces that played the decisive role in toppling the Qaddafi regime in Libya.

The Middle East and North Africa are Europe's direct neighbors to the south and south-east. The volatility in the region simply cannot be

ignored by EU member states from Spain to France to Italy to Greece. Even Germany as the EU's biggest country and a home to many immigrants from Turkey and Arab countries cannot remain aloof. In the absence of a common policy, Europe's problem is that the national interests of the few member states that actually care about MENA, differ widely. Thus, in the intra-Libyan conflict France and Italy have landed on the opposite sides of the Libyan divide. Whereas France's interests are essentially energy-related, Paris has sided with the eastern Libyan forces, while the main Italian interest in stemming illegal immigration from Libya has attracted Rome to the national government in Tripoli. Off the Libyan coast, French and Turkish ships, both belonging to NATO, have narrowly escaped an incident, while Greece is very unhappy with Turkish moves, in conjunction with the Tripoli government, to establish control over the undersea gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean. Tellingly, Paris, Rome and Athens cannot count on the support of the EU as a whole.

The old imperial-era connections that used to tie individual European countries to parts of the Middle East where they used to completely dominate have remained distant memories. Recently, France has played almost no role in Syria beyond taking part in the anti-ISIS coalition air strikes in Syria, and in "punishing" Syrian government troops for alleged use of chemical weapons. Paris remains the preferred European destination for many affluent Lebanese, but France could do little to help Lebanon withstand the many trials it has been subjected to in the last several years. Italy feels some residual attachment to its former colony Libya, but the focus of its policy is mostly on stopping illegal immigration from that country. As the United States' closest ally, the United Kingdom intervened in a number of countries alongside the US, notably in Iraq and Afghanistan. No longer part of the European Union, Great Britain remains a faithful US ally, part of the Anglophone core of the US-led Western system, alongside the UK's dominions Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

## Russia

Russia's breakout of the former Soviet Union space as its principal ground for geopolitical activism occurred in 2015 as a result of Moscow's military intervention in Syria. The military success that Russia scored there lies at the foundation of Moscow's reclaiming of the country's great-power status, temporarily lost as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. President Vladimir Putin's decision to intervene in Syria was prompted by the likely downfall of the Syrian regime unless supported from the outside, and the equally likely triumph of the Islamist extremists and radicals after a brief triumph of the Syrian opposition. Putin certainly wanted to reverse the tide of the Arab Spring and keep the only toehold in the Middle East that Moscow had managed to hold on to after the end of the USSR. However, Putin's larger objective was staging Russia's return to the global stage as a major power.

Five years on, Russia has been able to defeat the opponents of the Damascus regime, and pen their remnants in the Idlib enclave. It was able to do this with deployment of just a handful of warplanes, relatively few boots on the ground, and thanks to situational alliances Moscow was able to strike with Tehran and Ankara. Russia's military success, however, was not furthered by diplomatic achievements. The early attempt to do a Dayton-style agreement in Syria in cooperation with the United States fell through in 2016 because of objections from the US military and security establishment. The follow-up effort to reach a political settlement by means of the so-called Astana process launched in 2017 in cooperation with Iran and Turkey ran into difficulty as the Syrian opposition failed to unite; its sponsors, including the Saudis, were not initially interested; and Iranian and Turkish views diverged from the Russian one. A major problem was the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's reluctance to share power with the opposition, particularly after Russia had handed him military victory. This is where things stand in mid-2020.

It was in the Middle East, a true paradise of Realpolitik, where Russia's 21st century foreign policy has been taking shape. Its

principles could be summarized as follows. Russia is out in the region for its own interest, not in search of any global solution or a spread of a particular set of values. Where the Soviet Union marched in search of strategic allies against the United States, and willing to spend lots of money to spread influence and ideology, the Russian Federation has been extremely judicious with spending any resources, and always looking for opportunities to gain an important position, take over a resource, or just earn money. The lessons of Afghanistan, Tajikistan and the Northern Caucasus have not been in vain.

Moscow has also learned to work with partners in a new way. Rather than supporting strategic allies it has relied on situational alignments that work only in particular situations, and for a period of time, without blanket commitments. Since 2015, Turkey has been a friend-turned-foe-turned-friend again, and the sequel is by no means over. In Idlib in early 2020, Russian forces and Turkish troops found themselves on the firing line, facing each other. A few months later, Turkey intervened in Libya in force, pushing back the group supported by Russia. Limited cooperation with Iran in Syria did not make Moscow warm to Tehran's wider plans in the region or dispel lasting mistrust between the two countries.

Such posture has made it possible for Russia to deal pragmatically with all relevant players in the region, including simultaneously with those that regard each other as mortal enemies: Israel and Iran; Turkey and the Kurds; Iranians and Saudis. Actually, the deconfliction mechanism between the United States and Russia, installed immediately after Russia had inserted itself into the heart of the Middle East, has worked perfectly professionally ever since. This stands in stark contrast with Russia's relations with Turkey, Israel or indeed Syria, all of which have seen deadly incidents.

Yet, Moscow's current policies in the Middle East appear a patchwork of country-specific approaches than do not add up to anything resembling a region-wide strategy. Beyond Syria, Russia has become more involved in Libya, an oil-rich country with a potential for naval

basing where it seeks to recover the economic promise that elude it with the fall of the Qaddafi regime. This time, however, Russia politically and militarily supported a regional challenger to the internationally recognized authority while still keeping contacts to both sides. Another new development in Libya has been a wider use of Russian private military contractors active in Libya on behalf of one of the sides. Russian contractors saw battle in Syria as well, and some of them lost their lives at Deir ez-Zor in 2018, but this was more of a side activity. In Libya, private contractors those were the only Russians reportedly fighting.

Russia's new much warmer relationship with Saudi Arabia that included joint oil price setting within the OPEC+ format took a severe test amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020 Riyadh, in response to Moscow's unwillingness to agree to deeper oil production cuts opened a price war, seeking to drive Russian oil from some regional markets. Peace was restored within a few weeks, but scars have remained. This lesson may have relevance to Moscow's newly-energized ties to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

In 2019, Moscow for the first time advanced a regional security plan for the Gulf region, inviting Iran and its Arab neighbors to build mutual confidence. Yet, Russia's resources and influence in the region remain limited. It can exploit the growing uncertainties created by the US regional policy and China's unwillingness to deal with Middle Eastern security issues. However, there is only so much that Russia itself can or would be willing to deliver. Moreover, the economic downturn provoked by the pandemic strengthens the view inside Russia that the country needs to focus on its own problems rather than engage in geopolitical posturing abroad.

Russia's relations with Iran have remained correct but hardly cordial. An attempt to use an air base in Iran at the start of the Syrian operation incurred immediate opposition in Iran and had to be abandoned. Moscow has not withdrawn from the JCPOA and is looking



forward to the lifting of the UN embargo on the sale of conventional weapons to Iran, but it remains firmly opposed to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and is wary about the Iranian missile program. Russia was not supportive of the late General Soleimani's extensive activities in the Middle East. In Syria, where Moscow and Tehran were on the same side on the battlefield and depended on each other, they remained competitors for influence in Damascus. Like Turkey, Iran is viewed from Moscow as an ambitious regional power that has to be closely watched.

## India

Of all great powers, India's involvement in the Middle East is the least pronounced. For a long time, New Delhi's foreign policy has been taking a very low profile outside of South Asia. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, this has begun to change. Modi's ambition is to turn his country into a world power. This ambition redefines India's relations with other major players. The failure of reconciliation with China, exemplified by the deadly incident in the Himalayas in June 2020, has confirmed China in the Indian eyes as an adversary. India's cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia within the Quad format, which is aimed at containing China, is thus likely to be further strengthened. Relations with Russia, traditionally cordial, are going through a test, given Moscow's close partnership with Beijing. Whatever India's relations are with America, China and Russia, the country can be expected to chart an independent course in world affairs.

India has a number of reasons to be more active in the Middle East. One is geographical proximity to the region, similar to Europe's. Two is economic interest. India depends on energy supplies from the Gulf area. Hundreds of thousands of Indian nationals work in the region. Three is the religious factor: India is a home to dozens of millions of Muslims. Four is competition with China. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, from which New Delhi has been staying away, runs

from China to the Middle East and Europe, going around India, via Pakistan and Central Asia in the north, and Myanmar, Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the south.

In the decades ahead, India is likely to increase its economic presence and diplomatic activity in the Middle East, and its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. As the United States lowers its level of engagement in the Middle East, the European Union focuses on immigration and humanitarian issues, and Russia's exposure will stay limited, Indo-Chinese rivalry in the region will take center stage.

## Conclusion and implications for regional players

The main takeaway from the above analysis is that, on balance, the Middle East is becoming less central to global major-power relations. The principal factor has been continued retrenchment of the United States from the region, and the inability/unwillingness of China and the other major players to fill the void being created by the slow-motion US retreat. The United States will not abandon the region completely, but it is caring less about it, provoking uncertainty about Washington's stewardship. This situation cannot be fully ascribed to President Donald Trump: the retrenchment policy was already at work in the second term of George W. Bush presidency. Thus, it is difficult to expect a reversal of the current US policies under Trump's successor. The US-China confrontation, which is getting more intense, is geographically being played out in East Asia and the Western Pacific.

Against this background of major-power relative disinterest and complicated interactions, regional actors are freer to pursue their own policies, without much regard for their allies and partners. Here, much depends on the ambitions of particular leaders. Turkey's ascendancy as a regional power has much to do with the energy and convictions of President Erdogan, who has been running it since 2003. For over a decade, Israel is being led by another strong leader, Prime Minister Netanyahu. Iran has a more complex power structure, but Tehran's foreign policy activism has had the mark of General Soleimani, killed



in a US attack in January 2020. Saudi Arabia's often erratic behavior has the fingerprints of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Egypt is emerging from its geopolitical restraint by getting ready to intervene militarily in neighboring Libya. Even smaller countries like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, led by strong rulers, have been able to punch way above their nominal weight.

One visible result of this situation has been the proliferation of intra-regional conflicts that are being played out without much interference from outside the region. The ongoing civil war in Yemen with Saudi and UAE participation is one example; the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies, on the one hand, and Qatar, is another. US allies and partners Turkey and Israel; Turkey and Egypt have been at loggerheads for years.

Regional rivalries have long been feared to fuel quest for nuclear weapons. So far, Israel remains the only, if undeclared, nuclear weapons-state in the Middle East. Iran's nuclear program continues, while being monitored by the IAEA and watched by the world powers. The JCPOA is still in place, despite the US withdrawal from it. The future is impossible to predict, but leaders in Tehran would need to know that a full-scale invasion of Iran is not something it realistically has to fear from the United States, and that acquisition of nuclear weapons would dramatically worsen its geopolitical standing, rather than bolster it. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – three other candidates in the Middle East for joining the nuclear weapons states club, would also need to carefully weigh their options. The end of the post-Cold War US hegemony may look permissive in terms of nuclear proliferation, but security and standing achieved via nuclearization are likely to prove elusive, and end in a disaster.

# I

## INTERESTS OF PRINCIPAL STATES

## 1.1. IRAN'S GEOPOLITICAL GAMES

*Vladimir Sazhin*<sup>1</sup>

Iran (or Persia, as it was formerly known) is one of the world's most ancient civilizations, alongside Egypt, Greece, China and India. The Persian Empire ruled by Cyrus and Darius was the greatest power in the VI-IV centuries BC. The later states that arose in this territory remained major players on the political and economic map of the region. Modern Iran is no less important in global terms.

The Islamic Republic of Iran holds some of the largest fossil fuel reserves in the world. It ranks fourth in terms of oil reserves (160 billion barrels, or around 10 per cent of the world total), and it is in second place (after Russia) for natural gas reserves (33.72 trillion cubic meters, or 17 per cent of the world total). Iran has tremendous transit potential for the transport of fossil fuels and other goods. The country is in essence a crossroads linking the global transportation corridors between north and south, east and west.

With a population of 82 million, Iran has one of the largest armies in the world, estimates ranging from 540,000 to 900,000. For nearly sixty years now, Iran has been active in the nuclear sector, with notable success. Iran's nuclear efforts have not always been directed at

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peaceful uses of nuclear energy, which, of course, arouses concern in the international community.

Iran remains a major factor in regional and global politics and continues to play a leading politico-military role in Western Asia.

But to what extent is this a positive role today?

## Links in the “Shiite chain”

Teheran is doing its utmost to assert its role as a dominant regional player. These claims are based in large part on the ideological doctrine expounded by the late leader of the Islamic Revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. The key element of this doctrine is the idea of exporting Iran’s model of Islamic revolution. Three possible options are on offer: the peaceful model (ideological-propaganda model); the semi-military model (sabotage, commando and terrorist operations); and the military model. In the years following the revolution, the ruling clergy of Iran, availing themselves of these models, were not shy of resorting to the harshest of methods in a bid to expand their influence.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Iran has strengthened its efforts to pursue hegemony in the Middle East. Even before the events in Syria began in early 2011, Iran’s political and military leadership was already promoting the concept of “chain of resistance” against the plans of its regional opponents, who, in Teheran’s view, seek to undermine Iran’s influence.

Iran’s main foreign policy goal from 2015 to 2020 was to strengthen this “Shiite chain of resistance”, which stretched through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Effective use of this chain would make it possible for Iran to ensure its domination throughout the Middle East.

## Enemies and allies

Iran’s foreign policy doctrine is based on confrontation with the United States and Israel. Iran has not had official relations with these two countries for more than 41 years now (since 1979).

*The United States* was dubbed the “Great Satan” in the Islamic Republic and remains so today. A blistering but nevertheless ‘cold war’ has been raging between the US and IRI with varying degrees of intensity at different periods. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA, initiated by President Donald Trump, injected serious new tension into these already difficult relations. More will be said on this subject later. It is worth noting that confrontation between the two countries reached a peak in late 2019-early 2020.

Bilateral tension began to escalate in May 2019, when Teheran lost hope of any softening in US sanctions pressure and decided to resort to decisive action.

This resulted in an intense “tanker war” in the Persian Gulf,<sup>2</sup> a US drone destroyed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC),<sup>3</sup> a missile attack on oil industry infrastructure in Saudi Arabia,<sup>4</sup> and an upsurge in Iranian hackers carrying out cyberattacks against the US.<sup>5</sup>

President Trump further fueled the tension by issuing the executive order of April 15, 2019, declaring the IRGC a terrorist organization.<sup>6</sup> In his statement, Trump declared his Administration’s plans to place the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, including the Quds force, on the list of foreign terrorist organizations. “The IRGC actively participates in, finances, and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft. The IRGC is the Iranian government’s primary means of directing and implementing its global terrorist campaign”.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the US

2 “Tanker war” in Full Swing: Iranian IRGC Detained a Ship in the Strait of Hormuz // Eurasia Daily. July 18, 2019. Available at: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/07/18/tankernaya-voyna-v-razgareksir-irana-zaderzhal-sudno-v-ormuzskom-prolive>.

3 US Military Says Iran Shoot Down of its Drone Was “Unprovoked attack” // Reuters. June 20, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-iran-usa-confirmation/us-military-says-iran-shoot-down-of-its-drone-was-unprovoked-attack-idUSL2N23R07X>.

4 Saudi Oil Attacks: US Says Intelligence Shows Iran Involved // BBC. September 16, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49712417>.

5 Recent Cyberattacks Require Us All to be Vigilant // The Official Microsoft Blog. October 4, 2019. <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2019/10/04/recent-cyberattacks-require-us-all-to-be-vigilant/>.

6 For more details see Sazhin V. I. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – a State within a State // *The Contours of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law*. 2017, 10 (3). Pp. 83-109.

7 Shinkman P. Trump Designates Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps a Terrorist Organization // U.S. News. April 8, 2019. Available at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2019-04-08/trump-designates-irans-revolutionary-guard-corps-a-terrorist-organization>.

declared General Soleimani Iranian Terrorist No. 1. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that Soleimani would be viewed in the same way as ISIS [ISIS is banned in the Russian Federation] and the leaders of other jihadi groups.<sup>8</sup>

In response, the Iranian Supreme Council for National Security announced that it was including on its list of terrorist organizations the US Central Armed Forces Command (CENTCOM). The Iranian Armed Forces General Staff warned of their readiness to use all available means to combat “American terrorists”, as US military personnel in the Middle East were now designated.

Americans are now under threat throughout the entire Middle East, particularly in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf area – anywhere, where encounters between Iranian and US military personnel are possible.

The tension was growing. President Trump, it seemed, was about to strike Iranian targets at any moment. But he stopped short of doing so.

The next wave of Iranian-US confrontation was unleashed on the Middle East at the end of 2019. A US military base in Iraq came under fire, the US responded with strikes on Iranian targets in Syrian and Iraqi territory and then the US Embassy in Baghdad was stormed. These developments prompted President Trump to issue an order to liquidate Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds special operations forces, which is part of the IRGC. The Americans justified their action by saying that Soleimani was behind the attacks on the US military base in Iraq and the US Embassy in Baghdad.

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei, that same day, called for a “tough response” to Soleimani’s death. The IRGC announced that Iran had identified 35 military targets in the

region, including Tel Aviv.<sup>9</sup>

Trump threatened to carry out strikes against 52 sites in Iran if Teheran launched an attack.<sup>10</sup>

Everything suggested that war was inevitable. But despite the harsh and at times provocative rhetoric on both sides, neither of them actually wanted a major conflict.

For this reason, immediately following General Soleimani’s death, the US and Iran began an active exchange of secret messages delivered via staff at the Swiss Embassy in Teheran, in a bid to prevent the conflict from escalating.<sup>11</sup>

It seems likely that the two sides realized the disastrous consequences escalation would have. The Iranians could not leave Soleimani’s death unanswered, but at the same time they did not want the confrontation to spiral. In the end, the IRGC carried out a strike on the US airbase Al Asad in Iraq on January 8, giving prior warning. Some were injured in the strike, but no one died.

The tension between the US and Iran eased off somewhat since the events of December and January, but this did not in any way mean that the two adversaries were suddenly sending each other peace signals. Indeed, their confrontation soon came to a head again.

According to The New York Times, the Pentagon ordered the US Armed Forces Central Command to destroy local pro-Iranian formations in the event of an attack on US troops in Iraq. According to this secret order, the IRGC personnel could also be a target for possible US strikes, if they were in the direct vicinity of fighters from the militarized Shiite groups.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Pompeo: Qasem Soleimani Is a Terrorist // RIATAZA. April 10, 2019. Available at: <http://riataza.com/2019/04/10/kassem-solejmani-terrorist-pompeo/>.

<sup>9</sup> What Will Revenge for Soleimani: Iranian Leaders Threaten Washington // BBC. January 4, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-50995172>.

<sup>10</sup> Trump: US to Strike 52 Iranian Targets Quickly and Hard If Americans Get Under Attack // BBC. January 5, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-50999136>.

<sup>11</sup> Swiss Back Channel Helped Defuse U.S.-Iran Crisis // Wall Street Journal. January 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/swiss-back-channel-helped-defuse-u-s-iran-crisis-11578702290?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=7>.

<sup>12</sup> Pentagon Order to Plan for Escalation in Iraq Meets Warning from Top Commander // New York Times. March 27, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/world/middleeast/pentagon-iran-iraq-militias-coronavirus.html>.

The Americans began reinforcing Iraq's missile defenses, deploying the Patriot air defense system there.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on April 1, saying that US actions in Iraq would have "catastrophic consequences" for the Americans themselves.

Teheran did not stop at mere statements.<sup>13</sup> It put its air defenses and the IRGC missile forces on combat alert. The Iranian military command had dozens of air defense and shore-based missile systems deployed along the coast of the Strait of Hormuz and threatened to cut off passage for ships through the strait. Iran had already resorted to this extortionist tactic on various occasions in the course of the past decade, each time leading to spikes of tension around Iran in the Persian Gulf region.

On April 15, eleven missile-armed speedboats belonging to the IRGC approached US naval vessels in the Persian Gulf. The Americans qualified this as "dangerous and provocative actions."

On April 20, the US made a response of sorts. US marines, using heavy equipment and combat helicopters, conducted an exercise involving landing on and taking control of the Saudi islands of Karan and Kurayn in the Persian Gulf (with Saudi Arabia's permission).

Harsh warnings followed from the Iranian military. In response, on April 22 President Trump instructed the US navy to destroy Iranian naval vessels that "harass our ships at sea."<sup>14</sup> That same day, the Revolutionary Guards launched their first military satellite, causing a stir among all of Iran's politico-military adversaries around the world.

The next day, the IRGC commander, Brigadier General Hossein Salami, responding to Trump's declaration, made practically the same threat, word for word: "We have also ordered our military units at sea that if a vessel or military unit of the navy of the US terrorist military

seeks to threaten the security of our civilian ships or combat vessels, they should target that (enemy) vessel or military unit."<sup>15</sup>

The Iranian General Staff issued a statement calling the US presence in the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman a threat to regional security. Iranian President Hasan Rouhani reminded the US that "the name of this gulf is 'Persian Gulf' and not the Gulf of New York and Washington."<sup>16</sup>

These statements and events all show that tension in the Persian Gulf has reached a "red line". But is war a possibility now?

Clearly, neither the Iranian nor the US presidents are looking for war.

There are many reasons for this. The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a severe blow to the economies of both countries. The US now faces galloping unemployment and a sharp drop in incomes, which could bode serious domestic upheaval for the country. Furthermore, Trump has a presidential election coming up in November. Any war, with its attendant loss of life and material and financial resources, would not win the support of the majority of voters. And a war against Iran would hardly be a pushover on the battlefields.

Iran's economic situation is even more serious. The pandemic comes on top of the worst economic and social situation in decades, brought on by US sanctions. Society is demoralized and divided. Adding to this, a fierce political struggle is taking place at the top. The government, led by the president, is under intense pressure from the radical opposition and the IRGC continue bolstering their political influence. COVID-19 has brought the parliament to a virtual standstill. The majority in the old parliament were in deep crisis after their

<sup>13</sup> Spokesman's Reaction to US' Military Moves in Iraq // Iranian Foreign Ministry. April 1, 2020. Available at: <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/579225>.

<sup>14</sup> I have instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea // Donald J. Trump's Twitter. April 22, 2020. Available at: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1252932181447630848>.

<sup>15</sup> IRGC Commander Warns US against Threatening Iranian Vessels in Persian Gulf // Tasnim News Agency. April 23, 2020. Available at: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/04/23/2249784/irgc-commander-warns-us-against-threatening-iranian-vessels-in-persian-gulf>.

<sup>16</sup> Thanking Supreme Leader for Agreeing with the Release of Justice Shares/ White Zone Doesn't Mean Not Observing Health Protocols/ World's Watching Iran's Fighting Coronavirus; Victory in This Period Is the Victory of the Entire Iranian Nation/ Felicitating the Persian Gulf Day to the Iranian Nation // Official website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. April 29, 2020. Available at: <http://www.president.ir/en/115018>.



defeat in February's election, and the new convocation has not yet begun work. None of this is conducive to waging even a limited war.

There is no doubt that Iran and the US will continue their propaganda and psychological warfare in the near future, and will continue their games of brinksmanship and hybrid clashes, which are fraught with alarming unpredictability.

*Israel.* The Iranian leadership takes a particularly hostile line towards Israel. Iran is the only country and UN member state that denies the State of Israel's right to exist. Israel is also a UN member state. There are countries that have no diplomatic relations with Israel, but that do recognize Israel's existence.

The anti-Israeli line was first charted in the 1960s by Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's future leader. His followers continued his policy and repeated his argument that the "Zionist regime must be erased from the face of the earth, and with the help of God's strength, the world will soon live without the USA and Israel." Iranian officials have come up with other definitions too, for example, calling Israel "a cancerous tumour on the flesh of the Middle East, which must be cut out."

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains one of the biggest current issues on Iran's foreign policy agenda. Teheran sees only one solution to this problem: the return to Greater Palestine (the territory of Israel and the Palestine National Autonomy) of all Palestinian refugees (estimated by the UNRWA at around 5.9 million people), holding free general elections and then forming the state institutions of a united Palestine, where Muslims would live together with Jews – the former citizens of Israel. In other words, this would be the dissolution of Israel, effectively its annihilation, which is the ayatollahs' long-standing dream.

*The Arabs.* Iran has troubled relations with most of its Arab neighbors. The roots of this conflict reach back into antiquity. Iranian officials today refrain from overly harsh words about the Arab monarchies, but Iranian journalists and experts openly call them Iran's enemies. This is not without reason: Saudi Arabia, other Arab countries, and

Israel have effectively already formed an alliance against Iran.

*The Kurds.* The Kurdish issue poses considerable problems for Iran. Kurdish political-military groups with around 20,000 fighters operate on Iranian territory. They oppose the ayatollahs and their regime and seek national and cultural autonomy for the Kurds. Teheran takes a "carrot and stick" approach to "its" Kurds. At the same time, the Iranian government opposes giving broad rights, powers, autonomy, and even more so, statehood, to Kurds, wherever they may be, whether in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, or, of course, in Iran itself. In this respect, Iran is in complete agreement with Ankara. Both governments responded very negatively to a referendum on an independent Iraqi Kurdistan held in September 2017.

*Iran's allies.* When it comes to Iran's official military and political allies, there is probably only one – Bashar Assad's regime in Syria. Of course, a number of other countries that oppose the US could count, too – Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea, perhaps a few more besides, but these are propaganda friends, not real allies.

Interestingly, there has been a lot of talk about an alliance between Iran and Russia in recent years. This is not the case in reality. In this respect, it is worth noting the response of Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov to a question from a CNN journalist about whether Russia and Iran are allies. He said he would not consider this the most appropriate term.<sup>17</sup> The two countries simply "work together in Syria." With ISIS [banned in the Russian Federation] defeated, Moscow and Teheran pursue fundamentally different goals and objectives in Syria, and indeed throughout the Middle East. It would be better at the present time to call the relations between Russia and Iran a "situational partnership" and no more than that.

But Iran does have alliance relations with non-state politico-military groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon (an organization which

<sup>17</sup> Top Kremlin Official: We Are Not that Threatening // CNN. January 25, 2019. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2019/01/25/sergei-ryabkov-russian-deputy-foreign-minister-pleitgn-dnt-tsr-vpx.cnn>.

plays a very major role in Lebanon's state structure), the HAMAS resistance movement in Palestine, the Islamic Jihad group and Shiite fundamentalists in Algeria, Iraq, Sudan and Yemen.

Despite facing economic difficulties, Iran continues to provide financial and military-technical aid to all pro-Iranian groups and organizations around the world. The priority here, of course, is Bashar Assad's regime.

*Syria.* Iran was the first country to come to the aid of Bashar Assad's regime, back in 2012. This is understandable because Syria has tremendous significance for Iran.

Supporting Syria has come at a great financial cost for Iran. In 2013, Iran granted Syria around \$15 billion. In 2015, the figure was \$8-9 billion. Since then, Teheran has invested between \$6 – 8 billion every year. Alternative data suggests that by mid-2018, Iran's spending on Syria was even higher and had reached \$15 billion a year.<sup>18</sup>

Important, too, is that over the course of this near decade-long war, Iran, which has taken direct part in military operations on Syrian territory, has suffered the highest casualty figures of any of the foreign participants in the conflict.

This can be explained by the fact that Iran has the largest contingent present in Syria. The Iranian armed forces have sent to Syria advisers, instructors, and military experts from the IRGC officer corps, many of whom took part in hostilities. The Quds special operations forces have also conducted special operations in Syria. Media information suggests that the total number of IRGC personnel in Syria at various times (including Quds) ranged from 2,000 to 7,000 and even higher. Hezbollah, which is subordinate to the IRGC, has also had from 5,000 to 10,000 fighters at various moments.

During the Syrian conflict, the IRGC recruited more than 20,000 Shiite "volunteers" from Iraq (the Hashd al-Shaabi group), Afghanistan (the Fatemiyoun brigade) and Pakistan (Zainabiyoun), as well as from

Iran itself (above all from among Afghan refugees and unemployed Iranians). Various estimates suggest that at times, Iran had up to 70,000 people operating under its aegis.

According to various unofficial estimates (there is no official data), losses among the Iranian and pro-Iranian forces in Syria amount to around 4,000 people, including 11 Iranian generals and dozens of colonels and senior officers.

Large-scale military operations had practically ended in Syria by 2020, but Iran has no intention of simply relinquishing its hold on the country. It has an interest in preserving the current situation in the country, and if there is to be any change in the political situation in Syria, Iran would want it to be only under the unconditional leadership of Bashar Assad, with Assad installing a regime in Damascus that would guarantee Iran a "controlling stake" in Syrian political life and ensure that any decisions taken would be in Iran's favor. These concerns are, first and foremost preserving and reinforcing the Shiite belt, including a logistics land corridor to ensure the supply of military-technical and financial support to the pro-Iranian forces within this belt, primarily, to the Lebanese Shiite armed group Hezbollah.

For this purpose, along with military activity and special operations, Iran also pursues a wide range of economic and social initiatives to bolster its influence in territory under Bashar Assad's control. By May 2020, Assad was in control of 65-70 per cent of Syrian territory.

In 2019-2020, Iranians, and Arabs friendly towards Iran, began buying up real estate in towns and villages, under the provisions of Law No.10, adopted in April 2019. This law effectively revoked the property rights of anti-regime opposition supporters and of refugees who had fled the country due to the conflict.

It is indicative that around the Damascus area alone, by April 2020, more than 8,000 real estate purchases had been made by "Shiites from other countries".

<sup>18</sup> Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever // Foreign Policy. June 1, 2018. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/01/iran-wants-to-stay-in-syria-forever/>.

Unobtrusively, but persistently, Iran is transforming local Sunni mosques into Shiite religious centers and also actively building new Shiite clubs, mosques and schools.

Not without prompting from Teheran, Syria has opened Farsi-language teaching centers, Iranian cultural centers in universities, and also language schools in the main population centers.

Iran believes that this kind of large-scale economic and ideological outreach in Syria will ensure that it maintains a privileged position in the country no matter how the military and political situation develops.

*Iraq.* This country became the stage for political and military struggles between Iran and the US. Teheran's primary task in Iraq, as in Syria, is to install a pro-Iranian regime with interests subordinate to Iran's own interests. Here, Iran has encountered US resistance (as in Syria, too).

Iran's main policy goals in Iraq are to drive the Americans out of the country and weaken their influence in the region in general. The Revolutionary Guards are working to make Iraq increasingly dependent on Iran and ensure a situation in which political forces loyal to Teheran would remain in power in Baghdad.

In March 2020, Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, who replaced the murdered Soleimani as commander of the Quds force, twice visited Iraq. He met with the leaders of the main Shiite groups, who are most able to exert leverage on the situation and are greatly dependent on Iran.

During the first months of 2020, Washington and Teheran were both trying to ensure that their respective candidate became the new prime minister. The previous incumbent, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, stepped down in November 2019. In May 2020, a new government had still not yet been formed.

The US has "its people" in the Iraqi government, armed forces and the country's elite, and this exacerbates the situation.

Obviously, the United States would not want to hand over a strategic country like Iraq to the Iranians.

*Iran's "hybrid hegemony."* While still adhering to the ideological line of Persian-Shiite superiority and the policy of fighting for regional dominance, Teheran understands that it does not currently possess any tangible capabilities for competing militarily with its main adversaries and engaging in a large-scale "hot" war or direct confrontation with them. This obliges the Iranian leadership to look for "creative approaches" and come up with asymmetrical responses. One such response is the so-called hybrid war that Iran has been pursuing. This kind of jihad involves Iran using proxies such as Hezbollah, foreign Shiite groups, covert operations, sabotage operations, cyberwar, pressuring and bribing politicians from various countries and a backdrop of propaganda, disinformation, hacker attacks and threats against its enemies.

The mastermind behind these new forms and methods of warfare in Iran was the murdered General Soleimani, whose nickname was "Shadow." He had excellent mastery of the tactics and strategy of hybrid wars and had conducted secret operations all over the Middle East, dealing blows, above all, to US image and interests so as to achieve the objectives set by Commander-in-Chief Ayatollah Khamenei.

Soleimani became practically the most influential politician not just in Iran but throughout the region. He would turn up in secret in all the different hot spots where his subordinates were at work. He also had a tacit hand in shaping political activity, holding covert meetings with leaders and senior officials from various countries.

After Soleimani's death, the IRGC encountered difficulties with managing these hybrid operations, but this does not mean that they will change their strategy.

It is therefore impossible to rule out the possibility that the IRGC might act independently, without the President's knowledge or participation. After all, it turned out that when the IRGC launched a military satellite, the president had not been informed in advance.

## The collapse of the nuclear deal

Iran's biggest problem today is the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, which was followed by Washington imposing the harshest sanctions ever on Iran.

By way of a reminder, in 2012, faced with Iran's refusal to budge on the nuclear issue and the Iranian government's rejection of the UN Security Council and the IAEA's demands, the European Union and the US imposed sanctions that reduced sales of Iranian oil and petroleum products, refused insurance services to tankers carrying Iranian oil, and excluded Iran from the international SWIFT banking system. Iran's economy suffered a severe blow. As a result, Teheran was forced to agree to talks with the 5+1 international group (Russia, US, UK, France, China and Germany). On June 14, 2015, the group concluded the nuclear deal – the JCPOA. Sanctions began to be lifted in the first quarter of 2016 and Iran began normalizing its trade and economic relations with the rest of the world.

But this process stalled with the arrival of a new president in the White House. Right from the outset, Donald Trump was fiercely critical of the JCPOA and promised that the US would withdraw from the deal. He said he had found what he considered at least four serious problems with the agreement, namely: the lack of any possibility for international inspectors to verify absolutely all facilities, including military facilities; no firm guarantees that Iran would never acquire a nuclear weapon; a limited time-frame of 10-15 years for the JCPOA; and, finally, no ban on Iran developing ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear weapon. Furthermore, Trump accused Teheran of expansionist activity in the Middle East. On May 8, 2018, the US officially declared its withdrawal from the JCPOA.

On August 7 that year, the US imposed its first new package of sanctions on Iran. There were restrictions on buying Iranian-made vehicles and gold from Iran. Sanctions also affected Iranian companies involved in aluminium, coal, graphite and steel production, and businesses producing computer software for industrial enterprises.

The second package of sanctions came on November 5, 2018 and

affected Iranian oil exports, as well as over 700 banks and hundreds of companies and physical persons. The sanctions hit Iran's energy sector, transactions involving hydrocarbons and all transactions related to Iran's central bank. The new US sanctions did not apply to eight countries that buy Iranian oil: China, India, Greece, South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK), Japan, Taiwan, Italy and Turkey.

The UK, France and Germany, as parties to and co-authors of the JCPOA, opposed Trump's anti-Iranian policy. With the support of the Russian Federation and China, they developed and officially registered INSTEX (Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges with Iran).

Teheran took a wait-and-see position, staking its hopes on Europe. But on April 22, 2019, President Trump ended the exemptions for the eight countries importing Iranian oil. The full ban on buying Iranian oil entered into force on May 2, 2019. The US took measures to end all Iranian oil exports and these measures were quite effective. In April 2018, Iran exported around 2.5 million barrels a day, but by mid-2020 (according to various estimates) the figure had fallen to between 100,000 and 400,000 barrels a day. US estimates suggested that Iran had lost around 90 per cent of its oil export revenue.

The US sanctions campaign against Iran continues. In December 2019, President of Iran Hasan Rouhani announced that since May 2018, the US had imposed 93 different restrictive measures on Iran.<sup>19</sup>

The European Union has little hope of resisting the US sanctions on Iran, which are more or less as harsh as the 2012-2016 sanctions that brought the Iranian economy to the brink of collapse. European politicians, officials and diplomats would like to preserve the JCPOA in one form or another, but they cannot make their countries' businesses work with Iran and face harsh US sanctions that could have very serious consequences for them.

Iran is looking for a way out of the current situation, even going as far as to ignore the JCPOA. In May 2019, when the US brought in its

<sup>19</sup> What Sanctions Have Been Imposed Against Iran // TASS. January 9, 2020. Available at: <https://tass.ru/info/7488823>.



full ban on Iranian oil exports, Teheran came up with a step-by-step plan (with 60 days for each stage) to suspend implementing its obligations under the JCPOA.

The fourth stage ended on January 6, 2020. Over this time, Iran has restored a large part of its nuclear infrastructure. It exceeded the permitted quantity of enriched uranium and heavy water in storage and increased the degree of uranium enrichment from 3.76 per cent to 4.5 per cent. It has been testing and using in production new and more effective centrifuges and has resumed uranium enrichment at the Fordo plant. All of this violates the provisions of the JCPOA.

Stage five was even more dramatic. In January 2020, the deputy head of Iran's atomic energy agency, Ali Asghar Zarean, said that the technical level achieved in the country now makes it possible to carry out any degree of uranium enrichment. In violation of the JCPOA provisions, Iran is carrying out work at the heavy water reactor in Arak, making it possible to produce weapon-grade plutonium there.

Teheran has said that this fifth and final stage is also the last chance to save the JCPOA. In an official statement, the Iranian government said that "the Islamic Republic of Iran abandons the last key point of the operational restrictions under the JCPOA, namely the limitation on the number of the centrifuge machines. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program will be no more subject to any restrictions in the operational sphere (including the enrichment capacity, percentage of enrichment, the volume of enriched materials, and research and development)."<sup>20</sup>

The other parties to the JCPOA (except the US, of course), have urged Iran not to go any further with its violations of the deal. The fifth stage, after all, effectively amounts to Iran withdrawing from the agreement, too, and this could have undesirable consequences.

But these pleas have fallen on deaf ears in Teheran.

In response, London, Paris and Berlin, in line with JCPOA

provisions, announced that they would launch the dispute resolution mechanism.<sup>21</sup> In a joint statement, the three countries stated that they do not accept the argument that Iran has the right to reduce its compliance with the JCPOA provisions.<sup>22</sup>

The mechanism was officially launched on January 17, although the actual work was to begin at a later date and ended up being postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is little hope of consensus. Ultimately, the matter will be most likely brought before the UN Security Council, where it is highly probable that a resolution to continue the sanctions lifting will not be adopted. This would result in the Security Council once more bringing into force all seven previous resolutions containing sanctions against Iran.<sup>23</sup>

In this situation, the EU would join the US and impose its own package of unilateral sanctions against Iran. For Iran, such a turn of events would be an economic and political catastrophe that could deal a blow to the current regime's continued survival.

But Teheran has decided to take it all. Iran is attempting now to threaten its opponents and lay down its conditions.

<sup>21</sup> Dispute resolution mechanism. Article 36 of JCPOA can be summarized as follows: If any of the participants, including the E3/EU+3, believed that any or all other participants were not meeting their commitments under this JCPOA, it could refer the issue to the Joint Commission for resolution. If the Joint Commission failed to resolve the issue within 15 days, any participant could refer the issue to Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The Ministers would have 15 days to resolve the issue. Along with this, any participant may request that the issue be considered by an Advisory Board, which would consist of three members (one each appointed by the participants in the dispute and a third independent member). The Advisory Board should provide a non-binding opinion on the compliance issue within 15 days.

If, after this 30-day process, the issue is not resolved, the Joint Commission would consider the opinion of the Advisory Board for no more than 5 days in order to resolve the issue.

If the issue still has not been resolved to the satisfaction of the complaining participant, then that participant could treat the unresolved issue as grounds to cease performing its commitments under this JCPOA in whole or in part and/or notify the UN Security Council that it believes the issue constitutes significant non-performance warranting a review by the UNSC.

Article 37 of the JCPOA can be summarized as follows: it provides for a vote in the UN Security Council on a resolution to continue the sanctions lifting. If this resolution is not adopted within 30 days, then the provisions of the old UN Security Council resolutions with the sanctions against Iran will be re-imposed.

<sup>22</sup> France, Germany, Britain Trigger Iran Dispute Mechanism: Statement // Reuters. January 14, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-mechanism-idUSKBN1ZD1B6>.

<sup>23</sup> UN Security Council resolutions against Iran: 1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), 1929 (2010) и 2224 (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Iran Announces Final Step in Reducing JCPOA Commitments // Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Available at: <http://irangov.ir/detail/332945>.



On January 19, 2020, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Ali Larijani, said that Teheran might revise its position on cooperation with the IAEA if the JCPOA dispute resolution mechanism is used.

Next day, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that if the issue of Iran's compliance with the JCPOA is sent to the UN Security Council, Iran will withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT),<sup>24</sup> which has 188 states-parties. The only state-party to have withdrawn from the NPT was North Korea, after it produced a nuclear weapon. Another four countries have not signed the Treaty: Israel, India, Pakistan (all non-recognized nuclear powers), and South Sudan.

Along with statements of this kind, Iran has stepped up work to restore its nuclear capability. Speaking on April 8, 2020, on the occasion of Nuclear Technology Day, the official representative of the Atomic Energy Organization of the Islamic Republic (OAEI) Behrouz Kamalvandi said that the institution's goal is to enhance its uranium production capability to 1 million SWU.<sup>25</sup> "We can produce new types of centrifuges, and our production capacity is now the same as before the JCPOA [...] with our current enrichment situation, production above 250,000 SWU is definitely achievable, but our goal is to reach one million SWU."<sup>26</sup>

Without officially withdrawing from the JCPOA, the Iranians are ensuring they have a clear road ahead for developing their nuclear program, including the military component, on their own terms and without being accountable to anyone.

Iran cannot create a nuclear weapon overnight, of course. It would take some months, at least, to fully restore the nuclear

infrastructure to pre-JCPOA levels. After that, even without political, economic and cyber confrontation from opponents, it would still take Iran years to actually produce a nuclear weapon. Before the JCPOA came into force, it was estimated that Iran would need 4-6 years to develop a nuclear explosive device, apart from developing a delivery vehicle.

Delivery vehicles are a crucial issue for Iran. Pakistan, for example, needed around a decade from carrying out its first underground nuclear test to developing a nuclear warhead that a missile could carry.

Uncontrolled nuclear capability development in Iran would prompt a corresponding response from Israel and the US. If the Iranians look to be close in their nuclear efforts to creating a nuclear device, there is no doubt that an Israeli and/or US airstrike against Iranian nuclear facilities would be extremely likely.

Israel is currently more concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic could result in the IAEA reducing its verification of Iranian nuclear facilities and that Iran could take advantage of this to speed up the process away from the West's gaze. According to Israeli intelligence, by April 2020, the Iranians were enriching 180 kilograms of uranium a month to a level of four per cent.<sup>27</sup> Iran is moving full steam ahead to restore its nuclear infrastructure.

But Omer Carmi, an Israeli researcher from the Washington Institute for Middle East Policy, believes that there is a gap today between Iranian officials' aggressive statements and the actual steps Teheran is taking in the nuclear sector.<sup>28</sup> After all, Iran is facing a disastrous situation, especially after the start of the coronavirus epidemic.<sup>29</sup>

24 Iran's 5th Step in Reducing its JCPOA Commitments // Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. January 26, 2020. Available at: <http://irangov.ir/detail/333768>.

25 SWU: Separative Work Unit – the unit used to express the amount of separation of uranium isotopes taking place during the enrichment process. It describes the enrichment equipment's capability to separate isotopes. For comparison, according to Euratom figures for 2014, global separation capability was 56 million SWU, and for Russia it was 28 million SWU.

26 AEOI's Goal Is to Reach 1mn-SWU in Enrichment: spox // MEHR News Agency. April 8, 2020. Available at: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/157412/AEOI-s-goal-is-to-reach-1mn-SWU-in-enrichment-spox>.

27 Middle East After the Epidemic. Threats and Hopes // Detali. April 14, 2020. Available at: [https://mnenia.zahav.ru/Articles/14184/blijnyi\\_vostok\\_posle\\_epidemii\\_ugrozi\\_i\\_nadejdi](https://mnenia.zahav.ru/Articles/14184/blijnyi_vostok_posle_epidemii_ugrozi_i_nadejdi).

28 Carmi O. The Pandemic's Implications for Iran's Nuclear Program // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. April 14, 2020. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-pandemics-implications-for-irans-nuclear-program>.

29 At the start of May 2020, Iran, with a population of 82 million, had 102,000 COVID-19 cases (10th place in the world) and 6,500 deaths (9th place in the world). The mortality rate from COVID-19 (ratio of deaths to infected persons) is 6.4% (it is 0.1%-0.5% for seasonal flu).

The COVID-19 pandemic comes on top of the economic crisis caused, in large part, by the US sanctions, an unprecedented fall in oil prices and domestic political tension, which has spilled over into widespread protests. In the first two weeks of the COVID-19 crisis the Teheran stock exchange dropped by a steep 3.4 per cent, and the national currency fell by 19 per cent. Daily losses from business closures and bankruptcies come to \$164 million.<sup>30</sup> Iran stands to lose at least 45-50 per cent of its GDP, and that is an optimistic estimate.<sup>31</sup> According to the Red Crescent, the pandemic has already cost two million jobs, and the unemployed have no state benefits or support from charity organizations to fall back on.<sup>32</sup> This creates a very volatile situation for the regime.

Omer Carmi takes the view that the authorities in Teheran are well aware that this is not the best time to move forward with their nuclear strategy.

An impartial analysis of the situation suggests that the only possible solution for Iran today is to negotiate. Of course, negotiations with the US seem practically inconceivable after the events of 2019-2020. Even after General Soleimani's murder though, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif did not rule out the possibility of talks with the Americans. "The Trump administration can correct its past, lift the sanctions and come back to the negotiating table. We're still at the negotiating table. They're the ones who left".<sup>33</sup>

Trump has categorically rejected Iran's proposal of lifting sanctions as a condition for negotiations. But Iran can engage in talks with the Europeans, Russia and China, which would be essential so as to lay a real, optimum base for talks with the Americans, which would be the only hope for reducing the tension.

30 Kussa I. The total number of people infected in Iran has stepped over 9 thousand. <https://newseek.org/articles/2713882> (accessed March 13, 2020).

31 Spidel P. The Scale of the Economy Shutdown // Investing.Com. April 20, 2020. Available at: <https://ru.investing.com/analysis/article-200268767>.

32 Krasnaya vesna. 04.04.2020. <https://yandex.ru/turbo?text=https%3A%2F%2Frossaprimavera.ru%2Fnews%2F32ce6ac4>

33 Hoffmann C. "It's a Disaster for Europe To Be So Subservient to the U.S" // Der Spiegel. January 24, 2020. Available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/it-s-a-disaster-for-europe-to-be-so-subservient-to-the-u-s-a-fdf6a4d6-6b5f-4a10-860e-4c41f591a74b>.

It is becoming increasingly clearer that the nuclear deal as originally concluded can no longer be preserved, but there are hopes for an updated version, an Iranian nuclear deal 2.0. First though, it is essential to have a base that can serve as the foundation for talks on a future agreement.

Such talks are absolutely vital, no matter what the domestic political developments in Iran, where parliamentary elections took place in February 2020, and in the US, which will hold its presidential election in November. This is a decisive moment.

It is worth adding a few words here about the Iranian parliamentary election.

The conservative hardliners scored a resounding victory in the February 21 parliamentary election. These supporters of principle, as they call themselves, see themselves as defending the principles of the Islamic revolution and the legacy of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. They took 220 of the 290 seats in the parliament. In the last parliament, this conservative wing held only around 120 seats.

The coalition of reformers and moderates obtained only 20 seats, whereas in the last parliament they had around 140. This is a seven-fold drop in their results.

Iran's domestic and foreign policy will undoubtedly undergo changes over the coming period. The so-called "liberal-reformer" faction will still control the executive branch until the presidential election in May 2021, but its possibilities for pursuing its policy course are close to zero.

On the foreign policy track, however, the JCPOA remains an important factor. Two scenarios are entirely possible here. The first, which would see no great surprises coming from Iran, encompasses the period through to the May 2021 presidential election.

This scenario would see the anti-Western hardliners possibly look for solutions to the sanctions problem and the JCPOA in general through a process of dialogue. After all, Teheran has little other option but to negotiate. Iran's economic and foreign policy situation is

becoming ever more difficult. On top of this, there is what amounts to an oil embargo, with trade with Europe taking a hit of 74 per cent in 2019. Hopes for alternative markets in the East were also disappointed: trade with China was down by 34 per cent, and with India by 79 per cent.<sup>34</sup>

Another important aspect complicating the political situation with Iran were the IAEA documents of March 3, 2020. The main quarterly report of the Agency said that as at February 19, 2020, Iran's stocks of low enriched uranium came to 1020 kilograms.<sup>35</sup> This is a more than threefold increase of the 300kg allowed under the JCPOA.<sup>36</sup>

The IAEA also has a number of questions regarding possibly undeclared nuclear material and activity related to the Iranian nuclear program. In this respect, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said that he had taken the decision to have a second report prepared because the situation was deemed to be quite serious.<sup>37</sup>

This second special IAEA report for the organization's members notes that Iran did not give the Agency access to two sites and did not take part in substantive discussions to clarify the IAEA's questions related to possible undeclared nuclear material and related activity.<sup>38</sup>

IAEA Director General Grossi said that Iran must decide if it will cooperate more transparently with the IAEA and provide the needed explanations.<sup>39</sup> He also noted that Teheran risks provoking a crisis if it

refuses to cooperate with the IAEA.<sup>40</sup>

Iran's current provocative policy greatly worries the European Union.<sup>41</sup> EU concerns relate not only to the nuclear issue. FATF, in particular, after several warnings, placed Iran on its black list,<sup>42</sup> because President Rouhani could not persuade his opponents to ratify the Palermo Convention<sup>43</sup> and the Convention on Financing of Terrorism.

With this level of distrust towards Iran, it cannot be ruled out that Europe, and above all the JCPOA co-authors United Kingdom, Germany and France, which have so far supported Iran in its desire to see the nuclear deal remain in place, could withdraw their support.

It should not be forgotten, either, that the US is certain to put pressure on Iran and try to influence any contacts with the country. The US presidential election will be important in this context. In the event of a Democrat victory, any agreements with Iran will not happen overnight and will not take the same form as before, but talks nonetheless will resume. If the Republican incumbent wins a second term, the outlook will be less optimistic.

It is also possible that the situation will irritate the Iranian radicals to the point where they decide to take extreme measures, following a different scenario that involves no negotiations. This would see increased anti-Western propaganda and Iran's withdrawal (perhaps gradual) from the JCPOA and the NPT, with an end, too, to IAEA verifications in the country.

At the same time, Iran would, as mentioned earlier, step up restoration of its nuclear infrastructure with the goal of putting in place the conditions and technical base needed to develop a nuclear weapon. If this happens, a restored and renewed Iranian nuclear program would

34 The End of the Persian Perestroika in Iran, the Hardliners' Time Has Come – and Taking Control of the Parliament Was Just the First Step // Friedrich Ebert Foundation. February 25, 2020. Available at: <https://www.ips-journal.eu/regions/middle-east/article/show/the-end-of-the-persian-perestroika-4109/>.

35 Irish J. U.N.'s Nuclear Chief to Iran: Cooperate or Face New Crisis // Reuters. March 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-iaea-grossi/u-n-s-nuclear-chief-to-iran-cooperate-or-face-new-crisis-idUSKBN20Q30T>.

36 UN Security Council resolution. JCPOA. Annex I to JCPOA – Nuclear-related measures. Section J. Uranium stocks and fuel. Article 56. Iran will maintain a total enriched uranium stockpile of no more than 300 kg of up to 3.67% enriched uranium hexafluoride (or the equivalent in different chemical forms) for 15 years. Resolution 2231 (2015). Adopted by the Security Council at its 7488th meeting, on July 20, 2015 (S/RES/2231(2015)).

37 Ibid.

38 Murphy F., Irish J. U.N. Nuclear Watchdog Admonishes Iran for Denying Access to Two Sites // Reuters. March 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-iaea/u-n-nuclear-watchdog-admonishes-iran-for-denying-access-to-two-sites-idUSKBN20Q1UE>.

39 Pompeo: U.S. State Department Closely Monitors Iran's Possibly Undeclared Nuclear Activities // Interfax information agency. March 5, 2020. Available at: <http://interfax.az/view/794594?lang=ru>.

40 The IAEA Says Iran Runs the Risk of Provoking a Crisis // RIA Novosti. March 4, 2020. Available at: <https://ria.ru/20200304/1568122533.html>.

41 EU Ccalls on Iran to Cooperate with IAEA // RIA Novosti. March 5, 2020. Available at: [https://ria.ru/20200305/1568198680.html?utm\\_source=rnews](https://ria.ru/20200305/1568198680.html?utm_source=rnews).

42 FATF (The Financial Action Task Force) is an international organization engaged in combating financial crime.

43 Palermo Convention – UN Convention on Combating Transnational Organised Crime. Adopted by UN General Assembly Resolution 5525 of November 15, 2000.

be even less acceptable for the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and other opponents of Iran as it was before the JCPOA. This would pave the way to a new round of confrontation with Iran, with the real risk of setting off a military conflict that could flare up into major war. This would be a suicidal scenario for the ayatollahs and their regime.

But we should not overlook the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is also having an impact on developments in and around Iran. The pandemic is making its effect felt on the Iranian authorities' decisions, crippling their possibilities and forcing them to change tactic.

Given present circumstances, no major developments with regard to the Iranian nuclear program and the JCPOA can be expected until Iran and the rest of the world emerge from the global lockdown.

We should not expect, however, to see any change in the geopolitical vision of the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian regime in general. As long as this regime continues, its strategic vision, ideology and policies will remain unchanged.

## 1.2. TURKEY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: IDEOLOGY AND POLITICS

*Viktor Nadein-Raevsky<sup>1</sup>*

The policy pursued by Turkey and its President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the Middle East, or, as the United States calls it, the 'Greater Middle East', has attracted a great deal of harsh criticism. Much has been written, both in the Russian and foreign media, about Turkey's impulsiveness in the face of certain events and about the repeated turnabouts in its foreign policy, amongst other things. That being said, from the perspective of an external observer, Turkey's reactions to regional events certainly comes across as *reactive* and *impulsive*. It should also be noted that Turkey does not feel inclined to act against its own material, political or diplomatic interests.

When examining the country's foreign policy in the region, it is important to consider its new features, in that it is a policy built on the new ideological foundation of a Turkish "perestroika," that is to say a completely remolded ideology of nation-building which, to a large extent, has laid afresh the grounds of its domestic policy, as well as a new system of moral and political values, new compared to the country's previous ideological doctrine. However, these new features only seem new when viewed through the lens of the modern political thought. In

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fact, they became ingrained in Turkish society during the times of the Ottoman Empire.

An onlooker would likely perceive Turkey's President as impulsive. However, in fact, Recep Tayyip Erdogan usually tends to act in accordance with the ideology that he himself created – an ideology that is different from the ideological vision put forward by the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Kemal Atatürk. During his time in power, first as a prime minister and then as president of the republic, Erdogan has radically transformed his country's ideology. Turkey's founding ideology is rooted in the principles of nation-building – the so-called 'Six Arrows of Kemalism' – established by Mustafa Kemal.<sup>2</sup> The country was oriented towards laicism, or a secular state, and nationalism, according to which "all inhabitants of Turkey are Turks," or, in other words, towards the "Turkification" of all peoples living in Turkey. At the heart of Kemalism lies the idea of transforming Turkey into a secular nation-state and modelling it on the European states.

It was this policy in particular that Erdogan and his associates found not to their liking. With the help of his ally Fethullah Gülen, Erdogan positioned his Justice and Development Party as a supporter of 'moderate Islamism,' comparing the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU) of Germany. The line between moderate Islamism and some of the more radical variants of Islam is, however, very fine. That said, Erdogan's main objective was to do away with the system of checks that was preventing the republic from reverting to an Islamic incarnation of the state and that continued to be jealously guarded by the Turkish army, which would regularly intervene in politics and stage coups whenever there was a threat to the secular nature of the Republic of Turkey. Building on the support of those in favor of the country's Islamization, especially Fethullah Gülen

<sup>2</sup> Atatürk's Six Arrows, or "Altı Ok" in Turkish, are laicism (building a secular state), nationalism, populism, republicanism, statism and revolutionism (loyalty to the ideals of the Turkish revolution).

and his Hizmet Movement, Erdogan and his team succeeded in removing the military from political processes by amending several important articles of the Turkish constitution.

This was how the fundamental tenets of Erdogan and his party's ideological and political platform were formed. The country, whilst not averse to the idea of joining the European Union, began a gradual turn towards the East, towards the Muslim world. For Erdogan, this was a strategic pivot reflecting a clear desire to become a kind of spiritual leader, if not for the entire Muslim world then at least for Muslims in the Middle East.

Turkey's policy in the region is a topic debated by dozens of political scientists, including experts on Turkey who seek to explain the actions of this difficult Russian partner. In order to understand Erdogan's actions, one has to understand the concepts that underpin his foreign policy, which necessitates going back to the history of the creation of the Republic of Turkey following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. On January 28, 1920, the Ottoman parliament adopted the National Pact, also known as the National Oath,<sup>3</sup> which determined not the borders of the Ottoman Empire but those of the state entity that would rise from its ruins, i.e. what would later become the territory of the Republic of Turkey.

This was the document Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Atatürk) was referring to when he said that his country should turn away from pan-Islamism and other theories of such kind. "This is what I understand by pan-Islamism: our nation and the government representing it naturally wish to see all our fellow believers prosperous and happy, wherever they may live. We wish that the communities created in different countries by our fellow believers might live independently, on their own... But to manage and govern the entire Muslim community from a single center, as an empire, as one big empire, is a fantasy! This runs counter to science, knowledge, logic!". He continued: "Gentlemen!

<sup>3</sup> Turkey's Modern History. Moscow: Nauka. 1968. P. 28.



Consider the scientific truth and never forget that there is a limit to power beyond which the body politic cannot go, just as there are natural boundaries that limit the normal development of a person.”<sup>4</sup> All these ideas were dangerous, according to Atatürk, who believed that the country should abide by the borders established in the National Oath.

This is the issue that has been overlooked by all the experts, and unduly so, for it was the very document to outline Turkey’s borders. According to the spirit and the logic of the document, Turkey’s borders were to encompass Cyprus, a strip of land stretching along Syria’s entire northern border, and the border regions of Iraq. In Iraq, that would be Mosul and Kirkuk. It should be noted that the neighboring province on the Turkish side of the border is also called Mosul. Turkish people are being taught about these delineations from the school bench. This view of the borders has never been changed or revised. Moreover, in 1939 Turkey incorporated into its territory a new province, so-called Hatay State, which during the French mandate was a part of Syria and was known as Alexandretta. Technically, everything was done in a rather peculiar fashion. A Turkoman movement in favor of joining Turkey had swept across the province and was bolstered shortly before a referendum that was to determine the region’s fate by ‘exporting’ more than 60 thousand Turks, who all voted in unanimously in favor of joining Turkey. According to contemporary observers, France, which held a mandate over Syria, for its part allowed these schemes to continue in order to prevent Turkey from joining the Axis Powers’ block (the future Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis) in the run-up to the Second World War. And so, Alexandretta became Iskenderun and Turkey acquired its Hatay<sup>5</sup> province.

It is useful to recall that, in the view of Turkish nationalists, the territory of Cyprus was also mentioned in the National Oath. In 1974,

under the pretext of protecting the Cypriot Turks, who comprised 18% of the island’s population, Turkey occupied the northern part of the island. It is well-known that this territory still remains under Turkish occupation today, with many Anatolian Turks having been resettled there.

Erdogan’s political ideology is an ensemble of well-established ideological doctrines. Initially, its main ideological pillar was that of moderate Islamism. Erdogan himself grew up in a religious family; his father and grandfather belonged to the Naqshbandi order of Sufism. Adherence to Sufi orders is characteristic of Turkish Islam. In 1965, Erdogan received his primary education at the Piyale Pasha School, before completing his secondary education at the spiritual Imam Hatip school in Istanbul in 1973. According to his official biography, in 1981 R.T. Erdogan graduated from Marmara University’s School of Economics and Commercial Sciences in Istanbul.<sup>6</sup> As an undergraduate student in 1976, he headed the Beyoğlu youth branch of the Islamist National Salvation Party and became the chair of the party’s Istanbul youth branch the same year.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, it was the religious aspect side of Turkish politics that Erdogan was first associated with. However, unlike the leadership of the National Salvation Party, Erdogan presented the new Justice and Development Party as a champion of moderate Islamism, giving it an admittedly religious vocation, but a moderate and pro-European one. It must be said, though, that the line between ‘moderate Islamism’ and extremist movements is a very fine one.

Gradually, nationalism came to be a key ideological component of Erdogan’s line; borrowed from Kemalism, over time it has come to be an integral part of Erdogan’s supporters’ ideology. That is to say that the Lazi, the Armenians, and the numerous Kurds are not recognized as national minorities. This explains why Turkish academia tended to refer to the Kurds as ‘mountain Turks’. And, therefore, when Kurds

<sup>4</sup> Atatürk Kemal. Selected speeches and statements. Moscow: Progress. 1966. P. 187.

<sup>5</sup> This province is known for the Incirlik air base, where NATO aircraft are based alongside Turkish ones.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’ın hayatı // Ensonhaber. July 1, 2014. Available at: <http://www.ensonhaber.com/recep-tayyip-erdoganin-hayati-2014-07-01.html>.

raised the issue of their autonomy, civil and cultural rights, they faced crackdown and forced resettlement from Eastern Turkey to other regions. In 1984, the AKP began a guerrilla warfare against the authorities, claiming, according to various sources, more than 50,000 lives. An attempt was made, of course, to end the hostilities, and negotiations took place between the authorities and the PKK leadership up until 2015, but they were successfully thwarted.

There also is a third component to the ideological framework of Erdogan and his party, and that is what is known in Turkey and beyond as Neo-Ottomanism. The beginning of Neo-Ottomanism as an idea is commonly attributed to Professor Ahmet Davutoglu, who, prior to the AKP's rise to power in Turkey, published the book *Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position*.<sup>8</sup> It was in this work that Davutoglu made the case for Turkish domination through the application of soft power over the entire territory of the former Ottoman Empire. The definition offered by the Turkologist Vladimir Avatkov is a very apt one: "Neo-Ottomanism is Turkey's unofficial foreign policy doctrine which aims to expand its influence over neighboring territories by leveraging its 'soft power', its economy, its humanitarian efforts and a supranational mindset."<sup>9</sup> In other words, according to this theory Turkey is to become the leader of the entire post-Ottoman space, at the helm of some supranational union under Turkey's recognized leadership. For the Turks, this conception of their 'strategic' role simply stands to reason from their view of the world and the historic role of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, when he was in Egypt Erdogan once declared: "We defended you". The Egyptians, however, like other Arab countries that were part of the empire, see things differently: they do not look back kindly on the period of Ottoman rule in their history. Indeed, the Muslim Arabs constantly rebelled against their Ottoman rulers. And yet, for the Turks, the Arab's negative recollections are simply unfathomable.

8 Davutoğlu A. *Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*. İstanbul, 2012. P.584.

9 Avatkov V. Neo-Ottomanism. The Fundamental Basis of Turkey's Ideology and Geostrategy // Svobodnaya Mysl. 2014. Vol. 1645. No. 3. Pp. 71-78.

When appraising the overall balance of modern Turkey's ideological framework, it is worth noting that Erdogan's ideological baggage combines Islamism with nationalism, a combination which, at least officially, is deemed unacceptable by Islam. For a conscientious believer of Islam, it is one's devotion to the faith that is considered essential, and not one's ethnic origin.

That being said, there are certain nuances to be found in the ideological arsenal of Erdogan and his supporters. Firstly, it advocates Turkish nationalism, which, in addition to denying the rights of national minorities within Turkey itself, also seeks to expand outwards into the 'Turkic world'. This stems from an idea that is deeply rooted in the Turks' collective consciousness, namely the unity of all Turks: Uzbek Turks, Kazakh Turks, Tatar Turks, Crimean Tatar Turks, etc., or, in other words, the long-standing notion of Pan-Turkism.<sup>10</sup> However, while during the Ottoman Empire supporters of this idea sought to establish an empire of Greater Turan, in modern times their goal is to unite other Turkic-speaking communities around Turkey by means of soft power.

The revival of this idea began after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that time, through Fethullah Gülen's educational network, Turkey opened dozens of Turkish lyceums throughout the post-Soviet space, and, through a government program run by Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA),<sup>11</sup> Turkish universities started to train the future elite of the Turkic republics. During this period, more than 26,000 former Soviet citizens from the Turkic-speaking republics and regions of Russia completed higher education in Turkey through TIKA-run programs. Turkey thus successfully created a new pro-Turkish elite across the entire post-Soviet space. Although this 'pan-Turkic project' lost some of its steam when the AKP first came to power, in recent years Erdogan has stepped up the efforts behind it.

10 For further details, see Nadein-Raevsky V.A., *Pan-Turkism: Myth or Reality? A study of the ideology and Politics of Modern Pan-Turkism*, Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of World Economy and International Relations. Simferopol, 1995.

11 Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA) (in Turkish: Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı).

This is how the three core ideological thrusts by which Erdogan and his supporters are guided came to form the bedrock of both Turkey's domestic and foreign policy.

### **The pivot towards the Muslim world**

Turkey's western-oriented foreign policy and its determination to attain EU membership was initially embraced by the Justice and Development Party. Some headway was made in this direction. Turkey was recognized as a candidate for EU membership: negotiations on accession began and conditions for accession were determined, as were steps that the country had to take in order to improve its legislation in the economic and human rights fields and on the situation of national minorities. The country also had to settle a number of problems in its relations with its neighbors. The EU called for a normalization of Greco-Turkish relations, which had soured not only because of their conflict around Cyprus that followed Turkey's occupation of Northern Cyprus and the expulsion of 180,000 Greek Cypriots from their cities and villages, but also because of their dispute on the maritime borders and airspace around Greece's Aegean Islands. Another serious problem, according to EU states, was the question of Armenian-Turkish relations, which were embittered not only because of Turkey's blockade of Armenia in support of its ally Azerbaijan (under the "One nation, two countries" motto, popular in both countries), but also because of Turkey's refusal to recognize the Armenian Genocide by the Ottoman Empire.

Nevertheless, Turkey did successfully resolve a few of the issues raised by EU, both in the economic sphere and in terms of its internal political order. For instance, Turkey entered into negotiations with the Kurds. Meetings took place among the head of the Turkish MIT (the National Intelligence Organization), Hakan Fidan, and the head of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan, who continues to serve a life sentence in a Turkish prison on the island of İmralı. It was in fact EU's pressure and the demands it placed on Turkey in

relation to human rights that led to an attempt to resolve the long-standing crisis in relations between the government and the Kurdish national minority, which, by various estimates, comprises up to 18 million people.

However, hopes that the negotiations on accession to the EU would prove to be a swift success were misplaced. Several EU states were opposed to the admission of Turkey to their ranks. The argument against Turkey's admission to the EU is not merely a religious one. By EU standards, Turkey is a large country which, would get a significant number of seats in the European Parliament and in the European Commission once it becomes a full EU member. This would give it significant influence over the union. Equally important is the fact that, notwithstanding the country's economic reforms and its overall advanced level of industrial development, Turkey's agriculture development still lags behind the level of development achieved by the more 'advanced' European countries. This means the sector would require significant subsidies from the EU. But the main concern for EU politicians was the question of Islam and its place within the EU.

Conversely, the EU's objections and the consequently protracted negotiations on Turkey's accession led to a gradual change in the position of most Turks on the very idea of joining the Union. Moreover, the foreign policy priorities of the Turkish government also started to shift.

It appears that Erdogan set himself the goal of bolstering his authority in Muslim countries and Arab Muslim ones in particular. This new direction in Turkey's foreign policy drew no objections from Erdogan's ally F. Gülen, either. The idea of close relations with Muslim countries and communities, or even an alliance with them, dovetailed nicely with Gülen's conception of Turkey's foreign policy. However, far from all of the novelties in the country's foreign policy drew support from Gülen, also known as Khoja Effendi.

The policy's eastern outlook meant Erdogan had to both assimilate the major challenges of the Islamic world and alter Turkey's regional

and international orientation. This meant a re-calibration of its relations, even with its strategic partners. Its allied ties with Israel were the main casualty of this adjustment. The first blow to these ties came when the two countries notoriously clashed during a panel discussion at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 29, 2009. Addressing the Israeli President Shimon Peres, Erdogan accused Israel of killing Palestinians during Operation Cast Lead.<sup>12</sup> “You know well how to kill!”, said Erdogan to Peres, walking out of the meeting.<sup>13</sup> He was hailed as a hero by pious Turks, who were unhappy with Turkey’s ally relationship with Israel, and of course he was equally acclaimed in Arab countries, where public opinion began to see Erdogan and his party as the main defenders of Palestinian rights.

However, this stunt by Erdogan was merely the beginning of Turkey’s foreign policy realignment. Erdogan continued to harshly criticize Israel’s policies in the occupied territories on a regular basis, and, in 2010, the Turks began preparations to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip. A humanitarian convoy called the ‘Freedom Flotilla’ was organized quite openly and received support from the government and the media. On May 31, 2010, the flotilla approached the territorial waters of Israel. However, Israel did not wait for the ships to enter its territorial waters, and an Israeli commando soon boarded the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara*. Turkish activists attacked the paratroopers using only their knives. The Israelis, for their part, used firearms against the ship’s defenders, despite the fact that Turkey was virtually Israel’s only ally in the region. The assault resulted in the deaths of nine activists at the hands of Israel’s commandos. It was this specific event that first drove a wedge between Gülen and Erdogan on foreign policy matters. Gülen condemned the organization of the Freedom Flotilla on the grounds that it violated Israel’s sovereignty. But this framing of the issue ran radically counter to the views

of devout Islamists, and the first deep crack appeared in Erdogan’s relation with Gülen. Gülen’s position was decried not only by Erdogan’s supporters in Turkey but also by Islamists around the world.

In turn, this deterioration in relations with Israel, Ankara’s main ally and partner in the region, was met with disapproval from Turkey’s generals and its overseas ally, the United States. Erdogan achieved his desired result: he managed to cast Israel in an unfavorable light in the eyes of Europe, whilst at the same time garnering unprecedented support not only from the Arab world, but also from the Islamic community at large. In addition, Israel was forced to relax its blockade against the Palestinian Authority. The figure of Erdogan rose up at the center of all these events, and he became something of an idol in the Arab world. By contrast, Gülen’s image suffered in the eyes of Islamists, and some followers of the multimillion-dollar Turkish Nur movement deserted him.<sup>14</sup>

But there was another twist to these events: Erdogan, in contrast to Israel, improved Turkey’s relations with Syria, which had always been fraught. It should be noted that the Syrians had not forgotten the events of 1939, when, during the French mandate, their Turkish neighbors managed to seize control of the province of Alexandretta, creating the so-called Hatay state. Only under the government of Bashar al-Assad were relations normalized. The Syrian authorities now no longer continuously remind Turkey of this seizure of Syrian territory. Erdogan and Assad even went on a family holiday together. Furthermore, joint Turkish-Israeli military exercises became a thing of the past, and Syria took the place of Israel in these exercises.

These cozy relations between the two countries lasted until the start of the ‘Arab revolutions’. Erdogan welcomed the events in Tunisia and then in Egypt with enthusiasm. Islamists came to power in Tunisia, and in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood, a party ideologically

<sup>12</sup> Shimon Peres and Tayyip Erdogan Hold Phone Conversation after the Scandal in Davos // Kommersant, January 30, 2009. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1110501>.

<sup>13</sup> Turkey’s Prime Minister Storms out of Davos Meeting // RIA Novosti, January 29, 2009. Available at: <https://ria.ru/world/20090129/160494284.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Members of the ‘Nur’ movement (Movement of ‘Light’) are disciples of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. Fethullah Gulen is considered to be the movement’s organizer in Turkey. However, Gulen himself denies his role in the creation of this organization.



akin to Turkey's AKP, emerged became a leading party. Erdogan and his AKP rode this wave and their popularity rose sharply throughout the Arab world. Arab Islamists were even willing to give their parties the name of the AKP. The Egyptian chapter of the Muslim Brothers considered doing so for instance. However, remembering their confrontation with the Ottomans, they changed their minds. Turkey became actively involved in the 'revolutionary process'. It staunchly supported Islamists in Libya as they overthrew the government of Muammar Gaddafi, which further increased its popularity among Arab Islamists.

As part of his efforts to expand relations with the East, Erdogan improved relations with Iran and even offered to act as a mediator on issues surrounding Iran's nuclear program and negotiations with the West. Turkey even suggested removing Iranian uranium from Iran to Turkey, as part of the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue.

Thereby, Erdogan managed to perform a complete pivot in his country's foreign policy, while continuing to reassure his Western allies of Turkey's abiding commitment to the United States and NATO.

However, this foreign policy pivot to the East also brought about negative consequences. Erdogan got carried away by his 'Islamic project', and when the Arab revolutions extended to Syria, he performed another foreign policy volte-face. His 'best friend' Bashar al-Assad became an evil enemy, the 'Butcher of Damascus' who did not know how to 'talk to his own people'.

### Turkey's foreign policy and the Kurdish factor

Turkey's regional foreign policy is largely shaped by domestic political factors, the most significant of which is arguably that of national minorities, an issue that emerged as far back as during the formation of the Republic of Turkey as it is derived from the Kemalist principle of Nationalism, a principle that remains at the heart of the Turkish Constitution today. The entire conflict with the Turkish Kurds can be boiled down to this principle. The Kurd's numerous uprisings in Turkey were vigorously suppressed by Turkish security forces, part

of the Kurdish population (more than 3 million people) was forcibly resettled across Anatolia, and tens of thousands left the country for the Kurdish regions of Syria, among other places. A large part of the Kurdish community emigrated to Europe. For instance, out of the approximately four million Turks living in Germany, 800.000 are ethnic Kurds.<sup>15</sup>

Within Turkey itself, the Kurdistan Workers' Party has been waging a guerrilla war against the Turkish state for Kurdish autonomy since 1984.<sup>16</sup> Following their attacks against the Turkish army and Gendarmerie, Kurdish units retreated to the north of Iraq. Despite the disagreements and rivalries between the region's powers, when it came to taking a stance against the Kurds all four states soon saw eye to eye. Indeed, an agreement with the Iraqi government dating back to the time of Saddam Hussein gave the Turkish army permission to pursue Kurdish troops on Iraqi territory. This agreement remained in force after the US-led operation 'Desert Storm' and the emergence of a *de-facto* independent Iraqi Kurdistan, and not only do Turkish troops launch periodic raids into Iraqi territory, they also regularly carried out air strikes against Kurdish villages in the north of the country.

After the establishment of the Islamic State, Turkey continued its operations in the north of Iraq despite having good relations with the administration of Iraqi Kurdistan. The situation deteriorated following the start of the Syrian conflict. Not only did Ankara set up Syrian refugee camps in Turkey, it also established training centers for Islamist terrorists, which came as a complement to other such camps found in Arab countries. Tens of thousands of militants launched sweeping military operations in Syria, with active financial support from Saudi Arabia<sup>17</sup> and Qatar, which some claim hadn't forgiven Bashar al-Assad

15 The Kurdish Issue in Germany // Newsland. July 4, 2013, <https://newsland.com/user/4297781156/content/problema-kurdov-v-germanii/4464457>.

16 The PKK's goal was precisely to achieve autonomy. Ocalan's basic premise was that 'Turkey is our country and there is no reason why we should give it up to the Turks'. Gradually however, under the effects of both the fierce struggle and changing priorities among the Kurds themselves, the crux of the PKK's struggle became the pursuit of an independent, unified Kurdistan.

17 Malbrunot G. How the CIA Is Supplying Weapons to Syrian Rebels // Inosmi.ru. June 28, 2012. Available at: <https://inosmi.ru/asia/20120628/194209015.html>.



for refusing to build a gas pipeline through Syria to export Qatari gas to Europe.<sup>18</sup>

Turkey tried on more than one occasion to unite the disparate Syrian opposition into a homogeneous system of 'anti-regime fighters', but to little avail. Moreover, Turkey's meddling in Syria has led to the deterioration of its political relations with Russia. However, the main reason behind Turkey's expansion into Syria was its determination to wipe out the Syrian Kurds whom it considers to be part of the PKK that allegedly controls the Kurds. This Turkish point of view is, however, a far cry from the truth. What the Turks fear the most is that yet another autonomous region might emerge, this time in the north of Syria, which, in Turkey's view, would pose a direct threat to its own territorial integrity.

There certainly is some ideological affinity between the Syrian Kurds and the Turkish Kurds. The PKK's recognized leader, Abdullah Ocalan, spent around 20 years in Syria and is highly respected in the ranks of the Syrian Kurds' national self-defense forces; his political theories, in particular the idea of democratic confederalism, are shared by many Syrian Kurdish leaders. His theory of democratic confederalism sets forth a process for building a democracy from the bottom up, from the level of self-governing communities, but the very idea of such a state structure is out of keeping with the Syrian constitution. Meanwhile, though sympathetic to the PKK, the Syrian Kurds remain an independent force of their own.

One thing, though, is certain: without the active role of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the backbone of which has always been the Kurdish People's Protection Units (the YPG) and the Women's armed brigades known as the YPJ, the US-led international coalition could

not have coped with the so-called Islamic state. The Syrian Democratic Forces managed to defeat ISIL forces in 2017 and to occupy its self-proclaimed capital Raqqa. However, the SDF's operations went a step further, and ISIS militants were driven out not just from the Kurdish regions but also from the East of Syria, where the country's main oil fields are located.

Convinced of the need to quash the people's self-defense forces of the Syrian Kurds which, in Turkey's narrative, rank among the 'terrorists', the Turkish authorities took advantage of Damascus's weakness in the north and of the deep-seated animosity between Arabs and Kurds and began gradually driving the Syrian Kurds out of a strip of land along Syria's northern border. Turkey's first move towards a *de-facto* occupation of Syrian territory was its military operation code-named Euphrates Shield (August 2016 – March 2017). This was followed by Operation Olive Branch, which resulted in the capture of the city of Afrin<sup>19</sup> in 2018. After the capture of Afrin, Operation Peace Spring began (2019), followed by Operation Spring Shield (2020), which both targeted the Rojava Kurds in north-eastern Syria.

Turkey exploited the inveterate disagreements between the Syrian Kurds and the country's Arab leadership. It is true that, following the spread of the terrorist war in Syria and the ensuing situation, Damascus did not stand in the way of the Kurds' quest for autonomy, the Kurds having successfully fought off not only ISIS, but also the armed Islamist opposition forces. These Kurdish feats, however, reinforced Ankara's concern and the fear of the Turks in general that yet another region of real Kurdish autonomy would appear along their southern borders. The situation was rather advantageous for the Turks: ISIS forces had been largely defeated and the United States yielded to Turkey's demands and withdrew their forces from the Kurdish regions, moving them first to Iraq and then back to north-eastern Syria, supposedly to guard the Syrian oil fields there.

<sup>18</sup> In 2009, Bashar Assad refused to sign a gas pipeline contract for a gas pipeline so as to protect the interests of his Russian ally. He added insult to injury and further embittered the Sunni monarchies by endorsing the so-called 'Islamic pipeline' through which gas from the Iranian South Pars would travel via Syria to Lebanese ports and from there on to Europe. For further details, see Why the Arabs Do Not Want to See Americans in Syria // Expert.ru, October 25, 2016. Available at: <https://expert.ru/2016/02/25/pochemu-arabyi/>.

<sup>19</sup> The Kurdish regions in the north of Syria, known as the autonomous Kurdish region of 'Rojava', consists of three cantons: Afrin in the Northwest, Kobani in the center and Jazira in the Northeast.

In all its operations, Turkey made use of Syrian armed opposition groups and pro-Turkish Turkomans. That is not to say that the Turks simply relied on the actions of disparate and rival groups of militants; rather, they took members from these groups and created brand new formations. For example, for Operation Olive Branch, the so-called “Free Syrian Army” was established, with more than 10,000 fighters, armed and equipped at Turkey’s expense and with its militants receiving a regular pay. In the media, these units were called the “Free Syrian Army,” but actually they were no longer made up of deserters from the Syrian Arab Army but of mainly Islamist militants.

Another feature of Turkey’s operations was mass population migration. When Operation Olive Branch began, more than 200,000 Kurds left the Afrin region, with the total number of refugees later rising to 350,000. Turkey’s operations against the Rojava Kurds led to another wave of 150,000 Kurds fleeing the advancing Islamists. However, before the Turkish incursion into Afrin the Kurds were asked to hand over their positions to the government’s Syrian Arab Army, an offer that they refused. After the occupation of Afrin, Kurdish property and their entire olive harvest were confiscated. Christians were completely driven out of the city, and the Yazidis, who inhabited the region, were forced to convert to Islam on pain of death. Temples and Yazidi places of worship were destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

The evicted were replaced by settlers, including Turkomans who had fled Tel Afar in Iraq, people from Central Asia and the poorer cities of Turkey, some fighters and their families from the war zone in Homs,<sup>21</sup> and Syrian Turkomans. According to reports from Afrin, there are Turkish flags flying all over the town, portraits of Erdogan on display, and policemen in Turkish uniforms standing guard. To what

extent this is consistent with Erdogan’s declared commitment to maintaining Syria’s territorial integrity only time will tell.

In light of the above, the Turkish expansion in northern Syria fully dovetails with the Islamists’ approach of “helping one’s Islamic brothers,” with Neo-Ottoman ideas of expansion across the area of the former Ottoman Empire, and with Pan-Turkish postulates about the ‘unity of all Turks’, including the Turkomans, be they Syrian or Iraqi.

However, the aim of Turkey’s expansion was not merely to occupy Afrin. A much greater threat to the future of Syria’s Kurdish regions came when Operation Spring Shield was launched in 2020. Turkey planned to capture a strip of Syrian territory 30 to 50 km deep in order to completely clear the area of Syrian Democratic Forces troops and, by the same token, of any Kurds. When it became clear to the Kurdish leadership that they would not be able to stop the Turkish offensive, and in light of the tragic experience of the resistance in Afrin and the fate suffered by the Kurds there, Rojava’s leaders decided to negotiate with Damascus and to enter into a de facto alliance with the Syrian Arab Army. But what really prevented a full Turkish occupation of Rojava was Russia’s intervention. Nevertheless, a 100 km long strip along the border still had to be abandoned to the Turks, Kurdish units had to withdraw behind a 30 km border zone with Syrian troops occupying a strip along the border in all of the main Kurdish regions. As things currently stand, the territory into which Turkish troops were brought is jointly patrolled by the Turks and the Russian police.

The situation in Idlib, where Turkish forces have failed to get the Islamist units to observe a ceasefire, has changed. Militants from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, defeated the pro-Turkish Islamists and, as a result, Turkey found itself unable to fulfil its obligations of maintaining a ceasefire. As a consequence, and despite active resistance from Turkish troops and the massive use of Turkish drones, units from the Syrian Arab Army succeeded in liberating more than half of Idlib’s territory. However, once again, the situation required Russian intervention. The Syrian army’s offensive was

<sup>20</sup> The Syrian Kurdish Enclave of Afrin: From Internally Displaced Persons to Demographic Changes // Kurdistan.ru. May 1, 2018, Available at: [https://kurdistan.ru/2018/05/01/news-32531\\_Siriyskiy\\_kurdskiy\\_anklav\\_Afrin\\_ot\\_vynuzhdennyh\\_pereselenecv\\_k\\_demograficheskim\\_izmeneniyam.html](https://kurdistan.ru/2018/05/01/news-32531_Siriyskiy_kurdskiy_anklav_Afrin_ot_vynuzhdennyh_pereselenecv_k_demograficheskim_izmeneniyam.html).

<sup>21</sup> Syro-Kurdish Scientist: “Erdogan’s Plans Include Changes in the Demographic Situation of Afrin Including Its Possible Future Annexation” // RIATAZA. March 3, 2018. Available at: <https://riataza.com/2018/03/03/siro-kurdskiy-uchenyiy-v-planah-erdogana-izmeneniya-v-demograficheskoy-situatsii-afrina-s-ee-v-dalneyshem-vozmozhnoy-anneksii/>.

halted, and Turkey had to accept joint control over part of the province's territory.

As can be seen, the Astana format of trilateral agreements between Russia, Turkey and Iran remains an active process. However, the Neo-Ottoman thrust of Turkey's foreign policy has also gained momentum in northern Africa. In the case of Libya, Islamists close to Erdogan's way of thinking and who support the Fayeze Al-Sarraj government are supported by Turkey, who supplies them with weapons and trains them up in its camps. In order to assist the Government of National Accord, Turkey has not only dispatched its own special forces there but has also sent 7,000 mercenaries from among the Syrian Islamist units it controls.<sup>22</sup>

But in addition to applying its ideological doctrines, Turkey is particularly interested in this North African country and the delimitation of its continental shelf, to which Ankara tenaciously lays claim despite there being no basis in international law for it to do so. Hence the memorandum of understanding that Turkey signed with Fayeze al-Sarraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) concerning maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean, an agreement which infuriated Egypt, Cyprus and Greece. These countries have pointed out that the deal violates international law.<sup>23</sup>

Turkey harbors equally serious designs on the continental shelf of Cyprus. It has begun drilling activities on Cyprus' continental shelf and has threatened the Republic of Cyprus with the use of force should it start drilling wells on its own shelf, claiming that no such activities have been agreed on with the administration of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which no one other than Turkey recognizes.

On January 18, in an official statement by the European External

Action Service (EEAS),<sup>24</sup> the EU condemned Turkey's exploratory and drilling operations in the exclusive economic zone of Cyprus, but this official censure has had no bearing on Turkey's intentions.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has led to events spiraling out of control, both for governments in the Middle East and around the world in general. Countries in the region were forced to close their borders, to sharply reduce their international contacts and associated air traffic, with the oil industry suffering accordingly. Turkey's economy has been hard hit, as have the economies of other states. According to preliminary data, tourism, a key sector of the country's economy, will inevitably suffer great losses in 2020. In total, between January and August 2019 over 31 million foreign tourists visited Turkey,<sup>25</sup> including a record of 7.017 million Russian citizens.<sup>26</sup> Other economic sectors will also unavoidably incur losses.

And yet Recep Tayyip Erdogan's reaction to the current situation is perfectly in tune with his traditional approach to his country's role in world politics. In Erdogan's view, developed countries have been plunged into a state of despair because of the pandemic crisis, which calls for a review of all forecasts about the future development of humanity and raises the question of restructuring the entire world order. Erdogan considers that, for the first time since the Second World War, "Turkey is being given the opportunity to play a part in reshaping the world order."<sup>27</sup>

Turkey's lockdown measures were limited to a curfew that only applied at weekends. Unemployment has risen sharply, and the immigration crisis has intensified. The EU is not offering any assistance. For the EU, the refugee crisis has receded into the background. Under

22 Turkey Uses Deceit to Recruit Syrians and Lure Them into Fighting for The GNA // Regnum. April 16, 2020. Available at: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2918692.html>.

23 Obozrevatel: Turkish Actions in the Mediterranean Sea and Libya Antagonize States // MK-Turkey. December 18, 2019. Available at: <https://mk-turkey.ru/politics/2019/12/18/mosr-obozrevatel-turciya-otkusyvaet-bolshe.html>.

24 The European Union Dutifully Condemns Turkey for Drilling on Cyprus' Continental Shelf // Rossaprimavera. January 19, 2020, <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/600f7c68>.

25 Which Country Sent the Most Tourists to Turkey? // Turkey for Friends. October 1, 2012. Available at: [https://turkeyforfriends.com/news/kakaja\\_strana\\_otpravila\\_bolshe\\_vsego\\_turistov\\_v\\_turciju/2019-10-01-1886](https://turkeyforfriends.com/news/kakaja_strana_otpravila_bolshe_vsego_turistov_v_turciju/2019-10-01-1886).

26 Russia Tops the Charts In 2019 In Terms of The Number Of Tourists Visiting Turkey // TASS. January 31, 2020. Available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/7652897>

27 Erdogan Speaks About His Part in The Redrawing of The World // Lenta.ru. April 21, 2020. Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/04/21/erd/>.

these circumstances, the time has really come for the Turkish government to reconsider many of their own ideas, yet they continue to beef up the country's military contingent in Syria, bringing its strength to 20 thousand, and to threaten the Syrian government with retaliation in the event of 'aggression' against Turkish occupation forces there. Air strikes against PKK troops in Iraq are carried out as usual, and operations against the PKK's forces in Turkey also continue. It is still hard to say what the exact toll of the lockdown on the country will be. But that the Turkish economy will suffer an unprecedented blow is beyond doubt.

### 1.3. ISRAEL'S NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE NEW ENVIRONMENT

*Irina Zvyagelskaya*<sup>1</sup>

**T**he security issue for Israel has always been particularly critical, irrespective of the changing nature of challenges and threats, or a sufficiently effective strategy to ward them off. The relative weakness of the state and army, Israel's non-inclusion in any politico-military alliances and the existential character of the threats meant that for the first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, the hypothetical possibility of a large-scale simultaneous onslaught by Arab armies from three different directions became a perpetual nightmare. He attached particular importance to strengthening the Israeli Defense Forces (TZAHAL) and to creating a powerful military capability. The modestly-sized but more modern Israeli army was notable for the ability of its officer corps, including the junior officers, to take independent decisions in response to a changing environment, for its high degree of cohesion, the readiness of its servicemen and women to sacrifice themselves and for its skill in mobilizing scarce resources.

Ben-Gurion, despite international pressure and dissension within the élite of Israel, succeeded in Israel's acquiring nuclear weapons, the

<sup>1</sup> Irina Zvyagelskaya – Head of the Center for the Middle East Studies, Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences; Ph.D. (Russia).

possession of which is not openly admitted by the Israeli leadership to this day. The Israeli historian Nir Kedar calls David Ben-Gurion a ‘security-minded leader’, something which was reflected not only in his conduct during his tenure but also in his custom of wearing a khaki uniform.<sup>2</sup>

The prevalence of the military element and the predominance of security issues also impacted on the decision-making process. The existing system in Israel gives a narrow circle of people belonging to restricted or shadow cabinets the opportunity of enacting serious and far-reaching strategic decisions. In this, political tradition also makes itself felt. After the declaration of independence, the prime minister increasingly inclined towards the military establishment, assumed the post of defense minister in addition to being PM and surrounded himself with army officers and bureaucrats from the Ministry of Defense. The MOD strove to subordinate the actions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to strengthening military capability. Foreign policy activity always served as an important resource in searching for allies who were able to provide supplies of arms, be prepared to collaborate in the intelligence field and also in terms of finding markets for Israeli military production.

## Evolution of the security doctrine

In terms of classical confrontation, the size of armies, the simultaneous existence of several fronts, the level of armaments and military training are all essential prerequisites for gaining advantage over one's adversary and being victorious. In the case of Israel, which withstood multiple armies from Arab states, factors such as modernization and mobilization capabilities played a decisive role. In order to obtain permanent supremacy over the adversary in the absence of peace agreements and strategic depth, a doctrinal statement of basic security tenets was required.

<sup>2</sup> Nir K. A Civilian Commander in Chief: Ben-Gurion's Mamlakhtiyut, the Army and the Law // Israel Affairs. 2008. Vol. 14. No. 2. P. 202.

Israel's security doctrine was formulated by Ben-Gurion in the beginning of the 1950s, mindful of the following objective circumstances: the small population size, the presence of existential threats and the possibility of winning only by swiftly incapacitating the enemy's command and control system (military infrastructure).<sup>3</sup>

Israel's security doctrine has never been fully published and only its main provisions have been made public. “Ben-Gurion's defense doctrine embodied three principles, or pillars: deterrence, early warning, and offensive power. These principles are still the cornerstone of Israeli defense. However, some of Ben-Gurion's ideas have been eclipsed, particularly in recent years. Notably, Israel no longer faces short-term existential threats.”<sup>4</sup>

This document written by Ben-Gurion remained for several decades the only attempt to officially formulate the doctrine of Israel's national security. To a certain extent this can be explained by the particularity of the way the Israeli political system and bureaucracy worked, where for a long time there was no National Security Council which could have initiated and developed doctrinal principles. One such council was set up in 1999 for the coordination, analysis and monitoring of security and its functions according to the prime-minister's directives. The duties of the NSC were legally enshrined in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

In 2018 PM Benjamin Netanyahu presented his own national security strategy, drawn up with the assistance of the NSC, experts and representatives from the military command, which, mindful of the changed environment, introduced substantive corrections to Ben-Gurion's doctrine. The key provisions were submitted to the cabinet of ministers, security structures and the relevant committees of the Knesset. The focus of ‘Netanyahu's doctrine’ is on the four main pillars designed to successfully counter modern threats. “The first pillar

<sup>3</sup> Karasova T. Israel's Nuclear Program // The Contours of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law. 2018. Vol. 11. No. 6. P. 98.

<sup>4</sup> Nagel J., Schanzer J. From Ben-Gurion to Netanyahu: The Evolution of Israel's National Security Strategy. FDD, Research Memo. May 13, 2019. P. 3.

<sup>5</sup> National Security Council. Available at [https://ru.qwe.wiki/wiki/National\\_Security\\_Council\\_\(Israel\)](https://ru.qwe.wiki/wiki/National_Security_Council_(Israel)).



is military power, which derives from deterrence, early warning, defense, and offensive capabilities. The second pillar is economic power, which derives from strengthening the private sector, removing obstacles to trade and commerce, and strengthening global economic ties. The third pillar is political power, which derives from strong alliances, deterrence, ensuring that the Israeli military has a free hand to operate, and eroding the [...] anti-Israel majority in international organizations.”<sup>6</sup> The final pillar is human capital.

In parallel to building up investments in intelligence and the air force, Netanyahu urges the creation of substantial ground forces. He points out that supremacy must be obtained in the fields of robotics, unmanned aerial vehicles and other technologies so as to allow Israel to penetrate deep into enemy territory. To protect the civilian population, anti-missile, anti-tank and cutting-edge barrier technologies providing for continuous operations and the defense of Israel’s infrastructure are needed.

The new doctrine introduced clarifications regarding the main principles for the use of force that Israel is traditionally guided by. Force can and should be deployed to counter any existential threat, but it notes the need for swift and deadly capabilities to minimize harm and deny the enemy substantial achievements, thus undermining its capabilities and sapping its will to continue fighting. Netanyahu also emphasizes the need to maintain readiness for ‘war between wars.’ Israel will not shy away from striking countries which put their territory at the disposal of Israel’s enemies and will hit their critically vital infrastructure if this would lead to reducing the duration of conflict. The doctrine contains “a clear message to the world about the way Israel plans to respond to strategic and existential threats, as well as large-scale terror attacks. Military commanders have previously implied this message in statements. But now, Netanyahu has enshrined it in a document that will likely serve as official Israeli policy for years to come.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nagel and Schanzer, op. cit. P. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Nagel and Schanzer, op. cit. Pp. 5-6.

Some analysts argue that the challenges facing Israel are constantly growing more complex and for this reason it is forced to orient its strategy towards waiting. “Israel’s national security strategy can seem baffling, but it is defined by a coherent logic: that the country’s problems have no near-term solutions and waiting them out might make them easier to deal with later.”<sup>8</sup> ‘Waiting’ for Israel means providing for a continual high-level state of combat- readiness and internal mobilization, maintaining advantages in confrontation and an emphasis on preventive action, which includes striking enemy formations on the territory of third states.

### Transformation of challenges and threats

The most serious security challenges that the military and analysts point to and which require an adequate response are the following: an enemy quick to learn; reduction in the cost of modern types of weaponry and their widespread use (virtually all armed formations are now equipped with drones, for example); the decrease in ‘classical’ military engagements and the growth in militancy of a varied range of armed groups and warlords and the spread of unreliable information (fake news).

Udi Dekel, the Director of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), highlights the ever more complex environment in which Israel has to provide for its security: “The risks Israel faces are growing, given a weakened and fragile surrounding Middle East where combat arenas and interconnected zones of instability abound. It is particularly difficult to assess the unintended consequences of military and political action, and there is an ongoing process of learning and improvement underway among Israel’s adversaries, who take advantage of advanced technologies that are cheap and readily available. There is increased difficulty in attaining a proper grasp on reality in a world of

<sup>8</sup> Sachs N. Why Israel Waits. Anti-Solutionism as a Strategy // Foreign Affairs. 2015. November/December. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2015-10-20/why-israel-waits>.

clashing narratives and questioned truth, which compromises decision making.”<sup>9</sup>

The participation of irregular forces in conflict; the use of new technologies; attempts to exert not only military, but economic, pressure on the enemy (blockades, sanctions, sieges); the creation of an unfavorable information climate (including the intentional spread of threatening rumors) etc. – although all of this is fairly traditional practice, in modern conditions the parties to international relations have now acquired unprecedented opportunities for using this toolbox.

Technological break-throughs, the extensive market for modern weapons accessible not only to states, but also to paramilitaries and militias, and stringent professionalism requirements, all serve to blur the lines between insurgents and a regular army.

### The fast-learning enemy

Israel’s first encounter with a large-scale challenge from irregular armed formations came during the Second Lebanon War in 2006. In this war, detachments of the Lebanese Shiite organization Hezbollah demonstrated the capabilities of a regular army and made wide use of intermediate and near-range missiles able to cover half the territory of Israel. Hezbollah had developed sufficient operational and tactical means to provide for the security of their own combatants. These also included the deployment of mobile missile launchers in urban and rural districts in the vicinity of clusters of non-combatants. The designers of these tactics supposed that Israel would not want to increase casualties amongst the civilian population. As a result, militia losses were not significant and their military capability allowed them to fire hundreds of missiles able to reach Haifa daily.

The effectiveness of the way Hezbollah waged war prompted one of the Israeli officers – at first glance paradoxically – to remark: “You can tell Hezbollah has been trained in guerrilla-fighting by a real

army.”<sup>10</sup> The militias’ use of anti-armor missile systems against IDF armor and defensive positions, coupled with decentralized tactics, came as a surprise to the Israeli armed forces.

Israeli military specialist Shlomo Brom believes that one of the main problems was that Israel set itself the unrealistic objective of “defeating Hezbollah by destroying its military capability and disarming it. The realistic objective of the short-term confrontation should have been to *contain* Hezbollah, in other words to create a situation in which its ability to harm Israel would be significantly reduced. [...] Due to the complexity of the campaign in Lebanon, it was possible to advance Israel’s interests only by a combination of military and political means and not by military force only.”<sup>11</sup>

The Israeli operation began with bombings by the air force. This was prompted first and foremost by the experience of the 1982-84 war, when the Israeli army sustained serious losses in Lebanon. Now the casualties were mainly among Lebanese civilians who did not have time to leave their homes and had nowhere to flee. Bridges, power stations, roads and other infrastructure were destroyed.

Israel failed to provide information support for its military campaign in Lebanon: the bombings, civilian casualties and the destruction of infrastructure, shown on all channels (not only Arab ones), undermined the image of Tzahal and Israel.

The regular army was at a loss to do anything against Hezbollah’s organized and well-equipped mobile detachments, which moreover enjoyed the full support of the local population. During the war, even the forces for whom the Shiite radical organization presented a serious internal political threat, sympathized with them.

Currently Hezbollah has not only built up its military capability, but has made qualitative changes on the northern front. In step with

<sup>9</sup> Dekel U. At the Opening of the New Decade, Regional Challenges Test Israel’s Strength // INSS Insight. 2020. No. 1256. P. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman F. Conflict in the 21-st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars. Arlington, Virginia: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies. 2007. P. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Brom S. Political and Military Objectives in a Limited War against a Guerilla Organization. The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives. Ed. by Shlomo Brom and Meir Elran. Tel-Aviv: INSS. 2007. Pp. 17-18.

the military wing of Hezbollah continually transforming itself into a professional army, confrontation has taken on an increasingly asymmetrical character. Assaf Orion, a reserve Brigadier-General, gave the following assessment of Hezbollah's capabilities: "Hezbollah's current arsenal is estimated to include 130,000 rockets and missiles of various ranges and warhead sizes, in addition to attack drones, coast-to-sea missiles, and surface-to-air missiles. This large firepower, exceeding that of most nation-states, is defended by a land garrison and augmented by offensive infantry units. The group's impressive military growth took place despite two obstacles: Hezbollah's deep involvement in regional fighting, especially in the Syrian war, and the UNIFIL (UN peacekeeping force – *I.Z.*) mandate to help the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) become the only military force south of the Litani River."<sup>12</sup>

As we know, the demarcation lines of the border with Lebanon are indicated on UN maps and diagrams as being non-official. The blue line was proposed by the UN in 2000 in confirmation of the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon. At a 2007 trilateral meeting both sides agreed to demarcate the blue line on the ground. Visual demarcation work took several years. Towards mid-December 2015 the UN forces in Lebanon verified 227 points, measured 258 and installed 237 markers in the form of blue barrels along the blue line (the Line of Withdrawal of Forces).<sup>13</sup>

UNIFIL is a modern and well-equipped force. Experts note that it uses more radars than any other UN peacekeeping mission. It has also developed an information and liaison system along the blue line which uses maps, real-time geographic data, satellite imagery and coordinates.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this, the Israeli military are still skeptical about the UN force's capabilities. They believe that in terms of the reality on the ground in Lebanon they cannot always monitor what is happening on the border effectively enough. "The main feature in Hezbollah's campaign in southern Lebanon is the restriction of UNIFIL's mandated freedom of movement. The UN [...] reports at least 150 incidents of restricted movement [...]. In ninety-five cases, UN troops were stopped, forty-five others involved vehicles blocking their path, and several more involved a stationary physical barrier."<sup>15</sup>

The strengthening of Hezbollah's military capability and the concentration of its military presence along the blue line is achieved through placing arms depots in border villages. So as to make monitoring and access more difficult they planted around populated areas a lot of woodland and bushes which could be used as natural camouflage. Moreover, the UNIFIL representatives cannot by any means always inspect suspicious locations, since they cannot trespass on private property.

Hezbollah makes much use of both traditional and modern technologies. Fairly traditional, although still effective, include building trans-boundary tunnels which can be used for subversive activity. Modern technology includes monitoring any movement of Israeli forces in the territory adjacent to the border. Here we can say that an information symmetry between the militants and the regular army has been restored. As is well known, Israeli intelligence has always excelled by virtue of its detailed knowledge of positions in the enemy army and in addition they had at their disposal psychological portraits of the commanders. Currently, Israeli servicemen report that Hezbollah has full information about the border group, including the number-plates of service and private vehicles, has tracked the routes of officers' movements and also holds personal data on them etc.

<sup>12</sup> Orion A. Hiding in Plain Sight. Hezbollah's Campaign Against UNIFIL. Policy Notes // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. November 2019. P. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Isaenko A. Peacekeepers and Colored Lines. Borders in International Law – A Subtle and Diplomatic Business // Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie. January 29, 2016. Available at [http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2016-01-29/13\\_peace.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2016-01-29/13_peace.html).

<sup>14</sup> Isaenko, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Orion, op. cit. P. 3.

The example of Hezbollah shows that different kinds of military organizations are able to reach a level of mutual deterrence with regular armed forces or fight in close coordination with them; to have a serious effect on the balance of powers in a conflict; to take independent decisions about war and peace. Successful resistance shown by a military grouping to the most combat-ready army in the region was an indicator that wars were changing their nature. Israel now had to think more about how to defend its internal front as well as its critically vital infrastructure and government institutions.

At the same time there is a danger in overstating the role of irregular armed groups in modern conflicts and consequently the challenge that they represent for sovereign states and regular armies. As the young researcher Arslan Ayan from York University rightly remarks, “although the influence by non-state actors [NSAs] and individuals is growing to disregard the traditional nature of international politics, they should not be overestimated. [...] assuming some type of state-like actorhood in regional politics, NSAs are often capable of shaping and influencing the regional balance of power by forcing the regional governments to appeal to external balancing – allying with other powers – against asymmetric threats. Such actorhood also bless[es] them with a capability to trigger and shape the course of a state-centric power competition on both regional and international level[s].”<sup>16</sup>

On the whole, this conclusion seems logical enough, although the present relative isolation of Israel in the region and its unregulated relations with the vast majority of Arab states do not offer it any opportunity of joining regional alliances to counteract a new adversary. Israel’s main ally is a global power – the US. And here, bearing in mind the efforts of the Trump administration to reduce its commitments in the region, Israel might well be confronted with new opportunities

and responsibilities. “Washington sees few regional partners that can be trusted. Israel remains the only ally that can be relied upon, such that heavy responsibility will shift to Israel if and when the administration decides to withdraw US forces from Syria and Iraq – at which point Israel is likely to be fighting for American interests, as well as its own.”<sup>17</sup>

Such an interpretation of the possible role of the Israeli armed forces is a sort of turning point: notwithstanding its close relations with US, Israel always fought for its own interests, which were not always necessarily identical to, or coincided with, those of the US. The emerging enhancement of the role of Israel in protecting US interests, pointed to by several Israeli analysts, can be seen as yet one more confirmation of the changing environment in the Middle East, as well as the emergence of new threats.

## Fake news

The dissemination of unreliable or intentionally false information is becoming an increasingly serious international challenge. Israel is no stranger to this problem. In the words of the former deputy director of Mossad, Rami Ben-Barak, “we are becoming aware that many significant global events are being influenced by groups and interested parties that employ fake identities to create a false reality.”<sup>18</sup>

In August 2017 the company Cyabra Strategy Ltd. was set up in Israel with the purpose of defending state structures from a variety of digital attacks, including all forms of disinformation. Cyabra staff had worked previously in the cyber-security and intelligence units of the Israeli armed forces as well as in business intelligence companies specializing in shaping activity on social media using fake profiles, avatars and bots. This experience helps the company to identify when a disinformation attack occurs.

<sup>17</sup> Dekel, op. cit. P. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Kahan R., Shalev A. Startup with Israeli Intelligence Bona Fides Offers Defense Against Fake News // CTECH. June 11, 2018. Available at <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctech/articles/0,7340,L-3740002,00.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ayan A. Beyond Proxies: Power Politics Meet Non-State Actors in the Middle East. Available at [https://www.academia.edu/36707310/Beyond\\_proxies\\_Power\\_politics\\_meet\\_non-state\\_actors\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_East?auto\\_download=true&email\\_work\\_card=view-paper](https://www.academia.edu/36707310/Beyond_proxies_Power_politics_meet_non-state_actors_in_the_Middle_East?auto_download=true&email_work_card=view-paper).



Israel also pro-actively creates fake news to influence the enemy. The arsenals of Mossad and Aman (military intelligence) had always included various active measures of the sort, but in the digital age the destructive effect of disinformation is growing both significantly and uncontrollably.

## Confrontation with Iran

Iran remains one of the most serious adversaries of Israel in the region. Although Israel has always criticized the 'nuclear deal' with Iran and has responded positively to the US withdrawal from it, Israel is nevertheless apprehensive that Iran will in the present circumstances manage to acquire more opportunities for realizing its nuclear program. More specifically, Israeli experts believe that Tehran could continue enriching uranium (attempting to increase the U235 content), accumulating fissile material and improving centrifuges and if the situation were to become extremely unfavorable for Iran, it could even attempt to restrict IAEA inspector presence. To all intents and purposes this kind of policy could reduce the time needed to create nuclear weapons, if that is what Iran, at the end of the day, decided to do.

The Iranian nuclear threat, although very serious, is nevertheless not an immediate challenge. It leaves Israel about a decade to prepare to counter it and fight it from an incomparably stronger position than now.

Currently the incomparably more serious and immediate threat to Israel is the growing strength of Iran in the region through the deployment of its own forces in the immediate vicinity of Israel and by proxy. "In 2019, Iran continued its military build-up in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, in order to deepen its influence, reduce American influence, and establish bases for potential activity to harm Israel and Saudi Arabia as part of creating deterrence. For this activity, Iran depends on local elements that enable its freedom of action (not only military) – first and foremost Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Syrian

regime, as well as pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq and Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. In the Palestinian arena too, Iranian support for Islamic Jihad and Hamas continues, manifested in funding and in technological knowledge for rocket and missile production."<sup>19</sup>

As already mentioned, in this situation Israel reserves the right to strike Iranian forces and Shiite militia positions in neighboring countries (Syria, Iraq), facilities under construction and individual targets. Bombings and air attacks such as these are becoming increasingly a matter of routine for the Israeli army.

The projection of Iranian power, although posing a threat to Israel, at the same time opens up opportunities for it in the region. For the first time Israel and a number of Arab countries have a common and mighty foe, thus providing grounds for rapprochement (firstly with Saudi Arabia), even though the Palestinian question remains unresolved, which has always kept the doors closed to the Arab world for Israel. For the Israeli analyst Dan Shiftan, known for the harshness of his assessment of the Arab world, Israel's strengthening of relations and current contacts with individual Arab states could become an important factor in providing for Israel's security. "An incomparably more important factor is the significant improvement of Israel's position in the region and the profound realization by all the major players of its strength, reliability and intransigence. The strategic alliance with President El-Sisi's Egypt outweighs the already-mentioned negative tendencies. Despite the gloomy economic forecasts, Egypt continues to be the most important and stable Arab country and the only anchor for the regional organization against radicals headed by Iran. Close relations with Jordan, convergence of interests with Saudi Arabia, the countries of the Persian Gulf and Morocco strengthen this tendency."<sup>20</sup>

It should be pointed out that Israel sees these countries through

<sup>19</sup> Shine S., Zimmt R., Landau E. Iran: Defiance and Audacity, Alongside Internal Challenges. Strategic Survey for Israel 2019-2020. On the Brink of Escalation: Multiple Challenges Demand a New Strategy. Tel-Aviv: INSS, January 2020. P. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Shiftan D. The National Security of Israel – Main Factors and Threats // Vesty. January 11, 2017. Available at <https://www.vesty.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4906018,00.html>.



the prism of a new peripheral strategy which aims at developing relations with those states in the region which reject its reformatting under the influence of policies pursued by various radicals and non-state actors.

### **The Palestinian question and the potential for growing tensions**

‘The Deal of the Century’, publicized by the Trump administration in January 2020<sup>21</sup> and presented as a definitive and realistic plan for resolving the Palestinian question, has once again focused attention on the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The plan officially recognizes the need to create a Palestinian state based on the principle of ‘two states for two peoples’ and it says that the Palestinians are entitled to self-determination and that major assistance will be provided to ensure their state is viable. However, the Palestinians are to be given only 70% of the territory of the West Bank; however, this being said, they were not at all the kind of party that the Trump administration would have had serious consultations with. The capital of the future state of Palestine is supposed to be East Jerusalem, but in reality this toponym is applied less to Jerusalem itself than to some of its outskirts, where there are Arab villages. A critical issue in the plan is the fate of the Israeli settlements. The complete evacuation of the half million or so settlers to Israeli territory is clearly no longer feasible, but the plan also proposes to leave under Israeli sovereignty the valley of the Jordan River, the most fertile and historically most significant part of the territory. Moreover, this could be done unilaterally by the Israeli leaders, without any negotiation process involved. The unresolved status of the Palestinian question gives rise to serious internal and external challenges for Israel. In the absence of a political solution containing realistic provisions for the establishment of a Palestinian state, Israel could gradually become a state for two peoples, but that would entail the collapse of the Zionist idea. Neither can

one disregard the constant military tension in and around the Gaza sector controlled by HAMAS.

In the context of these security challenges, the ‘Deal of the Century’ could potentially disrupt the relative balance in the uneasy Israeli-Palestinian relationship and even upset Israel’s relations with the countries with which it has peace treaties (Jordan and Egypt) if Israel starts implementing direct annexation of the territories on the West Bank and in the valley of the Jordan River.

At this juncture, ensuring national security requires new means and methods. In the troubled region of the Middle East this applies equally to all countries, including Israel itself. Effectiveness in withstanding threats depends increasingly on the ability to address a whole raft of issues such as technology, science, improving the quality of education and management. “Israel’s relative strength lies in the domains of security and military matters, as well as in technological innovation. But it has to become more efficient in these areas if Israel wants to move forward. The same holds true in some critical economic-social areas, where Israel’s performance lags behind most advanced countries. Weaknesses in productivity, inequality and governance require reforms that are more focused on greater efficiencies than policy reversals. It is efficiency that will contribute more than anything else in the long run to increasing sustainable economic growth, which in turn will bolster Israel’s security, economy and society.”<sup>22</sup>

Today’s expert thinking points to the need for Israel to pursue a Grand Strategy, as this is the only possible way to guarantee the security of the state in the contemporary world. Strengthening the armed forces and building up modern weaponry remains an important factor, but not a sufficient one in terms of preserving advantages and maintaining growth in competitiveness. A new approach is imperative, one which puts the

21 Peace to Prosperity. A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People // White House. January 1, 2020. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprospersity/>.

22 Arad U., Strum D., Tadmor Z. Grand Strategy for Israel: Reflections and Directions // The Samuel Neaman Institute for National Policy Research. 2017. Pp. 6-7. Available at: <https://www.neaman.org.il/EN/Grand-Strategy-For-Israel-publication>.

main focus on human capital and economic growth at the same time as reforming governance and overcoming the significant rifts and imbalances in society. It is this that is the main challenge for Israel and the pre-requisite for guaranteeing its security in the face of new threats.

## 1.4. IN SEARCH OF A SETTLEMENT OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

*Stanislav Ivanov<sup>1</sup>*

The Arab Spring of 2011 saw a series of mass anti-government protests that spread through many countries in the region. Spontaneous demonstrations, rallies and acts of disobedience swept across most of the Arab states of the Middle East, clamoring for political and economic change. A majority of Arab states managed to contain the situation by announcing political reforms and taking steps to improve the socio-economic situation of the poorest segments of their populations. Some states, however, failed to do so, which led them into a period of protracted political crisis, armed conflict and civil war. Whereas Tunisia and Egypt saw their governments overthrown and ruling elites displaced, Syria, Libya and Yemen were plunged into years of chaos, violence, civil war and terror.<sup>2</sup>

The weakest link in the Arab world was the Syrian Arab Republic. Here, civil war has raged at its fiercest and dragged on for many years.<sup>3</sup> From 2014 to 2016, the Islamic State (IS) had not only managed to take

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2 Pechurov S. The Arab East: From “Spring” to Chaos? 2013. Moscow, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Science. P. 115.

3 Ivanov S. The Syrian conflict and instability in the Middle East // Russian Edition of the SIPRI Yearbook 2018. 2019. Moscow, IMEMO. P.685.

over a third of the country's territory and its oil fields but also threatened to seize Syria's capital, Damascus. It took the intervention of military contingents from dozens of foreign states to defeat the terrorist quasi-state calling itself the Islamic Caliphate that had risen up in Syria and neighboring Iraq.

An analysis of the events in and around Syria reveals that the Syrian crisis did not occur in a vacuum or by coincidence. It was a combination of negative factors (historical, political, economic, ethnic, religious and external factors) that led to tragedy for the Syrian people and the disintegration of their statehood. One of the historical reasons underlying the Syrian conflict was the cavalier way in which the modern Syrian State emerged in the 1920s.

### **The reasons behind the current Syrian crisis: a historical perspective**

As you know, present-day Syria was formed from provinces of the former Ottoman Empire via a League of Nations mandate entrusted to France, one of the victors of the First World War. The French mandate in Syria was the result of decisions taken at the French-British Conference in San Remo in 1920, which were subsequently approved by the League of Nations on September 29, 1923. It then took a while for the external borders and administrative structure of this new Syrian state to become fully defined, but they were based on the secret Sykes-Picot agreement reached on May 16, 1916, by the governments of Great Britain, France, the Russian Empire and, later on, Italy. But this process took no account of the ethno-confessional diversity of the local population (which comprised Arabs, Kurds, Yazidi Kurds, Turkomans, Circassians, Armenians, Assyrians, Muslims of various branches of Islam, Druze, Christians), or of any other differences, traditions and peculiarities. It resulted in some of the region's myriad ethnic communities, such as the Kurds or the Turkomans, being artificially divided by the official borders of the newly created states of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Different local ethnic and religious

groups were forcibly merged into new territorial and administrative units.

Under the French mandate, Syria consisted of five autonomous enclaves called *states*: Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia (the 'Alawite state'), Jabal al-Druz (a Druze district with its center in As-Suwayda) and Alexandretta (handed over to Turkey in 1939 and now called Iskenderun). In the north-east of the country, around the cities of Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, a separate administrative district was established, also under French administrative control. The State of Greater Lebanon, which initially formed part of this Syrian 'confederation,' became a separate state under a French mandate in as early as 1926.

On December 1, 1924, the Alawite Arabs left this nominal federation or confederation to form an administratively separate French mandate territory, existing alongside the Syrian Republic (a union of Damascus and Aleppo). The Alawite State existed under the name of the Sanjak of Latakia from 1923 to 1936. It was home to mainly Alawite Arabs, members of the esoteric sect to which the Assad clan ruling Syria today belongs. As mentioned above, the Sanjak of Alexandretta (the Turkish name for the State of Hatay) was annexed by Turkey on June 29, 1939.<sup>4</sup>

For a long time, this notional subdivision of Syria into fairly independent enclaves, all under a French mandate, took the edge off the various ethnic, confessional, political and other tensions that were simmering between the new state's different communities. Kindred clans and tribes were still allowed to cross the territorial boundaries unimpeded. If under the Ottoman Empire all peoples living in the territory of present-day Syria were subjects of the Sultan and were all forced to submit to Istanbul alike, they now found themselves in a similar situation of semi-colonial dependence on France. Of course, there were uprisings, civil unrest and protests by some groups both against the Ottoman yoke and then against the colonial authorities, but these

<sup>4</sup> Alekseeva N., Amirov Sh. and others. 'Syria' // The Great Russian Encyclopaedia, Digital version. 2017. Available at: <https://bigenc.ru/geography/text/3665888>.

events did not bear the same antagonism as those that would occur later on against the central government in Damascus.

The struggle for Syria's political independence was fought out from 1930 to 1945. The French mandate for Syria officially ended in 1943, but French troops remained there until 1946, even though the Syrian Republic became a fully-fledged member of the UN and proclaimed itself a sovereign State in 1945.

### **Independence and the intensification of power struggles in Syria**

As noted above, after gaining its independence, the country became riven by internal turf wars and entered into a state of permanent instability. Just in the decade from 1946 to 1956, the country saw a succession of 20 governments and 4 constitutions. Relations with neighboring states deteriorated. In 1948, the country was drawn into a protracted military and political confrontation with Israel, and later on a conflict with Turkey also arose.

In 1963, officials from the Ba'ath Party (the Arab Socialist Revival Party) seized power in Syria, advocating Arab nationalism and a secular state. This meant that the main opposition to the Ba'athists initially came from the champions of conservative Muslim values and traditions, namely radical Sunni Islamists.

By then, the more influential and affluent members of the Sunni Arab community (which comprised up to 70% of the country's population) constituted the country's political and business elite. The Alawite Arabs and the SAR's small Shia community (comprising around 10-12% of the population) found themselves at a material and political disadvantage, and had little option but to join the army in order to adequately provide for themselves and their families. Over time, the Alawite Arabs came to form the backbone of the Syrian officer corps.

It is no coincidence that, in 1971, a series of military coups brought to power an Alawite president, Hafez Assad, whose legitimacy was immediately challenged by the Sunni. They believed that the Alawite sect

bore no relation to Islam, and according to the country's Constitution at the time only a Muslim could be president. In 1973, a Lebanese Imam, Musa as-Sadr, issued a fatwa (a formal religious ruling) in which he recognized the Alawites as representing a branch of the Shia school of Islam. His view was supported by Imam Hakimi, an Iraqi Twelver Shia theologian, and then by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, too. However, most Sunni in Syria and other Muslim countries disagreed and refused to recognize the Alawites as Muslims. This explains the stubborn unwillingness of Sunni leaders and of the League of Arab States (LAS) to recognize the legitimacy of the Assad clan's presence in power.

Between 1976 and 1982, a series of Islamist uprisings took place in Syria, organized by Sunni radicals under the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. President Hafez al-Assad brutally suppressed these rebellions with aircraft and artillery. In the city of Hama alone, tens of thousands of people were killed by government forces in 1982, with some neighborhoods reduced to ruins. Many of the uprisings' leaders, as well as members of the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters were forced to emigrate, while others were repressed and persecuted.<sup>5</sup>

But animosity between the ruling Alawites and the radical Sunni majority continued to fester in the country for many years. Even the continuous presence of a certain number of Sunni within the government and security apparatus, failed to quell the ever-increasing strife between the two communities.

Bashar al-Assad's succession to his father's presidency in 2000 brought no meaningful change to the state's domestic and foreign policy. Long-overdue political and socio-economic reforms did not take place. Syria remained in a state of emergency and with a one-party system, and not only did the Alawites hold key positions within the state apparatus, the army and other security and law enforcement agencies, but they also began to drive Sunni people out of business while hundreds of thousands of Kurds continued to be deprived of Syrian citizenship.

<sup>5</sup> The 1982 Hama Massacre: Assad's War Against the People of Syria // ALIF Channel. October 27, 2019. Available at: <https://alif.tv/reznya-v-hame-82-g-vojna-asadov-s-narodom-sirii/>.

The influence of Shia Iran and the Lebanese group Hezbollah grew in Damascus, as did, as a consequence, Syria's isolation in the Arab world. And, as in many other Arab countries, against a backdrop of demographic growth, unemployment in Syria rose and most people's material conditions worsened, especially among young people. It was in this state of affairs that the Arab Spring's events gripped the country. Understandably, hundreds of thousands of protesters and demonstrators took to the streets in both urban and rural areas, and, once again, spearheading these spontaneous protests were Muslim Brotherhood leaders. Riots and clashes with the police took place on the streets.

On April 7, 2011, Assad issued a decree granting citizenship to all Syrian Kurds who had been deprived of it following the 1962 census.<sup>6</sup> On April 21, 2011, Bashar al-Assad was also forced to sign a decree rescinding the country's forty-eight year-long state of emergency. The Supreme State Security Court, which handled cases involving opponents to the regime, was also abolished. The opposition described the Syrian President's decision as meaningless on the basis that it did nothing to curb the clout of the all-powerful state security agencies.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the ban on demonstrations was relaxed: people were now entitled to assemble for peaceful protests, although prior authorization from the Ministry of Internal Affairs was required. Participation in unauthorized mass events remained prohibited.

On August 4, 2011, the president approved a decree introducing a multi-party system in the country. As mentioned earlier, a one-party system had been in place for decades under the ruling Ba'ath party. Pursuant to this new law, permission to create a party required signatures from 50 founding members. The request for permission also had to clearly set out the future organization's party-line and sources of funding. Under the new law, the creation of parties and movements based on religious, racial, narrow social, or regional-tribal

lines was prohibited. Nor were any activities by parties affiliated to various foreign organizations permitted. Furthermore, the creation of party paramilitary wings was strictly forbidden. All parties were obliged to respect the human rights and democratic principles laid down in the constitution.<sup>8</sup> However, all these reforms were clearly long-overdue and half-hearted, and they failed to stem the tide of fierce confrontation rising by the day between the authorities and the opposition.

### Civil war in Syria and foreign intervention

As in 1982, the authorities brought out army units, aircraft, armored vehicles and artillery to disperse demonstrations and suppress riots. Some members of the military, the police forces, secret services and government bodies defected to the opposition. Thus, began a protracted civil war in Syria, where the main contending forces were the armed opposition (mainly Sunni Arabs) and government forces (Alawite Arabs, Shia, and Ba'athists). At the same time, radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra started gaining ground in the country.

The Kurds initially opted for a neutral position in this internal Syrian conflict, established self-governance bodies and fought only against Islamic State militants. They were compelled to do so by the situation in the country's northern and largely Kurdish-populated areas, where, following the withdrawal of the Assad administration and government troops from the region in 2012, residents were given a green light to defend themselves against advancing IS units. During the fierce fighting for the strategically important northern city of Kobani (in 2014-2015), Kurdish volunteers from Iraq and Turkey came to the aid of the Syrian Kurds who were also supported from the air by the US Air Force and the international anti-terrorist coalition.

<sup>6</sup> Guliyeva E. A History of the Syrian Kurds. Case File // TASS. February 20, 2016. Available at: <https://tass.ru/info/2685549>.

<sup>7</sup> Baranovskaya M. After 48 years, Syria's State of Emergency is Abolished // Deutsche Welle. April 21, 2011. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ru/a-15023055>.

<sup>8</sup> Syrian President Allows a Multi-Party System in the Country // Versii. August 4, 2011. Available at: <http://versii.com/news/237049/>.



From the very outset, foreign states were actively involved in the Syrian conflict. One way or another, events in Syria involved Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Israel, the Persian Gulf states, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France and others. A distinctive feature of the Syrian conflict has been the active participation of irregular non-governmental organizations and terrorist groups. Fighting on the side of the government forces were militants from the Lebanese military and political group Hezbollah, units of the Iraqi Shia militia Hashd al-Shaabi, mercenaries and volunteers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Russia (PMC Wagner), and Shia Palestinians.

### **The threat of radical Islamic groups seizing power in Syria**

As noted above, in addition to the armed opposition, the Assad regime was also under attack by radical Islamic groups from an extreme Sunni (Salafi) movement. The greatest threat in the south and the north-west of the country came from the terrorist group Jhabat al-Nusra, which later joined the larger umbrella group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, whereas the country's north-east, and the area east of the Euphrates River, was under the sway of the IS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or by its abbreviation DAESH. The latter stood out because of the tens of thousands of foreign jihadist volunteers who flocked from around the world to take part in its activities, and because of the fact that its leaders set their sights not only on conquering Syria but also Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Yemen and other Muslim countries in the region. Between 2014 and 2016, in those parts of Syria and Iraq under its control IS managed to establish a quasi-state of its own: the Islamic Caliphate with the capital in Raqqa.

In addition to foreign jihadists, IS's ranks were swelled by radical Islamic Sunni from Syria and Iraq, by members of Arab tribes from east of the Euphrates River, and by Iraqi military and political Ba'athist groups who had just recently rebelled against the central government

in Baghdad. By 2015, 8 to 10 million people were living in the Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Various estimates suggest that the number of IS militants reached 100,000 people, with Damascus and Baghdad really at risk of succumbing to the group. The jihadists were armed not only with small arms and jeeps equipped with heavy machine guns, they also had trophy modern armored vehicles, artillery, mortars, anti-tank guided shells, etc.... They even allegedly managed to capture a Soviet R-17 ballistic missile, as well as several combat aircraft. The Islamic State's leaders also showed an interest in weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological and radioactive). The caliphate established economic operations in the territories under its control. By smuggling oil, mainly via Turkey, as well as agricultural products, museum artefacts and other goods onto world markets and by looting local banks and imposing taxes and levies on the local population, the caliphate's annual budget exceeded a billion dollars.

The leaders of the Islamic caliphate colluded with the African terrorist groups of Boko Haram (in Nigeria), Al-Shabab (in Somalia), with individual cells of the Taliban Movement (in Afghanistan and Pakistan), etc. IS emissaries and recruiters also sought to extend their influence to states in North and Central Africa, the Middle East, the South Caucasus, South and Central Asia, Russia and China.

Assad's army, debilitated by the civil war, was, like Baghdad, unable to put up a decent resistance to IS militants. Although prior to 2011 the Syrian army was approximately 320,000 strong, after the defection of part of the army to the opposition, mass desertions and battle casualties, a mere 80,000 Syrian troops and a few thousand rebels were left defending Damascus and the predominantly Alawite regions (the Latakia province). By that time, many territorial entities, including the Kurdish regions, were left with no support from the central authorities and had no choice but to set up local self-defense units and grassroots militias. There was a real danger that the Islamic Caliphate would further extend its territory and grasp in the region, that it might seize power in Syria or Iraq and that new, large-scale terror attacks

might be perpetrated in Europe, Asia, the CIS, the US and elsewhere. By joining their efforts, the Russian and US air forces, a number of other foreign states, the Kurdish militias as well as any Syrian and Iraqi military units that remained fit for combat managed, by the beginning of 2019, to put the largest IS groups to rout and liberate one of the last settlements still under jihadist control along the Syrian-Iraqi border, Al-Baghuz.<sup>9</sup>

On October 27, 2019, the US President, Donald Trump, announced the successful elimination of the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a special operation. He had apparently been hiding in the Idlib province in the north-west of Syria, just a few kilometers away from the Turkish border.

Sadly though, the defeat of the Islamic State and the killing of its leader did not bring Syria any long-awaited peace. Surviving jihadists dispersed, taking refuge in hard-to-reach areas of Syria and Iraq and in the province of Idlib itself, where they continued to wage their jihad against the Syrian authorities alongside the local terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham; some of them migrated to Libya, Yemen, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries. Some of the foreign jihadists who had families managed, by various means, to return to their home countries where it is likely they became sleeping cells or IS recruiters; several thousand IS militants continue to be held in temporary detention camps, mainly in the Kurdish-controlled North-East of Syria. To claim that the Islamic State, the world's largest international terrorist group, has been finally defeated, would be premature.

Its ideology still holds great appeal for radical Sunni Muslims, and its leaders have not relinquished their plans to regain their foothold in Syria and Iraq in due time. Today, they consider Afghanistan and Pakistan to be part of a new pseudo-state entity, the Greater Khorasan, which stretches from the Russian Volga in the North to Sri Lanka in the South and from Iran in the West to the hinterland of China in the

East. IS terrorists have openly declared their intention and plans to impose their own rules over this vast region and establish a new caliphate there. And IS still has its sponsors from among Sunni rulers, political opposition groups in some states, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and various Islamist non-governmental organizations. Therefore, the possibility of IS returning to Syria with a vengeance is not to be dismissed, even if, for now, this threat has receded into the background.

### **Escalation in the Idlib de-escalation zone at the start of 2020**

Under the 2018 Sochi Agreements between Russia and Turkey, Turkey was tasked with separating moderate opposition groups from radical Islamist ones and securing the withdrawal of militants and heavy weapons from a zone reaching 15-20 km deep within the Idlib de-escalation zone. Instead of this, however, for nearly 18 months after the agreement's entry into force the terrorist groups Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Turkestan Islamic Party, and Hurras ad-Din (all banned in the Russian Federation) drove the moderate opposition fighters North, towards the Turkish border, and took control of most of the Idlib province. Artillery shelling, assisted by the use of drones, against the Syrian regions adjacent to the de-escalation zone and against the Russian Khmeimim air base have intensified.

In response, in early 2020 Syrian government forces and pro-Iranian Shia formations launched, with support from the Russian Air Force, a decisive attack on last bastion of the armed opposition and radical Islamic groups in the country. The aims of this military operation were to unblock the strategically important M5 Damascus-Aleppo and M4 Aleppo-Latakia highways, establish control over the neighboring settlements and, circumstances permitting, to reach the Syrian-Turkish border. The first two goals were achieved with good success but a large-scale intervention by the Turkish armed forces impeded the full completion of this operation.

<sup>9</sup> Kurdish militias confirm the liberation of the last settlement in Syria under IS control // IA Interfax. March 23, 2019. Available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/655419>.

Under the pretext that Syrian government troops had penetrated the so-called de-escalation zone, leaving all 12 of the Turkish observation posts in their rear, the Turkish command deployed additional troops, heavy weapons and military equipment, including ATGMs (anti-tank guided missile launchers) and MANPADS (man-portable air-defense systems), to Idlib. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, by the beginning of March 2020, the forces Turkey had concentrated in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo were comparable in size and combat strength to a mechanized division (over twelve thousand people).<sup>10</sup>

In the night between February 27 to 28, 2020, Syrian air strikes killed 36 Turkish troops and wounded dozens more, leading Turkey to retaliate with heavy artillery shelling, aircraft, attack drones, and MANPADS. It is now known that this tragic incident occurred because of the presence of Turkish personnel within the combat formations of armed opposition groups.

Immediately after the incident, Turkey's military command announced the start of its next military operation in Syria, code-named "Spring Shield."<sup>11</sup> The pro-Turkish forces managed to regain partial control over a number of settlements and, according to Ankara, inflict serious damage on the Syrian army and its allies in terms of their manpower, weapons and other military equipment. Allegedly, several government forces' helicopters and aircraft were shot down, and dozens of tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery pieces, and air defense systems were put out of action.

Erdogan threatened to use force to restore the status quo in the Northwest of the SAR, and held consultations on the situation in the Idlib province with Russian, US, French, German, and NATO leaders. Erdogan's Western partners lent him moral support of course,

expressing concern about the impending humanitarian catastrophe and the risk of a new wave of illegal migrants and refugees rushing to the EU, but they stopped short of offering any direct military assistance.

Despite an extremely tense situation in and around Idlib, and despite the likelihood of direct clashes between Turkish and Syrian forces, there was a certain confidence that any further escalation of hostilities could still be averted. Erdogan had reached a 'red line' in Syria; crossing it could sever his partnership with Russia, with all the negative consequences that this would entail for Ankara (political, military, trade and economic consequences, etc.). As already mentioned, Erdogan could hardly count on NATO for assistance or support in this conflict. After all, the Turkish Armed Forces' presence and involvement in hostilities in Syria could hardly be recognized as fully legitimate or warranting the intervention of the alliance. In all likelihood, Erdogan will have no choice but to abide by the agreements reached in Astana and Sochi on Idlib and seek a compromise settlement on Syria with Moscow and Tehran.

During their bilateral military and diplomatic meetings in late February and early March 2020, Russian representatives drew Ankara's attention to the provisions of the Astana and Sochi agreements that Turkey had failed to fulfil as being the justification behind Assad's military operation. The high-level talks that took place between Presidents V. Putin and R. Erdogan on March 5, 2020, in Moscow resulted in an agreement on a ceasefire between government troops and opposition fighters along the contact line in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo and a six-kilometer-wide buffer zone on either side of the strategic M4 highway (Latakia – Aleppo), to be patrolled jointly by Russian and Turkish troops from March 15, 2020. It was also decided to ensure the safe return of the latest wave of refugees from Idlib to their places of former residence. It appears that this time Russia and Turkey's combined efforts managed to avert an open armed confrontation in north-west Syria. Of course, Moscow reached an understanding for such a compromise with Damascus and Tehran.

<sup>10</sup> Russian Defense Ministry accuses Turkey of militarizing the Idlib zone in Syria // Vedomosti. March 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2020/03/04/824398-minoboroni-rossii-turtsiyu>.

<sup>11</sup> Turkey's Ministry of Defense of Turkey reports on the results of Operation Spring Shield // Gazeta.ru. March 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2020/03/03/14109943.shtml>.

## The role and significance of foreign forces in the Syrian conflict

Since its very beginning, the Syrian conflict involved external interference from foreign states and international terrorists; however, Russia, Iran, and Turkey soon became the main players here, and it should be emphasized that only the first two were officially invited to intervene by the Syrian government.

As noted earlier, the Russian military began operations in Syria at the end of 2015, when the situation in the country became critical and there was a real danger that radical Islamist groups might seize power in Damascus. It was made clear from the very outset that Russia's military action in the SAR was directed against the forces of international terrorism and against the Islamic State and Jhabat al-Nusra in particular.

Russia's air base in Khmeimim and naval base in Tartus were upgraded in accordance with bilateral agreements. Pursuant to a new agreement signed with Syria in January 2017, Russia's lease of both facilities was extended for 49 years, with a possible 25 year prolongation.<sup>12</sup> In late September 2019, the Russian Ministry of Defense reported that some 30 Russian combat aircraft and helicopters were stationed in Syria, including Su-35 fighter jets, Su-34 and Su-24 bombers, Mi-35 and Mi-8 AMTSh assault helicopters.<sup>13</sup> In February 2020, two Russian frigates, the Admiral Makarov and the Admiral Grigorovich, armed with Caliber-NK missile systems, were sent to bolster Russia's naval forces in the Mediterranean along with the large landing ship 'Orsk' from Russia's Black Sea Fleet, whose purpose it was to provide support and supplies to Russian forces in Syria. Russia also has special forces, field engineer troops and military police actively present in Syria, as well as military doctors, advisers and other specialists. In total, Russia's military contingent in Syria is several thousand strong.

<sup>12</sup> 'Moscow Cements Deal with Damascus to Maintain 49-year Presence at Naval and Air Bases in Syria' // TASS. January 20, 2017. Available at: <https://tass.com/defense/926348>.

<sup>13</sup> "Russia 24" Reported Firing of Russian Aerospace Forces Planes by Turkish Specialists // INTERFAX.RU. February 27, 2020. Available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/696912>.

On March 2, 2020, in order to stop the fighting on the road to Idlib a Russian military police unit entered the strategically important city of Sarakib, recently liberated by government forces and located at the intersection of the Damascus-Aleppo and Aleppo-Latakia highways.

Iran continues to play a key role in supporting the Assad government.<sup>14</sup> Every year, Iran allocates 8 to 10 billion dollars from its state budget to the upkeep of the Assad family, its state apparatus, military and security services, as well as units of foreign Shia mercenaries. Experts believe the number of Iranian and pro-Iranian militants there to be on a par with that of the Syrian Armed Forces, i.e. around 80,000 people. In addition to Iran's Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Lebanese group Hezbollah, this international Shia corps includes squads from the Iraqi Shia militia Hashd al-Shaabi, Hazara Afghans, Houthi Yemeni, and Pakistani and Palestinian Shia. The Iranian authorities provide them with financial, material and technical support, as well as weapons and military equipment.

Turkey found itself on the other side of the 'barricades.' Despite paying lip service to the fight against terrorists, Ankara staunchly and uncompromisingly supported the Syrian armed opposition and radical Islamist groups in Syria. It soon became clear that in Erdogan's view the term 'terrorist' didn't refer to jihadists from the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra or other groups of the same ilk but rather the Kurdish militias, whose contribution to defeating the terrorist groups in land-based operations was decisive. As a result of three punitive military operations in the north and northeast of Syria, code-named 'Euphrates Shield,' 'Olive Branch' and 'Peace Spring,' the Turkish authorities succeeded in occupying vast swathes of territory in those regions and established complete control over the Turkish-Syrian border (some 900 km long). Under the Astana and Sochi agreements, Ankara also set up observation posts and deployed ground force units in the northwest of Syria, in the Idlib and Aleppo provinces.

<sup>14</sup> Sazhin V. Iran in Syria: The Price of Help // The International Affairs. January 1, 2018. Available at: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/1909>.



The Turkish occupation was unique in that it attempted to change the demographic make-up of Syria's border regions, overtly repressing the local Kurdish population, with tens of thousands of families forced to flee to remote areas of Syria and Iraq as a consequence. Hundreds of Kurdish militants and many civilians were killed and wounded by airstrikes, artillery and mortar shelling and the incursion of Turkish mechanized forces and pro-Turkish elements from among the armed opposition and Islamists.

Ankara has been using representatives of these pro-Turkish proxy forces to establish alternative regional and municipal government bodies in the occupied Syrian regions, as well alternative police and security services, and is training the so-called Syrian national army. Erdogan wants to increase the size of this army to 100,000 and, in the near future, to resettle over a million Syrian refugees from Turkey to northern Syria.

In doing so, Ankara hopes to use pro-Turkish Sunni Arabs and Turkomans to create a buffer zone or a 'green belt' for itself. Erdogan's ultimate goal in Syria remains to oust the Assad government in Damascus by any means and replace it with representatives of the Arab Sunni majority under the auspices of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization on friendly terms with the current Turkish authorities. Erdogan has questioned the legitimacy of Assad's presidency and relentlessly blames him for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and acts of state terrorism.

A small US military contingent remains in Syria and continues to play a significant role in a number of key areas. For instance, several hundred US special forces and air force troops are stationed on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, where they train the forces of the Democratic Alliance (up to 50,000 people), most of which are Kurdish militias, and provide them with logistic and fire support, as well as other forms of assistance. One of the aims of the United States in this area is to keep the control of oil fields and refineries firmly in the hands of the Kurds and local Arab tribes. According to information received by the Turkish

*Anadolu* news agency, on March 12, 2020, the Imam Ali military base was attacked by the US Air Force and its allies from the city of Deir ez-Zor, as was an industrial zone in the Abukamal region in eastern Syria. This attack allegedly targeted sites belonging to the IRGC and militants of Shia Hezbollah-type terrorist groups under its control.<sup>15</sup>

A small US garrison also remains in the south of the country at the al-Tanf military base, near the border with Iraq, where the Americans are striving at all costs to prevent the creation of a Shia land bridge that would connect Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut. This US military base is located at the intersection of the borders of Syria, Iraq and Jordan. It controls a 55 km area around the base, where the Syrian refugee al-Rukban camp is also situated. The base was established in 2014 on the Syrian-Jordanian border after Amman closed the border out of security concerns. The area adjacent to the US base and the refugee camp are under the sway of illegal armed groups, which explains the difficult humanitarian situation in the camp.

Israel has not shown any direct interest in Syria's internal events, its leadership being concerned solely with military activity by Iranian and pro-Iranian groups near its borders. Every so often, the Israeli Air Force and its UAVs carry out missile and air strikes on warehouses, weapons vehicles, or other targets belonging to Iran's IRGC, Hezbollah and foreign Shia mercenaries in Syria. Allegedly at the request of the Russian authorities, Tehran promised to keep its military assets and those of its satellites in Syria at least 80 km away from the Israeli border. But this was not enough for Israel's leaders. Jerusalem is insisting that this buffer zone be extended further and that all border crossings between Iraq, Syria and Lebanon be closed, to prevent heavy weapons (missiles, drones, etc.) from Iran from reaching Hezbollah or other Shia groups active in Syria.

For a long time, Jordan made its territory available for American instructors to train Syrian opposition militants and radical Islamic

<sup>15</sup> A coalition led by the United States has struck Iran's military facilities in Syria // InoSMI.ru. March 12, 2020. Available at: <https://inosmi.ru/news/20200312/247034575.html>.

groups, where they also received weapons and ammunition. The Jordanian Air Force took part in air strikes targeting IS positions in Syria. More recently, the potential participation of Jordanian businesses in the rehabilitation of Syrian settlements near the border has been discussed, and initial steps have been taken towards returning some of Jordan's Syrian refugees to their former places of residence in their homeland.

The Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, are all implicated in Syria in one way or another. For a long time, these countries' special services and non-governmental funds served to funnel financial, material and other forms of assistance to the armed opposition and radical Islamist militants. The Gulf monarchies sought to stymie the increasing influence of Iranian Shia fundamentalists in the region. After the defeat of the Islamic State, the Saudis and their allies in the Gulf agreed, not without pressure from the United States, to finance the restoration of Raqqa, the Islamic State's former capital, to provide material assistance to the Kurds and Arab tribes in north-east Syria, and to participate in other humanitarian projects in the region. There were even talks about Saudi military instructors participating in the training of Arab militias on the eastern bank of the Euphrates.

Since the start of 2020, Egypt too has been providing military assistance to Kurdish militia units in Syria to help them in their conflict with Turkey. The Egyptian authorities even gave the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PDS) the opportunity to open a diplomatic mission in Cairo, as well as the right to use a television station.<sup>16</sup>

The deterioration of Syria's relations with Turkey and its continued isolation both within the Arab-Muslim world and at the international level are forcing the official government in Damascus to seek out new allies in the region. Until recently, within the League of Arab States

Assad could count only on the support of representatives of Iraq's Shia government and, to some extent, of Lebanon. In the Middle East, the Assad government relies mainly on help and support from Iran, which itself continues to be isolated in the Muslim world and by the United States. The European Union and the US more or less agree in their approach to the Syrian question, which is not the case on Iran.<sup>17</sup>

A key event for the region took place on March 3, 2020, when the administration in control of eastern Libya opened a diplomatic mission in the Syrian capital. Both sides are quite open about the fact that they are forming a partnership to counter the military threat posed by Turkey.

Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, was there in person to receive the Libyan delegation, which included the Deputy Prime Minister, Abdel Rahman al-Ahirish, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Abdel Hadi al-Houweij. The parties to the negotiations agreed that events in Libya and Syria are links in one and the same chain. They consider that the policy pursued by Turkey's President Erdogan's is one of general destabilization in the region. "Syria and Libya face similar challenges and external pressures that threaten their sovereignty and national security," said Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem.

Libya's eastern administration is on the same side as the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Khalifa Haftar, who enjoys the support of influential Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. The Government of National Accord (GNA), which is based in Tripoli and which receives military assistance from Turkey, stands against it. In 2019, Tripoli and Ankara signed a series of documents relating to maritime borders and military contacts. Turkey has already transferred thousands of jihadist fighters to Libya from Syria, where they had been taking part in military operations against Damascus.

<sup>16</sup> Hanly K. Egypt to provide military assistance to the Kurds in Syria // Digital Journal. March 14, 2020. Available at: <http://www.digitaljournal.com/news/politics/egypt-to-provide-military-assistance-to-the-kurds-in-syria/article/568753>.

<sup>17</sup> Shumilin, A. Middle East Conflicts: A European Approach. 2019. Moscow: Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences. P. 64.

Under the agreements signed by Damascus and the administration in eastern Libya, all the Syrian mercenaries who were captured by the LNA will be handed over to the Syrian authorities. The agreements also provide for close cooperation in the field of intelligence sharing. Meanwhile, in Libya and in Syria fights of local significance continue, despite ceasefire agreements.

### **Findings and conclusions on the crisis situation in Syria**

In sum, the protracted crisis in Syria remains the epicenter of the region's instability, adversely affecting the overall situation in the Middle East. Above all, the armed conflict in Syria is having a major impact on the its neighboring states, Iraq and Lebanon, where ethnic and confessional fault lines and sectarian sentiments within ruling circles also persist and periodically lead to government crises and internal conflicts. The proxy war for Syria between Iran, Turkey and the Persian Gulf monarchies has turned the country into a testing ground for a region-wide Sunni vs. Shia military confrontation, which is afflicting ever more countries in the region.

Triggered by the events of the 'Arab spring' and external intervention, the civil war in Syria has dramatically weakened the State and its armed forces, and allowed radical Islamic groups, such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, to control vast swathes of its territory and natural resources (oil and gas fields and their processing facilities) for several years.

To speak of a final victory for the Assad government over the armed opposition and terrorist groups would be premature. Damascus currently controls about two-thirds of the country's territory, home only a third of its pre-war population (7 to 8 million people out of 21.5 million).<sup>18</sup> Some areas of the pro-government territories still

occasionally escape the central government's control. For instance, in the southern Syrian province of Daraa, government troops have already had to carry out several military operations this year (2020) to quash individual units of opposition fighters and radical Islamist groups.

It's not all plain sailing for Assad in his small home province of Latakia either, where Syria's Alawite Arabs are concentrated. For all its apparent stability and status as the stronghold of the country's political elite, over the years of the civil war the province has completely fallen prey to local warlords and organized crime. In many ways, this has been to the advantage of the political elite itself, which encouraged smuggling and other types of illegal business. That the irregular forces in these coastal areas will not be able to cling on to power for long is beyond doubt. However, it is unclear who will step into the future security, financial and economic vacuum in Latakia. So far, the official government in Damascus has been attempting to sustain a delicate act of balancing the interests of the large Assad clan and those of his foreign allies, but no one can tell how events will unfold further.<sup>19</sup> The Iranian authorities and their regional partner Hezbollah, have their eye on the Latakia province and its Mediterranean port.

A significant part of the Idlib and Aleppo provinces, as well as other northern regions of the SAR where more than 4 million Syrians are living, are currently under Turkey's control. Kurdish militias and Arab tribes from the east of the Euphrates dominate the country's North-East, where up to 4 million Syrians also live. In total, 7 to 8 million people remain in non-government-controlled areas. Another 7 million Syrians are refugees in neighboring countries, and EU states have accepted up to 800 000 more. Most Syrian refugees have, for 10 years now, been languishing in makeshift camps abroad. The socio-economic situation of those who have remained in Syria is barely better. They continue to struggle with electricity and water supply, the need to

<sup>18</sup> Population in Syria According to Censuses (1960, 1970, 1981, 1994, 2004) And Estimates of the Population for 2005-2011 // Central Bureau of Statistics. Syrian Arab Republic Office of Prime Minister. Available at: <http://www.cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2011/Data-Chapter2/TAB-10-2-2011.htm> (accessed November 21, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Ivanov, S. The War in Syria is Shifting to the Economic Sphere // Nezavisimoe vojennoe obozrenie. November 25, 2019. Available at: [http://www.ng.ru/armies/2019-11-25/8\\_7735\\_syria.html](http://www.ng.ru/armies/2019-11-25/8_7735_syria.html).

rebuild housing, infrastructure, hospitals, schools, etc. Unemployment levels remain high, public safety is poor, there are reprisals by the authorities and individual outbreaks of violence and terrorist attacks are still ubiquitous.

The course of recent events in and around Syria has shown that military means may succeed in ridding the country of foreign jihadist groups, but they cannot possibly quench the internal Syrian conflict (the civil war).<sup>20</sup> What is needed is a political solution, and only one achieved through the broad format of the Geneva process, a process that cannot be replaced by the 'Astana format', no matter how useful the latter might be.<sup>21</sup> Evidently, the top tactical goal at this stage must be to abide by the Russian-Turkish agreement of March 5, 2020, to seek a ceasefire and an end to hostilities along the contact line in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo and to isolate and disarm terrorist groups, whilst at the same time addressing the strategic issue of enabling the Constitutional Committee on Syria to resume its work in Geneva. Involving the widest possible range of the country's ethnic, religious and political forces, including Kurdish delegations and representatives of refugees, in all further efforts to find a settlement to the Syrian conflict could help normalize the situation and reconcile all the internal forces and groups that are seeking an end to the armed conflict and the preservation of the Syrian state. Failing to do so would, in all likelihood, lead to the armed conflict resuming with the active participation of foreign actors and their local proxies, or to the country collapsing into de facto enclaves for a long time.

20 Trump, Putin Agree 'No Military Solution' in Syria' // Aljazeera. November 11, 2017. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/trump-putin-agree-military-solution-syria-171111090130089.html>.

21 Shumilin, A., Middle East Conflicts: A European Approach. 2019. Moscow: Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences. P. 64.



## NUCLEAR AND MISSILE PROGRAMS



## 2.1. MISSILE AND NUCLEAR CAPABILITIES OF MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES

*Konstantin Bogdanov<sup>1</sup>*

**R**emaining a ‘powder keg’ of world politics, the Middle East has a large demand for weapons and military equipment. It is here that several ambitious regional powers are at once, actively buying modern missile weapons, including long-range systems, and running own projects on their development. The situation is additionally complicated by the availability of WMD development and production capacities in the region, including nuclear weapons.

### **Iran**

Iranian missile development appropriately seems to shape the landscape of Middle East missile programs. This is due to their multifaceted nature, to the scale of production and use of guided missile weapons, to its technological level and especially to the pace of innovation process. Claiming regional leadership, Iran sees advanced missile capabilities, including medium-range systems, as an integral part of its leadership status.

The key motivation for developing a precision-guided missile capability with a range of up to 1,000 km is due to Iran’s catastrophic

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air power underdevelopment behind its main regional rivals. This is a consequence of the long-standing international embargo on the supply of strike weapons systems, which do not allow for the rearmament of the Iran Air Force. While Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel operate 4th generation aircraft with advanced precision-guided weapons (and, in the future, 5th generation aircraft), Iran's most capable combat aircraft are the Soviet Su-24MK bombers, shipped under 1989 contract, with targeting systems and precision-guided munitions from that era. Therefore, the Iranian military's emphasis on actively developing tactical and operational-tactical missiles to compensate for this lag is understandable.

At the moment, the political restriction on the range of developed and deployed missiles up to 2,000 km, imposed by the Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is officially in force<sup>2</sup>. The Iranian military usually explains that this range is enough to strike the territory of Israel, Tehran's 'main enemy'. However, statements have also been made that in the case of a threat from European countries, the range cap for the missiles developed could be increased<sup>3</sup>.

Iranian missile programs go back to their own developments in the field of heavy rockets for multiple launch rocket systems (*Zelzal*), reinforced by active contacts with North Korea and China. A distinctive feature of the Iranian approach is the continuous process of innovation in missile design, including the adoption of solutions and their migration between different variants and lines of missile weapons developed. The result is the impression of atomization of efforts in the form of simultaneous development of dozens of different missile systems, similar both in tactical and technical characteristics, while it is actually a rapid improvement of technologies and design knowledge.

2 Davenport K. Iran's Leader Sets Missile Range Limit // Arms Control Association. December 2017. Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-12/news/iran%E2%80%99s-leader-sets-missile-range-limit>.

3 Sharafedin B. Iran Warns It Would Increase Missile Range if Threatened by Europe // Reuters. November 26, 2017. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-missiles-europe/iran-warns-it-would-increase-missile-range-if-threatened-by-europe-idUSKBN1DQ007>.

The breakthroughs in Iran's missile technology in the 2010s were mainly related to the development of three key areas: new structural composite materials, new rocket engines (mainly solid-fuel), and, in particular, the development of technology for detachable terminally-guided re-entry vehicle, which significantly improved the accuracy of new-generation missiles. During a missile attack on US air bases Ain al-Assad and Erbil, Iraq, on January 8, 2020, in retaliation for the US assassination of IRGC General Qasem Soleimani, new Iranian short-range ballistic missiles did demonstrate unexpectedly high accuracy, up to deliberate hits on free-standing large hangars<sup>4</sup>.

The easiest way is to divide Iranian rocket science into liquid- and solid-fuel programs, although both of them are developing systems with different range and accuracy.

Iran's liquid-fuel missiles date back to the Soviet R-17 (*Scud-B*) operational-tactical missiles, the first received from Libya and Syria in 1985–1986, and later to their modifications supplied from North Korea. Their improvement relied heavily on the transfer of technology and information from North Korea; thus, Iran was not an unorthodox among other Third World countries with missile programs. This way a line of operational-tactical missiles *Shahab* appeared, which now has reached a medium range: *Shahab-1* (1988; 300 km), *Shahab-2* (1997; 400–500 km; Iranian localization of North Korean missile *Hwasong-6*) and *Shahab-3* (2003; from 1,300 to 2,000 km in different variants; considered to be a further development of *Hwasong-7*).

A new breakthrough was achieved in the early 2010s with the liquid-fuel *Qiam-1* missile entered service. The *Qiam* family differs from the *Shahab-2* by the new control system, detachable re-entry vehicle and broad use of light alloys and composites, which allowed to lighten the construction and thus increase the range up to 800 km. In 2018, a new version of the *Qiam-2* missile was shown, with aerodynamic

4 Savelsberg R. Massive Improvement in Accuracy of Iran Missiles over Scud-B // Breaking Defense. January 15, 2020. Available at: <https://breakingdefense.com/2020/01/massive-improvement-in-accuracy-of-iran-missiles-over-srud-b/>.

control surfaces seen on its new front section, indicating that Iran has mastered the technology of terminally-guided re-entry vehicles. This not only increases the accuracy of missiles, but also increases their ability to evade missile defense systems.

*Qiam-1/2* became the most “fighting” modern Iranian missile; before that, it was a *Shahab-1* missile, which since 1994 had been used to attack the People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran (*Mujahedin-e Khalq*) camps in Iraq. The first use of *Qiam-1* dates back to June 18, 2017, when it was used to strike at Islamic State facilities in the Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor. It has been used in Syria ever since. The missile was also used to strike targets in Iraq in January 2020. Its use in the conflict over Yemen is also likely (see below).

For long-range missiles, new technologies led to the development of *Ghadr* (several subtypes) and *Emad* missiles in the 2010s. These deep upgrades of the *Shahab-3* missile with a range of about 1,600–2,000 km featured new re-entry vehicles and significantly higher accuracy<sup>5</sup>. Reports that these missiles have a liquid-fuel first stage and a solid-fuel second stage have not yet been reliably confirmed. *Emad* is a version of the *Ghadr* missile on which a maneuverable re-entry vehicle with aerodynamic control surfaces has been mounted<sup>6</sup>. All these missiles are believed to have a launch weight of 17–19 tons and can carry a payload of 750 kg.

Another vector of development of liquid-fuel medium-range missiles found itself in the *Khorramshahr* missile, whose tests began in 2016–2017. It is believed to be another North Korean footprint in Iran’s missile program: *Khorramshahr* looks similar to BM-25 *Musudan* (*Hwasong-10*). The missile has more powerful engines, and with a launch weight of 20 tons it can travel up to 2,000 km with a payload of 1,500 kg. It is believed that this missile can deliver a more powerful warhead or be potentially MIRVed. In February 2019, a new version was

tested, designated *Khorramshahr-2*, on which, similar to the *Shahab* line, a maneuverable re-entry vehicle was mounted<sup>7</sup>.

Iran’s solid-fuel ballistic missiles are growing out of *Zelzal*’s unguided rockets projects, complemented by the transfer of some key technologies from China. The base model was the *Fateh-110* tactical missile with a range of 200–300 km and a payload of up to 450 kg. Based on this successful design, a number of specialized guided missiles have been developed, in particular the *Khalij-e Fars* (anti-ship ballistic missile with an electro-optical homing system), as well as the *Hormuz-1* and *Hormuz-2* (ballistic missiles with passive and active homing seekers, presumably anti-ship and anti-radiation respectively). Interesting is the *Fateh Mobin* project, which is an upgrade package for control systems of older *Fateh-110* missiles, including the installation of a homing seeker with infrared channel for terminal guidance<sup>8</sup>.

In 2015–2016, the new *Fateh-313* operational-tactical missiles (range up to 500 km) and its new, larger version *Zolfaghar* (range over 700 km, heavier warhead of 550 kg) appeared sequentially. *Zolfaghar* were used in missile attacks on Islamist bases in Syria from Iran. Their main difference from the previous models is the detachable re-entry vehicle and, presumably, the quasi-ballistic trajectory<sup>9</sup> that complicates the employment of missile defense systems.

Further improvement of the family goes in two directions: increasing the range and creating more advanced systems to replace obsolete missiles. In February 2019, another version of this line of missiles, *Dezful*, was shown, with a range up to 1,000 km and more powerful warhead. The increased weight and dimensions required the development

7 Brugge N. What of Kind is Iran’s New Missile “Khorramshahr”? // Space Rockets Project. August 19, 2020. Available at: <http://www.b14643.de/Spacerockets/Specials/Khorramshahr/index.htm>; Iran Equips Long-Range Missile with Guided Warheads // The Iran Project. February 4, 2019. Available at: <https://theiranproject.com/blog/2019/02/04/iran-equips-long-range-missile-with-guided-warheads/>.

8 Cebul D. Iran Unveils “Bright Conqueror” Missile // Defense News. August 13, 2018. Available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2018/08/13/iran-unveils-bright-conqueror-missile/>.

9 Delory S., Kasapoğlu C. Thinking Twice about Iran’s Missile Trends: The Threat is Real but Different than Predicted. 2017. Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique. P. 4.

5 Forden G. Shahab Missiles RV Variants // Arms Control Wonk. June 9, 2010. Available at: <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/302763/iranian-warhead-evolution/>.

6 Elleman M. Iran’s Missile Priorities after the Nuclear Deal. 2018. London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies. P. 5.

of a new transporter-erector-launcher with an increased number of axles. In early 2020, *Raad-500*, another operational-tactical ballistic missile, was shown, which is a further development of the *Fateh-110*. The missile has a range of 500 km and was developed using a more advanced technology of composite structural materials, which allowed to significantly reduce the launch weight. The missile also has a detachable maneuverable re-entry vehicle with aerodynamic control surfaces.

In the class of solid-fuel medium-range missiles Iran has long ago (the first tests in 2008) demonstrated two-stage missiles *Sejjil* (later called *Ashoura*) with a range up to 2,000–2,500 km and the warhead weight of 500–1,000 kg. These missiles were Iranian attempts since the 1990s to develop solid-fuel systems with a range similar to that of liquid-fuel missiles *Shahab-3*. However, these missiles have not been tested since 2011, although they are regularly shown at military parades and the Iranian military reports that they are being prepared for mass production. This is most likely a sign of a temporary phasing out of work in this area and a shift of resources toward improving another line of medium-range missiles (*Ghadr/Emad*).

Iran's cruise missile program contains a number of systems, including long-range missiles. Of particular interest is *Soumar* cruise missile, which was first demonstrated in 2015. It is a ground-based system with a range of about 700 km. According to earlier unconfirmed and unproved claims from various sources, it had a range of 2,000–3,000 km, which seemed totally implausible. Considerable assistance in the development of *Soumar* was provided by the criminal delivery of six Soviet Kh-55 air-launched cruise missiles without warheads, carried out in 2001 from Ukraine<sup>10</sup> – in fact, Iran did copy these missiles. This seems to explain the initial overestimation of the range by sources: for the reference value were taken the characteristics of the Soviet missile, achievable when launched from a heavy bomber. In 2019, its version called *Hoveyzeh* with a range of 1,350 km was shown.

<sup>10</sup> Einhorn R., Van Diepen, V. *Constraining Iran's Missile Capabilities*. 2019. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. P. 13.

In addition, Iran is actively developing anti-ship cruise missiles.

At the moment, it is estimated that Iran, despite such a broad development program, has rather limited capacity for combat employment. These are c. 50 deployed launchers for medium-range missiles (c. 100 missiles, mainly *Shahab-3* of the most advanced variants including *Ghadr/Emad*, as well as *Khorramshahr*) and c. 100 operational-tactical launchers (c. 200–300 missiles, mainly *Qiam-1/2*, *Zolfaghar*, *Shahab-2*, *Fateh-110*) as part of the five IRGC Aerospace Forces missile brigades<sup>11</sup>. This calculation does not include land-based cruise and anti-ship missile launchers, as well as numerous short-range tactical systems of Iranian Army.

Special attention should be paid to Iran's space-launching capabilities. Iran launched its first artificial satellite in February 2009 using the *Safir* launch vehicle, an enlarged version of the *Shahab-3* missile. Since 2016 Iran began testing more powerful space launch vehicles *Simorgh*, using clusters of *Shahab-3* rocket engines. This fact is often presented as evidence of Iran's mastery of intercontinental ballistic missile technology, since the calculation shows a range of 4,000–6,000 km for *Simorgh*. However, it is not taken into account that these missiles can carry a very low payload at this range, and their survivability and performance characteristics (in particular, stationary open launch and many hours of pre-launch procedure) are completely unacceptable for combat employment in current conditions. In addition, the development of ICBM requires mastering the technology of warheads capable of re-entering the atmosphere at a speed of about 7 km/s without loss of mechanical strength and with a given accuracy.

*The phenomenon of the Houthi missile program*<sup>12</sup>. Speaking about Iran's missile programs in the regional context, one cannot but

<sup>11</sup> Cordesman A. *The Iranian Missile Threat* // Center for Strategic and International Studies. May 30, 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-missile-threat>.

<sup>12</sup> An exceptionally detailed analysis of the Houthi missile capabilities, their history and employment can be found in: Williams I., Shaikh S. *The Missile War in Yemen*. 2020. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/missile-war-yemen-1>.



mention such a notable phenomenon of recent years as Iranian ‘proxy war’ against Saudi Arabia in Yemen, where Tehran supports a group of Houthi rebels. During the conflict, the Houthis carried out several high-profile missile attacks on Saudi territory, saying they used missiles of their own designs. However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that all these cases involve Iranian missiles, which are quite advanced.

In 2016, the Houthis used against Saudis the *Burkan-1* ballistic missile, which is effectively a version of the Soviet R-17. At that time, there was a strong suspicion that this was a variant based on modified *Shahab-2* or *Qiam-1* missiles. On July 22, 2017, the Houthis used a new *Burkan-2* missile with a longer range. The missile was also used in the strikes against Riyadh city in November and December 2017 and March 2018. In August 2019, the Houthis showed a new *Burkan-3* missile, which is the same *Burkan-2* with a less sophisticated front section. Photos show almost complete similarities between those two missiles and Iranian *Qiam-1*, possibly they have a lighter warhead for a slight increase in range (up to 1,000–1,200 km, demonstrated in some attacks).

Much more interesting is another system attributed to the Houthis, the so-called *Quds-1* cruise missile<sup>13</sup>. The Houthi announced that they used the missile on July 12, 2019, during the attack on the Saudi Abha International Airport, and on September 14, 2019, during the strikes on the oil refineries in Abqaiq and Khurais. It was assumed at first, by analogy with *Burkan* missiles, that those are Iranian *Soumar/Hoveyzeh* cruise missiles. However, analysis of the photos and the debris showed that we are talking about a missile of similar but slightly different design, mainly of significantly smaller dimensions. Thus, the body diameter was estimated at 34 cm against 52 cm for *Soumar*, and the arrangement of wings and empennage had visible

differences. Further research has shown that this is a fundamentally new, more compact cruise missile developed in Iran and glimpsed at an exhibition there in February 2018<sup>14</sup>.

The Houthi missile capability, despite a number of high-profile propaganda successes, has had a very limited impact on the course of the Yemeni war, not being able to impose significant deterrent damage for Saudi Arabia.

## Turkey

Another actively emerging actor on the regional missile technology field is Turkey, which has placed its stakes in the state policy on the advanced development of the defense industry, both in equipping its own armed forces and promotion weapons sales abroad.

As early as 2012, the Turkish authorities announced a desire to develop a medium-range missile (up to 2,500 km), but did not specify whether it was a ballistic missile or a cruise missile; later it was stated that the development of ‘long-range ballistic missiles’ was a part of the Turkish government’s plans<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, the observed dynamics of the Turkish missile industry shows that Ankara is investing in both directions of the development of guided missile weapons, which may eventually lead to the deployment of a widely diversified medium-range combat capability with different launch platforms.

Among the current threats Turkey is considering, which motivates Ankara to build its own long-range missile capability, Turkish researchers commenting on the official views point out, first of all, the rapid development of Iran’s missile program, worsening relations with Israel since 2009, as well as the possible use of missile weapons by neighboring Syria (it is pointed out that since 1998 Damascus has

13 UN, Security Council. Letter Dated 27 January 2020 From the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council. Document S/2020/70 // United Nations Organization January 27, 2020. Pp. 23–24. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3850088?ln=en>.

14 Hinz F., Meet the Quds-1 // Arms Control Wonk. September 15, 2019. Available at: <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1208062/meet-the-quds-1/>; Hinz F. A Trace of the Quds in Tehran? // Arms Control Wonk. September 24, 2019. Available at: <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1208139/a-trace-of-the-quds-in-tehran/>.

15 Turkey Begins Work on ICBM // Hurriyet Daily News. July 24, 2012. Available at: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-begins-work-on-icbm--26211>; Egeli S. Turkey Embarks Upon Ballistic Missiles: Why and How // Uluslararası İlişkiler. 2017. Vol. 14. No. 56. Pp. 3–22.

threatened at least twice to use ballistic missiles when relations with Turkey had been deteriorating<sup>16</sup>. Tactical ballistic missiles *Tochka* and *Iskander* in Armenia are sometimes mentioned as examples.

Back in the second half of the 1990s, Turkey received ATACMS<sup>17</sup> tactical ballistic missiles with a range of up to 300 km from the US as part of the deal to enter the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) that took place in 1997. In 1996–1999, 120 missiles and 12 launchers were delivered. However, since then Turkish industry has been actively involved in developing its own missiles for similar purposes, relying on cooperation with China.

Since 1998, work has been underway on the Turkish localization of the Chinese B611 tactical missiles designated J-600T *Yildirim I* and *Yildirim II* (with range of 150 and 300 km, respectively). The missiles were placed on road-mobile launchers which automobile platform was manufactured by MAN. The inertial guidance system provided accuracy with a CEP of about 150 m. Turkey has over 200 *Yildirim* missiles of all variants.

In 2017, Turkey showed a new tactical missile with a declared range of 280 km in accordance with MTCR for the export model *Khan* and with an estimated range of more than 300 km in the *Bora* version for its own armed forces. The missile carrying a 480 kg warhead have a satellite guidance channel which improved the CEP up to 50 m. In May 2019, it was reported that the missile was for the first time used in combat during the Turkish army's Operation Claw against Kurdish units in the area bordering Iraq. The origin of the missile and its connection to the *Yildirim* family is unclear. Turkish sources argue that this is a longer version of the *Yildirim* missile, but a number of other assumptions suggest that *Bora* could be the result of transfer of Chinese experiences on the new M20 (DF-12) tactical ballistic missile, which has similar characteristics. In 2018, the following

extended-range version of *Bora* missile was announced<sup>18</sup>.

Despite the ambitious goals of developing ballistic missiles with a range of up to 2,500 km, the next possible step is likely to be much more modest. We are talking about operational-tactical missiles with ranges of 500–1,000 km, and only then about real medium-range missile systems (1,500 km and more). As the Turkish researchers mentioned, the range of 750–1,000 km is not only connected with the need for gradual development of missile technology (for example, the opportunity to stay with a single-stage missile scheme without switching to a two-stage scheme and maintain high accuracy). It also meets the politico-military objective of deterrence, covering the entire territory of Greece, Syria, Armenia and Israel, virtually all of Iraq, a large part of western Iran and the Egyptian coast. Two-stage missiles with a range of over 1,500 km are considered necessary to deter Saudi Arabia and Russia, but a number of researchers believe that such missiles may be redundant for Turkey's real military needs<sup>19</sup>. The required range of 2,500 km is considered even by Turkish experts to be a political excess associated with the considerations of increasing the prestige of the country on the world stage and the reluctance of Turkish leader Erdogan to cede Iran in technology race, and at the moment has no direct military justification<sup>20</sup>.

The line of potentially long-range cruise missiles is also developing in Turkey. The main system in this area is the *SOM* air-launched missile, first shown in 2011 and is a functional analogue of modern low-visibility precision-guided air-launched subsonic missiles with ranges up to 1000 km, developed by the world's leading military powers (*JASSM* and *JASSM-ER* in the US, *SCALP/Storm Shadow* in the UK and France, *Taurus KEPD.350* in Germany, as well as a number of

18 Bekdil B. Turkey Seeks to Expand Range of Locally Built Missile // Defense News. May 2, 2018. Available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2018/05/02/turkey-seeks-to-expand-range-of-locally-built-missile/>.

19 Kasapoğlu C. Turkey's Nuclear Onset. SWP Comment. 2019. No. 38. P. 4. Available at: [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2019C38\\_kasapoglu.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2019C38_kasapoglu.pdf).

20 Egeli, op. cit. Pp. 18–21.

16 Egeli, op. cit. Pp. 7–10.

17 Kibaroglu M. Turkey and Nuclear Weapons: Can This Be Real? // Ülgen, S. and Perkovich, G. (eds.) Turkey's Nuclear Future. 2015. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. P. 172.

examples of Russian guided missile weapons), which can be used by tactical aircraft. In particular, *SOM* can be used from the internal weapons bay of the 5th generation F-35 aircraft (*SOM-J* version), the development of the relevant project has been underway since 2014<sup>21</sup>; however, it is unclear whether Turkey will return to the F-35 program.

The *SOM* currently has a declared range of 300 km with the CEP of about 10 m, but according to sources in the Turkish defense industry, cited in the press in 2012, the range of the missile can already be brought to 500 km<sup>22</sup>, and after a number of improvements on this platform can be developed systems with ranges of 1,500 and 2,500 km<sup>23</sup>. Since then, however, quite a long time has passed and no signs of the tests of extended-range *SOM* variants has been observed.

The typical feature of the Turkish defense industry is the intensive development of strike drone technology, the effectiveness of which was fully demonstrated in early 2020 during the campaign in the Syrian province of Idlib. Evolutionary improvements in these technologies in Turkey could lead to the emergence of drones with the long-range guided missiles, as well as the long-range loitering cruise missiles.

## Israel

Israel possesses a whole range of advanced high-technology guided missile weapons of various types, including long-range systems.

The most important part of this capability is the medium- and intermediate-range solid-fuel missiles of the *Jericho* family. At the moment Israel possesses medium-range missiles *Jericho-2* with a range of 1,500–1,800 km and a payload of about 1,000 kg (first tested in 1987). The missiles should be phased out after 2026 in favor of the more advanced intermediate-range *Jericho-3* missiles, entered service in 2011.

Currently, the number of *Jericho-2* missiles in Israeli arsenals is estimated at 25–50. A number of experts, based on the history of the development of *Jericho-2* and functional similarities, argue that the missile implemented the principle of active-radar terminal guidance similar to that used in the US medium-range missiles *Pershing II* (RADAG).

The *Jericho-3* missile, first tested in January 2008, is often referred to as the intercontinental missile, based on the calculation of its energy and mass characteristics. However, with a plausible payload (750–1,000 kg) this missile has a range of 3,500–4,800 km, i.e. it is an intermediate-range missile. In 2013, a new missile engine was tested, which is expected to give the missile a range of more than 5,500 km, making it intercontinental, even if only in terms of formal definition.

Israel regularly tests its long-range missiles. The latest launches, classified as a new version of the *Jericho-3* missile, took place on 6 December 2019 and 31 January 2020 from the Palmachim Air Base<sup>24</sup>.

Israeli medium-range missiles and their mobile launchers are believed to be located in protected shelters in limestone hills near the Sdot Micha Airbase (Zekharia), 40–45 km south of Tel Aviv<sup>25</sup>. Based on satellite imagery analysis, it is estimated that between 23 and 50 shelters for mobile launchers have been built in this area; the number of spare missiles deployed is unknown<sup>26</sup>.

It is assumed that Israel has nuclear warheads for the *Jericho* missile family, their yield is unknown; according to some experts, the number of such warheads is at least 50<sup>27</sup>.

There is information about the development in Israel of sea-based cruise missiles designed to be launched from German-built *Dolphin*-class submarines, but there is no tangible evidence other than unverified

21 Eshel T. Turkey, US to Modify the SOM Cruise Missile for Use With F-35 // Defense Update. October 24, 2014. Available at: [https://defense-update.com/20141024\\_som-j.html](https://defense-update.com/20141024_som-j.html).

22 Turkey Aims to Increase Ballistic Missile Ranges // Hurriyet Daily News. February 1, 2012. Available at: <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-aims-to-increase-ballistic-missile-ranges-12731>.

23 TÜBİTAK 2014 hedefi // HaberTurk. January 14, 2012. Available at: <https://www.haberturk.com/ekonomi/teknoloji/haber/705814-tubitak-2014-hedefi>.

24 Kubovich Y. For Second Time in Two Months, Israel Tests a Rocket Propulsion System // Haaretz. January 31, 2020. Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-for-second-time-in-two-months-israel-tests-a-rocket-propulsion-system-1.8473939>.

25 Kile S., Kristensen H. Israeli Nuclear Forces // SIPRI Yearbook 2019: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security. 2019. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 338.

26 Cordesman A. Israel and Syria: The Military Balance and Prospects of War. 2008. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International. P. 143.

27 Kile and Kristensen, op. cit. P. 339.

reports of these missiles being tested in the Indian Ocean in May 2000. There is regular speculation that those could be cruise missiles with a range of up to 1,500 km, launched through 650 mm torpedo tubes. Sometimes they are considered an enlarged version of the *Popeye Turbo* air-launched cruise missiles, but there are reasonable doubts about this<sup>28</sup>. It is believed that these missiles can carry nuclear warheads and could be used as a survivable regional nuclear retaliatory capability<sup>29</sup>.

In addition to these weapons, Israel has developed the *LORA* ('Long-Range Artillery') operational-tactical missile system, which is a mobile launcher of a precision-guided solid-fuel ballistic missile with a range of over 300 km. The missile was first tested in 2004, but has never since been purchased by the Israel Defense Forces. At that, it was reported that in 2018 Azerbaijan received several such missile launchers from Israel<sup>30</sup>.

Israel has traditionally placed great emphasis on air-launched guided missile weapons. Despite the fact that its main purpose is to reach tactical objectives, some systems are already advanced enough for use deep in the enemy's territory. In particular, we can name the *Dalilah* air-launched cruise missiles with a range of 250–300 km (entered service in 1994), originally developed as a loitering munition to counter the intermittently activated air defense radars deep in enemy territory.

## Saudi Arabia

Riyadh began to make attempts to acquire medium-range missile capabilities (i.e., in fact, strategic, by regional standards, missile weapons) as early as the mid-1980s. As far as can be seen, one of the reasons for the intensification of efforts in this direction was the War of the Cities: the strikes against enemy cities by Soviet-made R-17

operational-tactical missiles, which were conducted from 1984–1985 by both sides of the Iran-Iraq war. Other motives have been repeatedly discussed, in particular the desire to raise the military and political prestige of the kingdom, frictions with the US over the deliveries of advanced weapons and the fear of the Saudi elites of a possible breakthrough in WMD proliferation in the region (which could have led them to think about the need to obtain their own delivery vehicles)<sup>31</sup>.

None of the missile designers of the appropriate range would bring such weapons systems to Saudi Arabia for political reasons or within the constraints of then-emerging MTCR – except for China, with which negotiations began in 1985–1986.

In 1987, the delivery was started. They were Chinese medium-range missiles (up to 2,500–3,000 km) DF-3 or DF-3A, with the nuclear warhead replaced by a conventional one. Their exact number is unknown; we are talking about a few dozen missiles, usually evaluate by experts in the range of 30–60 missiles and 10–15 launchers. The cost of the contract was \$3–3.5 billion<sup>32</sup>.

These missiles were the most secret part of the Saudi armed forces for a long time, until they were unveiled during the military parade on April 29, 2014, after the end of a major military drill Abdullah's Sword. Their military value was highly questionable already at the time of acquisition. Thus, according to the memoirs of Prince Khaled bin Sultan (in 1990–1991 he was a commander of the Joint Arab Forces during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm), the low accuracy of the missiles with a CEP of about 1–2 km did not allow to use them for strikes against military targets, whilst strikes against Iraqi cities in retaliation for the use of R-17 missiles were prohibited by the personal order of King Fahd to avoid needless civilian casualties<sup>33</sup>.

28 For a detailed discussion of the issue of these cruise missiles see Kristensen H., Norris R. Israeli Nuclear Weapons, 2014 // Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. 2014. Vol. 70. No. 6. Pp. 108–111.

29 Israel Submarine Capabilities // Nuclear Threat Initiative. October 16, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/israel-submarine-capabilities/>.

30 Ilham Aliyev Inaugurated Defense Ministry's Military Unit // Official website of the President of Azerbaijan. June 11, 2018. Available at: <https://en.president.az/articles/29030>.

31 The various versions of Riyadh's motivations are discussed in detail in McDowell S. Is Saudi Arabia a Nuclear Threat? Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School. 2003, Pp. 14–27.

32 Meick E. China's Reported Ballistic Missile Sale to Saudi Arabia: Background and Potential Implications, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report. June 16, 2014. P. 3. Available at: [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Staff%20Report\\_China's%20Reported%20Ballistic%20Missile%20Sale%20to%20Saudi%20Arabia\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Staff%20Report_China's%20Reported%20Ballistic%20Missile%20Sale%20to%20Saudi%20Arabia_0.pdf).

33 Bin Sultan K., Seal. P. Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Forces Commander. 1995. New York: Harper Collins. P. 350.



The low accuracy of DF-3 missiles has repeatedly led to speculative attempts to catch Riyadh on obtaining nuclear or chemical weapons delivery vehicles. However, despite the gravity of such concerns, there is still no firm basis for asserting at this time that Saudi DF-3 missiles were originally intended to deliver WMD warheads, although technically they could be used as a delivery vehicle of such weapons if they appear.

At the moment, the combat readiness of these forces is unclear. According to some assessments, missiles are considered obsolete and should be replaced. No test or combat training launches of the missiles from Saudi Arabia have been spotted since their delivery. However, periodic reports of Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Forces military drills mention the exercises that can be interpreted as ‘Simulated Electronic Launches’: pre-launch training including the simulated launches.

Initially, DF-3 missiles were deployed at two sites: 511th missile base at Al Hariq and 522nd missile base at Wadi ad-Dawasir. At the end of the 1990s, a third facility, the 533rd missile base near Raniyya, was built. Since the late 2000s and throughout the 2010s, significant work to reconstruct and expand the existing Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Forces facilities has been traced, as well as to build two additional proposed missile bases: 544th near Ad-Dawadmi and 566th near Ash-Shamli<sup>34</sup>.

The scale of expanding works at the bases may indicate that preparations for the purchase of new missile systems are underway or they have already been delivered. In 2014 there were reports in the US media with reference to ‘reliable information from intelligence community’ that in 2007 Saudi Arabia purchased in China a number of mobile launchers of medium-range solid-fuel missiles DF-21 (range up to 2,000 km), and this was allegedly done with the tacit consent of the US government, which has made sure that non-nuclear systems are

transferred<sup>35</sup>. There have also been reports of possible deliveries of Chinese shorter-range operational-tactical missiles to Saudi Arabia (DF-11 and DF-15).

This information is still not confirmed by facts, but it has been discussed quite seriously in the expert community with reference to unofficial confirmation by US intelligence sources. If such a transfer has indeed taken place, it should be noted that Riyadh would possess advanced, highly survivable missile systems that can be used for precision strikes against point targets. Experts link the prospects for further development of Saudi missile capabilities directly to the Saudi-Iranian regional struggle for leadership<sup>36</sup>.

Saudi Arabia also pays attention to the development of long-range, precision-guided air-launched weapons. Since the late 2000s, the country has purchased a significant number of French-British-made *Storm Shadow* cruise missiles with a range of over 500 km to equip its Tornado aircraft.

## Other countries of the region

The missile capabilities of the rest of the regional countries are quite limited and are mainly represented by arms purchased from abroad. However, it needs to be mentioned, as in some cases it creates a motivation of the major players which develop its own missile capabilities (e.g., when analyzing Turkey’s strategy).

*Egypt* initially served as the operator of Soviet R-17 operational-tactical missiles. Later on, in active cooperation with North Korea, Cairo developed and produced an improved version of this missile under the name *Project T* (range increased from 300 to 450 km, payload 985 kg), which now forms the basis of the country’s missile capabilities (up to 90 missiles). At the same time, Egypt continues to retain some

<sup>34</sup> Alrababah A., Lewis J. Saudi Rattles Its Saber // Nuclear Threat Initiative. December 15, 2014. Available at: <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/saudi-rattles-its-saber/>.

<sup>35</sup> Stein J. Exclusive: CIA Helped Saudis in Secret Chinese Missile Deal // Newsweek. January 29, 2014. Available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/exclusive-cia-helped-saudis-chinese-missile-deal-227283>.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis J. Why Did Saudi Arabia Buy Chinese Missiles? // The Foreign Policy. January 30, 2014. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/30/why-did-saudi-arabia-buy-chinese-missiles/>.

small number of Soviet R-17 missiles. Egypt has been credited with numerous projects to develop medium- and shorter-range missiles, but none of them have left the early stages. In 2015, Egypt purchased 50 *Storm Shadow* air-launched cruise missiles to equip its new *Rafale* tactical fighters.

*Syria*, despite the devastation of civil war, has maintained a sufficiently large missile capability. Before the war, it had at least 200–250 R-17 missiles and their modernized versions of the North Korean development. In addition, the Syrian Arab Army received from the USSR tactical missile launchers *Tochka* with a range up to 70 km, and in winter 2016/2017 it also received about 50 improved missiles 9M79-1 (*Tochka-U*) with a range up to 120 km and several launchers for them. The country does not have missile production capacity *per se*, but it has an established infrastructure for repairing and modernizing existing systems, and qualified personnel. Syria is also the operator of at least 36 advanced Russian *Yakhont* anti-ship cruise missiles (with a range of up to 280 km) as part of two road-mobile *Bastion* coastal missile systems. These missiles can also be used to launch precision-guided strikes on land-based targets, as demonstrated by the Russian military during the campaign against Syrian Islamists.

*Yemen* in the early 2010s had at least six R-17 missile launchers and 30–90 spare missiles, as well as several dozen *Tochka* missiles. During the civil war and the invasion of the Saudi-led coalition, control over those weapons was largely lost; missiles were widely used, including by Yemeni Houthis.

The *UAE* acquired a number of *Hwasong-5* missiles from North Korea in 1989, but they were later decommissioned due to poor performance characteristics. In addition, the UAE was the first customer for the export version of *Storm Shadow* air-launched cruise missile, called *Black Shaheen*, with a range of about 400 km.

*Qatar* is another recipient of *Storm Shadow* missiles. Missiles were delivered in 2015 in the amount of 140 units for the armament of 24 *Rafale* tactical fighters of the Qatar Air Force.

The main reason for the rapid development by the Middle East countries their own missile programs and active procurement of missile weapons abroad is the struggle for regional leadership against the background of a sharply growing security deficit. This motive has always existed, but it was greatly exacerbated by series of external interventions in the region by major world powers since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, fears of deployment the intermediate- and intercontinental-range missiles threatening these powers (the US, Russia, and European states) have every reason, but these are not the main risks, since first of all missile capabilities are developed for use within the region against regional rivals.

It should be noted that, in the early stages (since the 1980s), regional countries, except the Israel, were mastering short-range and extremely low accuracy missiles, which ultimately meant building a countervalue deterrent capability for indiscriminate strikes against cities or for delivering WMD. The risks of using missile weapons in this way are still present. However, a 'counterforce revolution' is currently unfolding in the region: the most advanced missile capabilities already have acceptable accuracy for pointing attacks on military targets, including moving targets, and this increases the probability of their use in armed conflict. Israel's relative technological advantage, which it has relied on for many years for its deterrent capability related to medium- and intermediate-range missiles as well as air-launched missile weapons, is gradually diminishing.

Currently, the regional countries are increasingly mastering precision-guided long-range missile weapons launched from aircraft platforms. The gradual spread of *Storm Shadow* missiles (with a range of 400–500 km in different variants) in the region forms fundamentally new combat capabilities for the armed forces of the Middle East states. So far, the US, which until recently has been very cautious about the proliferation of such weapons, has not entered the race: for example, missiles such as *JASSM* (range up to 360 km) and *JASSM-ER* (up to 1000 km) have been transferring only to some stable states that are

part of the circle of closest US allies. However, the growing international instability and the adventurous attitude towards arms control regimes and self-restraint rules, that inherent in the current White House administration, may well lead to the beginning of sales of such weapons to Middle Eastern partners (primarily Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies). After that, the appearance of the similar Russian and Chinese systems in the region with a good probability can be considered only a matter of time.

Since all the military and political conditions in the region are in place for further stockpiling and improvement of missile capabilities, the task of limiting and reducing them is not really an arms control task *per se*, thus the answer lies outside the military and technical field. Without systematic political *détente* and reduction of tension between regional leaders, there can be no sufficient basis for the implementation of confidence-building measures and verification procedures. The prospects for such a political process appear vague, and in any case are beyond the scope of this paper.

## 2.2. THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM – ITS PAST, PRESENT AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE

*Anatoly Diakov<sup>1</sup>*

For the past 20 years, the international community has closely watched Iran's nuclear program, its nature and objectives. In September 2002, Tehran announced long-term plans for the development of nuclear energy, to which end it was starting work on various areas of nuclear technology including the nuclear fuel cycle, nuclear safety, and nuclear waste management.<sup>2</sup> Iran first informed the Director General of the IAEA of its enrichment program at the start of 2003 during his official visit to Iran. It was announced that work to construct the Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant (PFEP) in Natanz was already nearing completion, and that the commercial-scale Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP) was under construction. In May of that same year, Iran informed the Agency for the first time of its intention to build an IR-40 heavy-water research reactor in Arak.

Iran had a Safeguards Agreement with the Agency as set out in document INFCIRC/214, which entered into force on 15 May 1974. In 2002, the Agency became aware of the fact that Iran had received nuclear material in the form of UF<sub>6</sub> (1000kg), UF<sub>4</sub> (400kg) и UO<sub>2</sub> (400kg)

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<sup>2</sup> Report by the Director General, GOV/2003/40 // IAEA. June 6, 2003. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2003-40.pdf>.

from a supplier country. Iran had not informed the Agency of these consignments. In accordance with its Safeguards Agreement, Iran was obliged to provide a report on the importation of such material and a report on the facilities where it was used. In failing to fulfil its obligations, Tehran aroused suspicions that it was engaged in secret nuclear activities aimed at building a nuclear weapon. These suspicions were later confirmed: up until 2003, Iran had been working on a program to develop a nuclear weapon.

Of course, Tehran's announcement that it was developing peaceful nuclear energy technology and its work to establish uranium enrichment capacity gave rise to concern within the international community that the reason Iran needed uranium enrichment technology was in order to produce weapons-grade fissile material. The uranium enrichment technology used to produce fuel for nuclear power plants is the same as that used to produce highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. If a country has enrichment technology, then it has the potential to overcome the main technical obstacles to making a nuclear weapon.

Iran's failure to meet its obligations under its Safeguards Agreement, and its plans to establish a uranium enrichment plant, gave rise in 2002 to serious concerns at the Agency that Iran might have a clandestine nuclear weapons development program. Based on the concerns expressed in the IAEA Director General's reports on the Iranian nuclear program, the United Nations Security Council adopted several resolutions (1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), 1929 (2010), and 2224 (2015)) obliging Iran to halt its uranium enrichment program and stop work on projects related to the production of heavy water and the construction of an IR-40 heavy-water-moderated research reactor. The resolutions called upon Iran to act in accordance with the provisions of the Additional Protocol, implement all necessary measures to ensure the transparency of its nuclear program, and provide assurances that the program was for exclusively peaceful purposes. Multilateral diplomacy involving the P5+1 (E3+3),

made up of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, played a major role in addressing issues surrounding the Iranian nuclear program.

### **Indications of the existence of a nuclear weapons program in Iran**

Due to the concerns that arose at the end of 2002 with regard to the nature of the Iranian nuclear program, the Agency worked concertedly from 2003 right up until mid-2015 to reconstruct the true history of Iran's nuclear activities.

The Agency's inspections, additional information provided by Iran, and information supplied by IAEA member States made it possible to establish that, for a fairly long period of time starting from the 1980s and continuing until the start of the 2000s, Iran had been engaging in undeclared nuclear activities at Ministry of Defense-affiliated organizations.<sup>3</sup> In 2003, Iran decided to make its nuclear activities entirely public, and admitted that it had contacted a clandestine nuclear supply network through intermediaries. Through this network, it had obtained information about centrifuge enrichment technologies, processes for the conversion of uranium fluoride compounds into uranium metal, and the production of enriched-uranium metal hemispheres.

Taking account of Iran's admissions, confirmations and explanations, the information received from member States, and independently gathered information, the IAEA initiated procedures to establish the scale and nature of the Iranian nuclear program. Iran's capability to enrich uranium to 20% and the lack of any indication that it intended to reprocess irradiated nuclear fuel focused the Agency's attention on the possibility that Iran might be able to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU) and use it to develop an implosion-type nuclear weapon.

By the end of 2011, based on an analysis of the information it had gathered, the Agency had a clear picture of Iran's undeclared nuclear

<sup>3</sup> Report by the Director General, GOV/2003/75 // IAEA. November 14, 2003. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2003-75.pdf>.



activities. It concluded that the AMAD plan to develop a nuclear warhead had run until 2003.<sup>4</sup> However, at the end of 2011, the Agency did not have a clear picture of the nature of Iran's nuclear activities after 2003. An analysis of the information that was available at that time gave rise to the suspicion that Iran was continuing its efforts to develop a nuclear explosive device.<sup>5</sup> To investigate these suspicions, the Agency had to obtain information from Iran about the following areas:

- Efforts, some successful, to procure nuclear related and dual use equipment and materials; high speed electronic switches and spark gaps (useful for triggering and firing detonators); high speed cameras (useful in experimental diagnostics); neutron sources (useful for calibrating neutron measuring equipment); radiation detection and measuring equipment (useful in nuclear material production facilities);
- The production of nuclear material at undeclared facilities and experiments to obtain uranium metal from fluoride compounds;
- The acquisition of nuclear weapons development information and documentation from a clandestine nuclear supply network;
- The development of safe, fast-acting detonators and equipment suitable for making a multipoint initiation system in an implosion-type nuclear weapon;
- The development of its own nuclear weapon, including tests using high explosives and carrying out hydrodynamic experiments either using nuclear or surrogate materials at the Parchin military complex.

During 2012-2013, the Agency's efforts to obtain answers to its questions initially elicited no meaningful reply from Iran. Iran simply refused to take account of the Agency's concerns and start work to address the outstanding questions surrounding the military component of its nuclear program. The process only got off the ground on

24 November 2013, when Germany, China, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and France (the E3+3) met in Geneva and agreed upon the Joint Plan of Action (JPA), which had the goal of developing a gradual, mutually-agreed comprehensive resolution that would ensure that the Iranian nuclear program was exclusively peaceful in nature. Under the JPA, Iran committed to provide the Agency with the relevant information, as agreed upon mutually, and to give it managed access to nuclear facilities.

One of the first steps aimed at allaying fears with regard to Iran's development of a nuclear warhead was Iran's commitment to provide information and clarifications that would allow the Agency to assess Iran's declared needs in terms of the development of exploding bridge wire detonators by May 2014.<sup>6</sup> Iran gave this information to the Agency and stated that simultaneous detonator activation tests were underway for civilian purposes. This was the first time since 2008 that Iran had participated in technical discussions with the Agency about a possible military component of the country's nuclear program. Furthermore, in May 2014, the parties agreed that information would be provided regarding work on the multipoint initiation of high explosives, as well as information and clarifications regarding neutron transmission modelling with regard to compressed materials.

More accelerated and productive co-operation between Iran and the Agency to address the outstanding questions regarding Iran's nuclear program started after Iran and the E3+3 (United Kingdom, Germany and France plus China, Russia and the USA) reached an agreement on the long-term Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>7</sup> The implementation of this plan, which was approved by the United Nations Security Council and which entered into force on 20 January 2016, was based on a step-by-step approach that would make it possible to, on the one hand, establish that the Iranian nuclear

4 Report by the Director General, GOV/2011/65 // IAEA. November 9, 2011. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2011-65.pdf>.

5 Ibid.

6 Report by the Director General, GOV/2014/10 // IAEA. February 20, 2014. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2014-10.pdf>

7 The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action for the Iranian nuclear program // Kommersant. July 14, 2015. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2768104>.

program was exclusively peaceful in nature, and on the other, ensure that all UN Security Council sanctions against Iran could be lifted, including international and national sanctions.

In August 2015, the IAEA Director General and head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran signed a “Road-map for the Clarification of Past and Present Outstanding Issues regarding Iran’s Nuclear Program”; these were the “issues” that had been set out in the *Report by the Director General* of 9 November 2011 (GOV/2011/65). In December 2015, the Agency, on the basis of the information at its disposal, including that obtained from Iran, presented its final assessment regarding all issues surrounding the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>8</sup> It came to the conclusion that after 2013 several kinds of activities had been underway in Iran to develop a nuclear explosive device, but that these activities had not moved beyond feasibility studies, along with scientific research. The Agency found no reliable evidence of any such activity after 2009, or of any diversion of nuclear material to the military component of Iran’s nuclear program.

### Iran’s nuclear program at the time of the signing of the JCPOA

*Uranium Enrichment.* At the enrichment plant in Natanz:

15,500 centrifuges (74 cascades each with 174 and 16 cascades each with 64 IR-1 centrifuges) had been installed; naturally occurring UF<sub>6</sub> was only fed into 56 cascades. 1,044 IR-2m centrifuges (6 cascades each with 174 centrifuges) had been installed.

In the research and development zone, work was underway on IR-2m, IR-4, IR-5, IR-6, IR-6s and IR-8 centrifuges. The centrifuges were fed with natural UF<sub>6</sub>, but no low-enriched uranium (LEU) was withdrawn as the product and the tails were recombined at the end of the process.

At the enrichment plant in Fordow: 2,976 centrifuges (16 cascades, each with 186 IR-1 centrifuges) had been installed; four of the

cascades had previously been fed with UF<sub>6</sub> enriched with up to 5% U-235. On 25 October 2015, as part of preparations for IAEA monitoring procedures, Iran stopped feeding material into the cascades at the plant.<sup>9</sup>

According to the Agency’s information, from the time when Iran started enrichment up to November 2015, it produced 16,141.6kg of UF<sub>6</sub> enriched with up to 5% U-235, of which 8,306kg was in the form of UF<sub>6</sub> in November 2015. In addition, Iran produced 447.8kg UF<sub>6</sub> enriched up to 20%. Of this, 110kg was down-blended to under 5% U-235, and 337.2kg was converted to U<sub>3</sub>O<sub>8</sub>.<sup>10</sup>

An analysis of the activities of the plants at Natanz and Fordow, including analysis of environmental samples taken at the sites, led the Agency to conclude that the facilities had operated as declared by Iran in its responses to the Agency’s design information questionnaire (DIQ).

Iran allowed the Agency to have monitored access to the centrifuge assembly lines, centrifuge rotor production lines and storage facilities.

### The IR-40 reactor in Arak

In 2002, Iran informed the IAEA of its intention to design and build a reactor to carry out research and produce isotopes for medical (molybdenum-99) and industrial purposes.<sup>11</sup> The reactor was meant to replace the existing Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), which was nearing the end of its service life. The information Iran had provided to the Agency in 2003 about the technical features of the reactor implied that Iran intended to design and build a 40MW IR-40 reactor that would use 80-90 tons of heavy water as a moderator and coolant, requiring approximately 1 ton of heavy water per year. The reactor core was planned with 150 fuel assemblies, each of which contained 56.5kg of

<sup>9</sup> Report by the Director General, GOV/2015/65 // IAEA. November 18, 2015. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov-2015-65.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Report by the Director General, GOV/2011/54 // IAEA. September 2, 2011. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2011-54.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Report by the Director General, GOV/2015/68 // IAEA. December 3, 2015. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov-2015-68.pdf>.

naturally occurring uranium in the form of UO<sub>2</sub>. Construction of the reactor began in 2004. Completion was originally planned for 2009, but this was later delayed to 2014.<sup>12</sup>

There are indications that during the preliminary phase of work to design the reactor in the 1990s, Iran received assistance from Russia and China. Russia's Dollezhal Research and Development Institute of Power Engineering (NIKIET) provided Iran with assistance in developing fuel elements.<sup>13</sup> China provided Iran with a zero-power heavy-water reactor – this is a low-power (100W) heavy-water reactor that uses fuel based on naturally occurring uranium metal. The reactor was in use from the mid-1990s and was intended to allow its operators to gain experience with this type of reactor. China also supplied heavy water.<sup>14</sup>

Heavy water reactors are ideal tools for obtaining weapons-grade plutonium relatively easily and inexpensively. This type of reactor does not require complex uranium enrichment technologies; it uses a fuel source made from naturally occurring uranium. Spent fuel can be removed and new fuel can be added without powering down the reactor, which means that it has a relatively high level of productivity.

If such a reactor operated at its nominal capacity of 40MW for 250 days per year, it could produce up to 10kg of weapons-grade plutonium, presuming fuel burn-up of about 1GW-day per ton.<sup>15</sup> This mass of material would be sufficient to produce three or four nuclear warheads. Naturally, the construction of this reactor gave rise to concerns about Iran's compliance with the non-proliferation regime.

UN Security Council Resolution 1696 (2006) required Iran to grant the IAEA access to all operations associated with the construction of

the IR-40.<sup>16</sup> In Resolution 1737 (2006), the Security Council ordered that Iran was to stop its work on heavy water related projects and the construction of this reactor. However, Iran did not stop work on these projects, although IAEA inspectors were granted access to the IR-40 construction site from 2006 onwards. As for the heavy water production facility, inspectors only obtained access in August 2011.<sup>17</sup>

In summer 2006 the Agency gained access to the reactor and carried out a design information verification (DIV). This verification confirmed that the reactor was being constructed in accordance with the information that had previously been provided. Aside from a few exceptions when Iran did not grant the Agency access to the reactor site, the IAEA was able to carry out DIVs between 2006 and 2013. It should be noted that all Agency reports on verification visits from 2007 to 2013 state that nothing had been discovered that might indicate that Iran was engaged in reprocessing spent nuclear fuel.

In accordance with the JPA, Iran committed to suspend all work to build the reactor, and to refrain from transferring fuel or heavy water to the site, or from manufacturing fuel for the reactor. In August 2014, Iran came to an agreement with the Agency on an approach to applying safeguards to the IR-40 reactor. By 2019, 48 pilot and operational fuel assemblies had been manufactured for the IR-40 reactor. They contained a total of 102kg of naturally occurring uranium in the form of UO<sub>2</sub>.

## JCPOA – main provisions

On 14 July 2015, Iran and the E3+3 (China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the USA) announced agreement on the JCPOA, which was endorsed by UNSCR 2231 six days later. The key aim of the JCPOA was to convincingly guarantee the exclusively peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program. For this purpose,

12 Ahmadinejad Visits Iran Heavy Water Reactor Site // The Iran Project. June 9, 2013. Available at: <https://theiranproject.com/blog/2013/06/09/ahmadinejad-visits-iran-heavy-water-reactor-site/>.

13 Albright D., Brannan P., Kelley R. Mysteries Deepen Over Status of Arak Reactor Project // Institute for Science and International Studies. August 11, 2009. Available at: <http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/ArakFuelElement.pdf>.

14 Samore G. Iran's Nuclear Programme. Iran's Strategic Weapons Programmes: A Net Assessment. 2005. London: Routledge. Available at: [http://www.123library.org/book\\_details/?id=107470](http://www.123library.org/book_details/?id=107470).

15 See Andriushin I., Yudin Y. Proliferation Risks and the Problem of Plutonium for Energy Production. Sarov, Saransk: Krasnyy Oktyabr'. 2007. 124 p.

16 Resolution 1696 (2006). Adopted by the Security Council at its 5500th meeting, on 31 July 2006 (S/RES/1696 (2006)). Available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1696>.

17 Report by the Director General, GOV/2011/54 // IAEA. September 2, 2011. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2011-54.pdf>.

Iran officially informed the Agency that it would apply the Additional Protocol to its IAEA Safeguards Agreement. The JCPOA also stipulated that all economic and financial sanctions previously instated via Security Council resolutions with regard to the Iranian nuclear program would be lifted. To settle any issues of dispute that might arise during the process of implementing the JCPOA, including the issue of Agency access to any given Iranian facilities where activities contravening the JCPOA might be taking place, it included an effective mechanism.

*Enrichment activities.* The enrichment capacity of the Natanz plant at the start of the practical implementation of the JCPOA was set at 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges grouped into 30 cascades. The level of uranium enrichment was not to exceed 3.67%. Iran committed to maintaining this level for 10 years. All remaining centrifuges at the plant were to be dismantled and sent for storage under IAEA monitoring.

At the Fordow enrichment plant, uranium enrichment stopped. All nuclear equipment was to be removed from the site. Iran committed to repurposing the remaining 1044 centrifuges for the production of stable isotopes.

The total level of uranium hexafluoride stockpiles enriched to 3.67% was set at 300kg and all remaining stocks at the time when the JCPOA entered into force were to be moved abroad. Iran's stocks of uranium oxide enriched to between 5 and 20 percent were meant to be down-blended to 3.67% to be used to make fuel for the TRR, or moved out of Iran.

The production of IR-1-type centrifuges in Iran was to stop. Plans for research and development work on uranium enrichment, as well as designs for more modern IR-2m, IR-4, IR-5, IR-6, IR-6s, IR-7 and IR-8 centrifuges, were meant to be shown to the Agency. Iran committed not to install new IR-8-type centrifuges at the Natanz plant for at least ten years after the start of the JCPOA.

The main objective of all of the restrictions placed upon the Iranian enrichment program was to ensure that Iran did not have the technical capacity to produce enough HEU to create one nuclear war-head within one year if it were to withdraw from the JCPOA.

*The IR-40 Reactor.* Under the JCPOA, Iran committed to change the design of the IR-40 reactor in Arak, reduce its capacity to 20MW and reconfigure it so that it would be incapable of producing weapons-grade plutonium. The reconfigured reactor would use fuel made from uranium dioxide enriched up to 3.67% and the full core load would be approximately 350kg. Fuel for the initial load would be manufactured outside Iran and all of the fuel irradiated in the reactor was to be removed from Iran.

By the time the practical implementation of the JCPOA began, the construction of the IR-40 was to be halted, and the core components of the reactor were to be neutralized and put beyond use by pouring concrete into the calandria. Production of fuel from natural uranium was to be stopped.

Iran was permitted to retain no more than 130 tons of heavy water. All excess heavy water produced in Iran surplus its own requirements for the next 15 years was to be sold on the international market. Iran was to refrain for 15 years from developing the capability to reprocess spent nuclear fuel or from engaging in research and development in the field of spent fuel reprocessing.

*Verification and Monitoring of the JCPOA.* In accordance with UNSCR 2231 (2015), the IAEA was tasked with taking the necessary measures to verify and monitor Iran's fulfilment of its commitments under the JCPOA for the full duration of these commitments and regularly report to the Security Council and IAEA Board of Governors on Iran's nuclear activities.

On 18 October 2015, Iran officially informed the IAEA Director General that, in fulfilment of its obligations under the JCPOA, it would apply the Additional Protocol to its IAEA Safeguards Agreement and modified Code 3.1 (prior submission of design information for new nuclear facilities to the IAEA).<sup>18</sup> The implementation of the Additional

<sup>18</sup> Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015), GOV/INF/2015/18 // IAEA. October 18, 2015. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov-inf-2015-18.pdf>.



Protocol, which was crucial to confirming the exclusively peaceful purpose of the Iranian nuclear program, began on the day the JCPOA entered into force. Iran informed the Agency that it would implement the Additional Protocol provisionally prior to its ratification by parliament.

The implementation of the Additional Protocol required the Agency to expand its team of inspectors permanently deployed to Iranian nuclear facilities. They have the most advanced monitoring and verification technologies at their disposal, such as electronic seals and on-line enrichment monitors.

### The implementation of the JCPOA

The practical implementation of the JCPOA started on 16 January 2016, after the IAEA had verified and confirmed that Tehran had brought its nuclear program into line with its voluntary commitments.<sup>19</sup>

According to the information the Agency provided regarding its verification and monitoring of the Iranian nuclear program in accordance with UNSCR 2231 (2015), up until 2019, Iran had strictly complied with its obligations under the JCPOA.

Iran implemented its Additional Protocol, permitting the Agency to use on-line uranium enrichment monitors and electronic seals which communicate their status within nuclear sites, and facilitated the automated acquisition of data and measurement recordings registered by installed measurement devices. This allowed the Agency to assess the declarations made by Iran. The implementation of the Additional Protocol also allowed the Agency to have greater access to facilities and other locations in Iran.

During this period, uranium enrichment activities continued in accordance with the long-term plan provided to the Agency in 2016.

The Natanz plant continued to enrich uranium, using 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges in 30 cascades. The total stockpile of uranium enriched

up to 3.67% U-235 did not exceed 300kg of UF<sub>6</sub>, or 202.8kg of uranium. The 1,044 centrifuges at the Fordow facility, which had remained spinning, did not carry out uranium enrichment, and there was no nuclear material present at that plant. Iran did not increase the quantity of enriched uranium obtained as a result of research and development into enrichment. No research and development into uranium enrichment was carried out, and research and development in the field of enrichment – both using uranium and without it – was carried out by Iran in compliance with the restrictions set out in the JCPOA.

At the Arak facility, construction of an IR-40 heavy-water research reactor based on the original designs was halted. Iran stopped production and testing of natural uranium pellets, fuel pins or fuel assemblies for that reactor. All previously manufactured natural uranium pellets and fuel assemblies were placed in storage under continuous Agency monitoring.

In 2016, the mass of heavy water produced in Iran exceeded the level set out in the JCPOA by 130 tons, and at the end of the year, 11 tons of heavy water were exported out of Iran.

According to the Reports by the Director General of the Agency, from the start of the implementation of the JCPOA, monitoring of nuclear activities in Iran did not reveal any undeclared activities or undeclared nuclear material.<sup>20</sup>

With the entry into force of the JCPOA, all applicable UN Security Council resolutions with regard to Iran's nuclear activities were rescinded (some restrictive measures remained in force, but through a separate annex to UN Security Council resolution 2231). A whole host of unilateral US sanctions were also lifted (mainly financial, including extraterritorial sanctions that affected the interests of third countries), along with all restrictive measures imposed by the EU.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## The US withdrawal from the JCPOA

On 8 May 2018, US President Donald Trump announced the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the reinstatement and tightening of the economic sanctions regime against Iran.<sup>21</sup> To justify this decision it was claimed that the terms had been so poorly drafted that even if Iran fully complied with them, once the agreement had expired, it would not render Iran incapable of building a nuclear weapon. Additional arguments put forward to support the US withdrawal from the agreement pointed to the inadequacies of the monitoring mechanism and discovery of unlawful nuclear activities, as well as the lack of provision to inspect any location in Iran. Mention was also made of Iran's development of ballistic missiles, and its destabilizing activities in the region, including support for terrorism. In November 2018, the US sanctions that had been lifted in 2016 under the JCPOA were fully reinstated, including restrictions regarding the energy sector, shipping and shipbuilding. Iran's central bank was excluded from the international SWIFT system.

In response to this decision by the US, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani announced on 8 May 2018 that the country would continue to implement the JCPOA if the other parties to the agreement assured Iran that they would respect its interests.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, he warned that if cooperation with the remaining signatories did not make it possible to fulfil all conditions of the JCPOA, then the agreement would not remain in force and Iran would restart uranium enrichment without any limitations.

The countries of the EU three (E3), China and Russia did not support the US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA. The European Union made a statement condemning the decision and declared that the USA did not have the authority to unilaterally rewrite the terms of this

international agreement. The European Union's statement on the reinstatement of American sanctions noted that the "the JCPOA is working and delivering on its goal, namely to ensure that the Iranian program remains exclusively peaceful, as confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 11 consecutive reports. It is a key element of the global nuclear non-proliferation architecture, crucial for the security of Europe, the region, and the entire world."<sup>23</sup> The statement expressed the intention to make efforts to protect EU companies that were engaging in lawful trade with Iran from the impact of the US' extraterritorial sanctions.

China expressed disappointment at the US decision on the multilateral deal with Iran. According to the statement made by Chinese officials, China had an interest in maintaining the integrity of the JCPOA and expressed its readiness to cooperate on this issue with other interested parties.<sup>24</sup>

In Russia, the decision by US President Donald Trump on the withdrawal from the JCPOA was seen as extremely irresponsible as there was no reason to tear up the agreement. It had been implemented successfully for over two years and Iran was conscientiously fulfilling its commitments under the agreement, as was confirmed by IAEA reports. Furthermore, in Russia this decision was seen as an attempt by the USA to force its will on the international community by threatening to apply extraterritorial sanctions.<sup>25</sup> Russia, too, committed to take steps to minimize the damage caused to the Iranian economy by the new American sanctions.<sup>26</sup>

In August 2018, the US started the process of reinstating the sanctions, of which the hardest for Tehran were what were known as

21 The Full Transcript of Trump's Speech on the Iran Nuclear Deal // The New York Times. May 8, 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

22 Rouhani: For Now, Iran Stays in the JCPOA // Atom.Info. May 9, 2018. Available at: <http://atominfo.ru/newss/z0292.htm>.

23 Joint Statement on the Re-Imposition of US Sanctions Due to Its Withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Brussels. August 6, 2018. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/49141/node/49141\\_fi](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/49141/node/49141_fi).

24 China Calls for Coordinated Measures to Ensure the Integrity of the Iranian Deal // Atom.Info. May 9, 2018. Available at: <http://atominfo.ru/newss/z0291.htm>.

25 Mikhail Ulyanov: The JCPOA Remains in Force at Iran's expense // Atom.Info. May 9, 2018. Available at: <http://atominfo.ru/newss/z0293.htm>.

26 Ryabkov: Russia Will Take Steps to Minimize the Damage Caused by US Sanctions Against Iran // Atom.Info. November 8, 2018. Available at: <http://atominfo.ru/newst/a0533.htm>.

secondary sanctions: punitive sanctions against companies that did business with Iran. In order to preserve the JCPOA, the EU developed what was known as a blocking statute, which was intended to protect European companies who were doing business with Iran from the impact of US extraterritorial sanctions. However, the European Union's creation of a mechanism for international trade payments with Iran in circumvention of US sanctions ran into difficulties. Not a single European country was prepared to enter into conflict with the USA and register a company in its jurisdiction that the special trade payments mechanism could operate through. The European Union only managed to launch the INSTEX mechanism for trade with Iran in circumvention of US sanctions in the middle of 2019.<sup>27</sup> However, not all European Union states signed up to the mechanism and it did not cover the export of Iranian oil.

On 8 May 2019, exactly a year after the US had withdrawn from the JCPOA, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani announced that, given that the European signatories were not fulfilling their commitments regarding the economic aspects of the agreement in full, as things stood, the deal no longer made sense to Iran. He announced that Iran would gradually suspend its implementation of elements of its JCPOA commitments.<sup>28</sup> It was stated that Iran would scale back the implementation of its commitments under the deal every 60 days if the European signatories failed to fulfil the requirements of the agreement, including those relating to banking and the oil trade, within that time. However, if these issues were resolved, then Iran would resume implementation of its commitments.

As a first step, starting from 8 May 2019, Iran announced it would temporarily stop adhering to the 300kg limit under the JCPOA on the total mass of 3.67%-enriched uranium stocks. According to the Agency, the total stockpile of enriched uranium in Iran exceeded 300kg of UF<sub>6</sub> on 1 July 2019.<sup>29</sup>

27 Fate of the JCPOA Hangs in Balance // TASS. June 29, 2019. Available at: <http://atominfo.ru/newsy/z0875.htm>.

28 Report by the Director General, GOV/2019/21 // IAEA. May 31, 2019. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/19/06/gov2019-21.pdf>.

29 Report by the Acting Director General, GOV/2019/32 // IAEA. September 2, 2019. Available at:

The next step was Iran's rejection of the ban on enriching uranium above 3.67%.<sup>30</sup> The Agency established that from 8 July 2019, the Natanz enrichment plant had started to enrich UF<sub>6</sub> from 3.67% to 4.5% U-235. Tehran also announced that it would return to the original plan to modernize the Arak nuclear reactor that had been finalized prior to the signing of the JCPOA and which would, potentially, make it possible to produce weapons-grade plutonium. However, according to the Agency, Iran did not continue construction of the Arak heavy-water research reactor (IR-40) on the basis of the original design.<sup>31</sup> Iran had not produced or tested natural uranium pellets, fuel pins or fuel assemblies specifically designed for the IR-40 reactor as originally designed, and all existing natural uranium pellets and fuel assemblies had remained in storage under continuous Agency monitoring.

On 6 September Iran started implementation of the third phase and stopped fulfilment of all of its commitments regarding research and development. Iran informed the Agency that it intended to install and test additional, improved centrifuges at the experimental uranium enrichment facility in Natanz using natural uranium.<sup>32</sup> A new cascade of 20 IR-6 centrifuges was commissioned, with an option to expand to 30, along with a cascade of 20 IR-2m centrifuges. Work began to install piping for a cascade of 164 IR-4 centrifuges and a cascade of 164 IR-2m centrifuges. The Agency was also informed of a plan to build a new cascade of 164 IR-6 centrifuges. Later, Iranian official representatives announced the development of IR-9 centrifuges with 50 times the production capacity of the IR-1.<sup>33</sup>

Iran's fourth step in terms of scaling back fulfilment of its JCPOA obligations was the restarting of uranium enrichment at the Fordow

<https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/19/09/gov2019-32.pdf>.

30 Report by the Director General, GOV/INF/2019/9 // IAEA. July 8, 2019. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/19/07/govinf2019-9.pdf>.

31 Report by the Director General, GOV/2020/5 // IAEA. March 4, 2020. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/03/gov2020-5.pdf>.

32 Report by the Acting Director General, GOV/INF/2019/10 // IAEA. September 9, 2019. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/19/09/govinf2019-10.pdf>.

33 Civil Servant: Iran is Developing an IR-9 Centrifuge with 50 Times the Capacity of an IR-1 // Atom. Info. November 5, 2019. Available at: <http://atominfo.ru/newsz/a0507.htm>.

facility in early November 2019. Iran invited IAEA inspectors to observe the process of feeding uranium hexafluoride into the centrifuges installed there.

In January 2020, Iran, in its fifth and final step, stopped respecting the limits set under the JCPOA on the number of centrifuges used for enrichment. According to an announcement by the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), Ali Akbar Salehi, the production capacity of all of Iran's enrichment facilities taken together reached 200kg per month, and by the end of 2019, Iran's reserves of enriched uranium had reached 800kg.<sup>34</sup> Reserves of heavy water in Iran exceeded 130 tons.

According to data presented in the most recent published IAEA quarterly report, as of the start of March 2020, Iran was using no more than 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges in 30 cascades at the enrichment plant in Natanz.<sup>35</sup> At the Fordow plant, since 22 January 2020, Iran has been using six cascades made up of 1,044 IR-1 centrifuges to enrich UF<sub>6</sub>. As of 19 February 2020, total stocks of enriched uranium in Iran amounted to 1,020.9kg, including 214.6kg of uranium enriched up to 3.67% and 806.3kg of uranium enriched up to 4.5% U-235.<sup>36</sup>

### **The JCPOA and monitoring of Iran's nuclear activities**

The key to confirming the peaceful intent of Iran's nuclear program is the implementation of the Additional Protocol, which allows the Agency to assess the accuracy and fullness of the information provided by Iran about its nuclear activities in line with its Safeguards Agreement. Iran has voluntarily applied the Additional Protocol to the NPT Safeguards Agreement, in accordance with the JCPOA, on a provisional basis, since 18 January 2016, i.e. since the entry into force of the JCPOA.

It is worth noting that in spite of suspending the implementation of some measures under the JCPOA, to date, Iran has undertaken all action in close cooperation with, and under the continuous oversight of, the IAEA. The Agency continues to carry out verification and monitoring under the JCPOA in line with the Additional Protocol, and Iran provides Agency inspectors with access to all facilities and locations in Iran so they can verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material at nuclear facilities and other locations outside of those facilities, as declared by Iran in accordance with its Safeguards Agreement.

Evidently, by implementing the Additional Protocol on a provisional basis, Iran hopes to maintain a bargaining chip it can use to exert pressure on the signatories to the JCPOA to fulfil their side of the deal. This could be inferred from the statement made by Iranian president Hassan Rouhani during his meeting with the head of the EU External Action Service, Josep Borrell, the goal of whose visit was to salvage the JCPOA.<sup>37</sup> The official IRNA news agency reported that the Iranian president had stated that Tehran might review its policy of permitting Agency inspectors access to Iranian nuclear facilities if the country found itself facing a "new situation".

In November 2019, the Agency reported that it had detected natural uranium particles of anthropogenic origin at a location in Iran not declared to the Agency.<sup>38</sup> Information about this facility and two other locations was included in Iranian documents seized by Israel and given to the IAEA. This gave rise to the suspicion that the declaration that Iran had made about its nuclear materials and previous activities had not been accurate or complete. The Agency therefore formulated a set of questions related to possible undeclared nuclear material and nuclear activities in Iran, and in July 2019, it asked Iran to respond to these questions. No response was received from Iran to this or

<sup>34</sup> Authorities: Iranian Enriched Uranium Reserves Reach 800kg // Atom.Info. December 24, 2019. Available at: <http://atominfo.ru/news/a0849.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Report by the Director General, GOV/2020/5 // IAEA. March 4, 2020. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/03/gov2020-5.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Iran May Block UN Inspectors if It Faces a 'New Situation' // US News. February 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-02-03/iran-may-block-un-inspectors-if-it-faces-a-new-situation>.

<sup>38</sup> Report by the Acting Director General, GOV/2019/55 // November 12, 2019. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/19/11/gov2019-55.pdf>.



subsequent requests, and the Agency requested access to the locations indicated to take environmental samples in order to resolve the questions that had arisen.

In the *Report by the Director General* published on 3 March 2020, mention is made of a letter from Iran to the Agency stating that it did not admit to any accusation of past nuclear activities and did not consider itself obliged to respond to such allegations. It also refused to allow IAEA inspectors access to the requested facilities.<sup>39</sup> The Agency, for its part, continued to insist that it should be granted access to the locations indicated in order to address all of its questions.

### Conclusion: what to expect

Iran's suspension of its voluntary commitments under the JCPOA represents a reaction to the USA's unjustified withdrawal from the agreement and reinstatement of sanctions. These actions by Iran are entirely lawful and provided for in the agreement. The USA's withdrawal from the JCPOA is a serious violation of agreements and UNSCR 2231, demonstrating their intention to destroy the deal.

The remaining signatories to the JCPOA maintain their support for and commitment to the nuclear deal, although how events continue to develop will, in many ways, depend on the readiness and/or ability of the European Union to address the challenges of circumventing US sanctions and implement the commitments under the agreement. For now, there is hope that it will be possible to keep the deal alive, at least with regard to maintaining the transparency regime surrounding the Iranian nuclear program. However, if the INSTEX mechanism developed by the EU in order to trade with Iran in circumvention of US sanctions fails to work, then Iran could refuse to allow IAEA inspectors access to Iranian nuclear facilities. In this context, the aforementioned denial of access to two facilities for environmental sampling is very telling indeed.

If acceptable solutions in order to allow trade with Iran in circumvention of US sanctions through the INSTEX mechanism are not found soon, then it is possible that Iran may refuse to allow the IAEA to continue inspection activities. Such a course of events might mean Iran could deviate from the exclusively peaceful character of its nuclear program, or that Iran might take the decision to manufacture a nuclear weapon. In assessing the likelihood of this happening, something that is of decisive importance to Iran is the time factor.

If we suppose that, in order to win time, Tehran might transition to enriching uranium up to 20%, formally speaking, this would not be a violation of its obligations under the NPT, and Iran would not even need to stop applying its Additional Protocol. A supply of 20%-enriched uranium makes it possible to significantly reduce the time required to produce weapons-grade uranium. Let us try to assess how much time it might take, working on the assumption that the goal would be to make 20kg of weapons-grade uranium enriched up to 90%: sufficient to produce two implosion-type nuclear weapons. If 20%-enriched uranium is used as the feedstock then approximately 100kg of it and around 400 separative work units (SWU) will be required. Producing 100kg of 20%-enriched uranium will require about 450kg of 5%-enriched uranium (Iran has already stockpiled around 1,000kg of this type of uranium), and about 1000 SWU. Using the enrichment capacity at the Fordow plant alone, this could be done within 6 months. After that, in order for Iran to make 20kg of 90%-enriched uranium, only 400 SWU would be required. Nominally, making full use of all of its enrichment capacity, this could be achieved in under a month; using only the capacity at Fordow it would take two to three months. This time could be significantly reduced if one cascade with 160 IR-6 centrifuges were to be launched and operated.

Once the required mass of enriched uranium is produced in the form of UF<sub>6</sub>, some time – about a month – will be needed to convert it into metal and manufacture hemispheres from that metal. Bearing in mind Iran's existing knowledge and experience gained during the

<sup>39</sup> Report by the Director General, GOV/2020/15 // IAEA. March 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/06/gov2020-15.pdf>.

implementation of the AMAD program, the manufacture and testing of an implosive detonation system could be started at the same time as the work to make HEU. That would mean it could be ready by the time the metal hemispheres were made. Thus, in such a scenario, Iran might need three or four months in total from the time the decision is made to the manufacture of a nuclear weapon suitable for testing. This time could be significantly reduced if Iran already had a stock of undeclared nuclear material.

It is hard to speculate which scenario will come to pass. To date, Iran has not violated a crucial aspect of the nuclear deal – the transparency regarding its nuclear activities – and has not obstructed the Agency in carrying out verification and monitoring according to standard Agency Safeguards practice.<sup>40</sup> Iran has continued to permit the Agency to use on-line uranium enrichment monitors and electronic seals which communicate their status within nuclear sites to Agency inspectors, and to facilitate the automated collection of Agency measurement recordings registered by installed measurement devices. The Agency is able to impartially and objectively verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material at nuclear facilities and other locations outside of those facilities. It is clear that every effort should be made to preserve the transparency regime surrounding the Iranian nuclear program.

<sup>40</sup> Report by the Acting Director General, GOV/2019/55 // IAEA. November 12, 2019. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/19/11/gov2019-55.pdf>



## PROSPECTS FOR PRESERVING THE NPT AND THE JCPOA

### 3.1. THE NEAR FUTURE OF THE NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION REGIME

*George Perkovich*<sup>1</sup>

I have been asked to explore how the collapse of the JCPOA will affect the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. The non-proliferation regime is a very important element of the broader nuclear order (about which I wrote in 2017, *The Brittle Nuclear Order*). That broader order involves restraint and deterrence in the potential use of nuclear weapons, commitments to preserve strategic stability, cooperation in preventing proliferation. It also obligates nuclear-weapon states to pursue the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals and to offer peaceful nuclear cooperation to states that forego nuclear weapons. My focus in the present paper is more narrowly on nuclear weapons proliferation in the wake of the JCPOA's collapse.

I will speculate first how this collapse may affect the prospects of proliferation by Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Then I will discuss whether and how developments in the Middle East might affect the calculations of Japan and ROK – the most likely additional proliferators. I will suggest that these challenges are not systemic. That is, they are not due to weaknesses in the NPT, the IAEA safeguards system, or peaceful nuclear cooperation. Nor would these states' potential interests in

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acquiring nuclear weapons be canceled by new arms control arrangements among the nuclear-weapon states (although these should be pursued for other reasons!). Rather, the potential proliferation challenges in the Middle East and Northeast Asia arise from specific contests between a handful of governments over issues broader than nuclear policies.

In writing *The Brittle Nuclear Order* for the Luxembourg Forum in 2017, I argued that:

“The threat of nuclear weapons proliferation could be much more manageable now than it appeared to be five or fifteen years ago. In 2002, proliferation appeared to be a grave threat from North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Libya, with additional concerns that Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and perhaps Turkey could become sources of acute worry. Five years ago, only Iraq and Libya had been removed from this list. Today, aside from North Korea, the proliferation threat picture is much more positive.

Much depends on the successful implementation of the JCPOA in and with Iran....Many developments could jeopardize it. Yet, the situation created by the agreement is much more positive than many analysts would have predicted five years ago. If the JCPOA holds, it is quite possible to motivate and prevent Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey from seeking and acquiring nuclear weapons. And if that is the case, then the other potential locales of state proliferation would most likely be ROK and/or Japan. Here, too, there is reason to believe that these two countries and the US and China – the two most influential outside powers—can develop and pursue policies to demonstrate that ROK’s and Japan’s interests will be better served by eschewing acquisition of nuclear weapons.”

Now, in early 2020, the United States has withdrawn from the JCPOA and is steadily increasing various sanctions on Iran and, potentially, on other nations and businesses that engage with Iran. This is part of a “maximum pressure” campaign to coerce Iran into complying

with a set of (rather vague) US demands regarding the nuclear program, human rights, support of terrorist organizations and other actors whom the US (and others) oppose in the Middle East. Iran has taken steps to transgress some of the JCPOA’s limits on uranium enrichment, while threatening to withdraw from the NPT if Iran is referred back to the UN Security Council as a result of the European Union’s triggering of the Dispute Resolution mechanism in the JCPOA. Meanwhile, the US and China confront each other with increasing intensity.

This is a very unstable situation. Any analysis or prediction that one makes today could be validated or invalidated by any number of actors tomorrow or next month. None of the major players – President Trump, the US Congress, Iranian leaders and the population, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, to name the most obvious ones – appears to have a clear strategy and the capacity to achieve it. Such confusion and uncertainty make analysis and prediction very dubious.

Obviously, answers depend on the scenarios one imagines, and today one can imagine many scenarios. For example, should we assume that President Trump will be re-elected in November? Should we assume that the Iranian regime holds effective power, or instead is embroiled in massive and ongoing civil strife? Should we assume that conflict – overt or covert, large-scale and incidental – intensifies between the US and its partners in the Middle East on one side, and Iran and its proxies on the other? Even if one could predict answers to these questions, it is not clear which answers to which questions would produce worst-case dynamics or better ones, from the standpoint of the non-proliferation regime.

### Scenarios of Saudi responses to Iran

With these caveats, for the purposes of our discussion I make the following assumptions (in late February). President Trump is re-elected. The Iranian regime is not displaced, though tensions within the country grow. Iran and the US continue to contest each other



throughout the region, but violence between them does not escalate dramatically. The JCPOA is not revived, but Iran continues to insist it does not seek nuclear weapons, and the EU-3 plus Russia and China continue to urge negotiations to modify it enough to enable its spirit to be restored. No additional state (beyond North Korea) withdraws from the NPT.

Under these conditions, what might arise as the major challenges within the nuclear non-proliferation regime? I begin this speculative analysis with a series of questions that have implications which participants in the Luxembourg Forum will comprehend without further elaboration.

- Do Iran's neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey, conclude that Iran will decide to seek nuclear weapons and will be able to succeed in acquiring them?
- Does Saudi Arabia materially seek to fulfill its leaders' various statements that they will acquire nuclear weapons if Iran does? That is, does Saudi Arabia seek to acquire capabilities that would enable it to produce or deploy nuclear weapons – either indigenous capabilities or imports from foreign suppliers?
- Do the US, Israel, Russia and other actors that could influence Saudi Arabia's quest for nuclear weapons capabilities demonstrate resolve to prevent this – preferably through diplomacy, but by physical means if necessary?
- Does Iran indicate – privately or publicly – that it will act to prevent Saudi Arabia from acquiring nuclear weapons?
- Is the IAEA given the authority and backing to gain sufficient access to Saudi Arabia to enable the Agency to detect violations of safeguards and other commitments?
- Do states that could exert diplomatic and economic leverage on Saudi Arabia, through sanctions for example, demonstrate willingness to do so, or do some key purchasers of Saudi oil find reasons not to do so?

Presently, it seems impossible to answer any of these questions

with confidence. More remarkably, I am not aware that these questions are being asked in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States, Russia, China or any other influential states or institutions. If they are being asked, open sources do not reveal it. This invites a point that I will make throughout this paper: the potential challenges to the international non-proliferation regime do not arise from shortcomings of this regime itself, but rather from the policies and actions of key states that are now motivated by interests beyond or besides nuclear non-proliferation. That is, non-proliferation is now a secondary interest. The key actors do not think much about how their pursuit of their primary interests will affect proliferation.

In some ways, this latter point is obvious. Long-time practitioners or observers of international affairs and many scholars would say that international regimes always reflect the priorities and exertions of major powers. And, historically, non-proliferation often has been less important to one or more of them than other facets of their relationships with particular states. This was seen in the US treatment of Pakistan after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US-India nuclear deal in 2005, Russia's relationship with Iraq between 1990 and 2003, China's relationship with North Korea in the 2000s, and so on.

In other ways, though, the dynamics around the Iranian nuclear challenge were different. From 2009-2016, the Obama Administration and other international powers saw the Iran challenge largely in terms of the non-proliferation regime. Non-proliferation was the top priority and they worked with the International Atomic Energy Agency to contain the threat. One consequence of the Trump Administration's irrational decision to stop implementing the JCPOA is that efforts to enduringly contain Iran's proliferation potential are now entangled with many other challenges and competitions.

One of these is Saudi Arabia. If Saudi Arabia responds to developments in Iran in ways that elevate proliferation concerns, efforts to deal with that challenge also will be entangled. The P5 plus Germany and the European Union, along with India, Japan and others, will then

struggle with each other and with Iran and perhaps Saudi Arabia to prioritize competing interests within each country and among them. The COVID-19 pandemic and global economic recession lowered fossil fuel prices so that large importers could be more willing to impose sanctions that limit supplies, and Iran and Saudi Arabia are more vulnerable to economic pressure. But the world's most influential states still have multiple and often competing interests towards both countries and non-proliferation may not be the most important.

Iran alone poses an enormous challenge and preoccupies the highest leaderships of the P5 + 1, and to some extent major importers of oil such as India and Japan. Adding Saudi Arabia to this challenge would seem an overwhelming burden for these governments and their leaders. However, the intense competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia could provide a lever to manage these challenges: Tehran and Riyadh could have incentives to modify their intentions and actions on a reciprocal basis.

Powerful outside actors would be necessary to facilitate diplomacy to this end. The US would be indispensable at one level. Iran and Saudi Arabia would need reassurance from it more than from others. But if President Trump remains in office it is difficult to see that he and his relevant departments would have the skill and temperament to effectively manage such diplomacy. (If Trump is defeated, this challenge would be immense for a new president and new cabinet officers to meet, especially as the process of confirming new appointees will likely be difficult given the partisan contests in Washington).

Russia would be indispensable, too, for several reasons. Its cooperation was invaluable in negotiating the JCPOA and encouraging Iran to accept and comply with it. Its role in Syria is important to Iran and also to Saudi Arabia, and provides leverage that Moscow could exert in various directions. Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council would come into play if the nuclear issue devolves into a worse crisis and potential military conflict, and the US threatens to, or actually uses force. Regarding Saudi Arabia, Russia's role in international

politics and the Security Council would be important, as would its potential role supplying nuclear technology (and weapons) to Saudi Arabia.

China would be vital, too. Similar to Russia, its role in the UN Security Council would motivate the US and Iran to compete for its cooperation. China's economic involvement in Iran, Saudi Arabia and the broader region – as a market for oil, a potential source of capital, and supplier of goods – could be mobilized to lessen the United States' coercive power.

Other players, too, would be important – the EU and India, particularly – though they are all struggling with internal problems and other priorities.

The broader conclusion from this admittedly simplistic survey is that it is easy to wreck an agreement like the JCPOA, but it is extraordinarily difficult now to reorder the situation in a way that makes anyone, let alone everyone, better off. President Trump is demonstrably incapable of providing the necessary leadership, and the officials and activists in Washington who favor “maximum pressure” against Iran have no viable strategy that would motivate Iran to do what they want and/or the rest of the world to cooperate to this end. At the same time, no other individual state or likely combination of several states has sufficient political and economic power to restore the JCPOA or effect a satisfactory replacement for it. I hope that this is wrong or too pessimistic, and I welcome evidence to the contrary.

### **Turkey, too?**

To add to the challenge, it is unfortunately necessary to mention the possibility that the collapse of the JCPOA could also stimulate the Turkish government's interest in seeking at least latent capabilities to acquire nuclear weapons. If this transpires, questions similar to those listed above regarding Saudi Arabia would arise. Additional variables or questions regarding Turkey would include:

- Does President Erdogan exert effective control over relevant

Turkish policy-making? If so, does he conclude that developing or appearing to develop nuclear weapons capability augment or undermine his hold on power?

- Does the US remove nuclear bombs now stored in Turkey, or do these weapons remain?
- Does Turkey remain in NATO?
- Does Russia continue to fulfill its agreement to supply nuclear power plants to Turkey, or does it condition such supply on Turkey's verified compliance with its NPT obligations?
- Are Turkey's interests and positions in Syria and Iraq (related to the Kurds) threatened militarily, including by Russia?<sup>2</sup>

If these questions are being considered in relevant capitals, it is reasonable to expect that deliberations on them are kept secret. I can merely speculate that the US and other NATO states would reduce incentives for Turkey to hedge its nuclear options if they expressed a clear preference for Turkey to remain in NATO. This would require them to manage their differences over some of Turkey's regional actions differently than they would if they did not value Turkey's membership.

If signs emerge that Turkey is taking steps to acquire nuclear weapon capabilities, it is doubtful that NATO today could produce a coherent response. Which leader of which major NATO power would be able to overcome all the confusion and discord and produce a shared script and plan of action? What would NATO's various members offer that would motivate the Erdogan government to desist and make clear that it will not seek nuclear weapons?

Russia's relationship with Turkey is complicated. Moscow could in some ways welcome Turkish withdrawal from NATO. But if Russian leaders also see a strong interest in avoiding Turkish nuclearization, they could find ways to reassure Erdogan that he and Turkey will be more secure without seeking nuclear weapons capabilities. This view could

<sup>2</sup> I wrote this on February 26. The next day, more than three dozen Turkish soldiers were killed in Syria. Turkey alleges that these attacks were either conducted or abetted by Russian forces.

be reinforced by signaling that Russia would impose costs on Turkey if it sought to acquire nuclear weapons. Such threats – however veiled – paired with possible NATO reactions could make the risks of seeking nuclear weapons appear larger and more certain than the speculative benefits of having a small arsenal. But, again, that calculus would be much stronger if Turkey also saw clear benefits in remaining in NATO.

In sum, perceived moves by Iran and/or Saudi Arabia and/or Turkey to acquire nuclear weapons in the absence of a functioning JCPOA clearly would produce regional crisis of a magnitude to upset international politics and security. Such crisis (or crises) would severely challenge the region and major international powers including the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Would such crisis (or crises) also threaten to collapse the global nuclear non-proliferation regime?

I think the answer to this question is “no,” or at least, “not necessarily.” Much of the world would see the United States (specifically, the Trump Administration) as the primary cause of the crisis due to its withdrawal from the JCPOA when the International Atomic Energy Agency and others assessed that Iran was complying with it. The functioning of the IAEA and its safeguards system, the provision or denial of peaceful nuclear cooperation, and the nuclear-weapon states' progress toward nuclear disarmament (or lack thereof) would not be perceived as very relevant, at least compared to the unrelated actions of the United States. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons would be irrelevant. Even the failure of conferences to explore the creation of a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East would be immaterial. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia nor Turkey would be driven by concerns over Israel's possession of nuclear weapons.

Again, we could say all of this is obvious. The priorities and actions of major powers drive international politics including nuclear proliferation and counter-proliferation or non-proliferation.

But that is only part of the story, albeit an important part. The non-proliferation regime is something more than the sum of the interests and efforts of the major powers. There is a non-proliferation

norm. It is not as strong as the norm against first use of nuclear weapons, but it is important. Just ask the 185 non-nuclear weapon states party to the NPT. The IAEA is an important institution in the non-proliferation regime, in many ways. Safeguards, nuclear safety, and cooperation in various beneficial peaceful applications of atomic energy are important global goods provided by the IAEA as part of this regime. The security guarantees, including the nuclear-weapon states' commitments not to attack non-nuclear-weapon states in good-standing under the NPT, are meaningful to many countries.

Thus, even as the major powers carry the brunt of responsibility for sustaining the non-proliferation regime and redressing crises within it, their interests and those of the wider world are served by dedication to preserving and strengthening it even in times of crisis.

### **What about South Korea and Japan?**

Turning away from the Middle East, if Japan or ROK in the next few years took steps to bolster their capabilities to produce nuclear weapons, I believe this would be seen as a consequence of actions or inaction by the US, China, North Korea, Japan and ROK. I do not think it would be a failing of the non-proliferation regime as such.

Japan and ROK are often seen as the next most likely cases of nuclear proliferation aside from Iran. Space does not allow going into detail about the domestic debates in each country and their relative technical options. The broader points are that both feel directly threatened by North Korea and its growing nuclear weapons arsenal. Both worry existentially about China's increasing economic and military capacity to project power. And both doubt the willingness and ability of the United States to reliably defend their interests and their physical security. These factors do not arise from weaknesses in the non-proliferation regime. They stem from the interests and actions of the US, China and North Korea and from Japan and ROK. To be more accurate: the national interests and actions of these countries are produced through competition amongst political and bureaucratic

factions within them. The outcomes of these contests, and then the interactions amongst the representatives of these countries, will determine whether further proliferation occurs in the region.

To be sure, the terms of the non-proliferation regime and their enforceability would affect the difficulty or ease with which Japan or ROK could produce fissile materials for nuclear weapons and conduct other activities related to developing nuclear weapons. The willingness and ability of the UN Security Council, ultimately, to sanction them or otherwise impede their production of nuclear weapons would be important. (This points to the already-mentioned importance of the US and China as veto-wielders, as well as Russia).

The UN factor (and sanctions more broadly) is related to the effectiveness of the non-proliferation regime, but ultimately depends on the broader calculations of interest that would guide each of the P5 in deciding whether and how to motivate both countries to comply with their NPT obligations. Japan and ROK are currently allies of the United States, so US policies towards them would be extremely important. China would have very strong motivations to prevent them from acquiring nuclear weapons. One can imagine a US government that would conclude that a Japan and/or ROK with nuclear weapons would not seriously threaten US interests and could weaken China's relative security in ways that the US might welcome.

Again, this analysis suggests how the interests and actions of potential proliferant states and of the US, China and Russia determine the effectiveness of the non-proliferation regime. But it will matter significantly if these states conceptualize and describe their policies and actions *in terms* of the non-proliferation regime. Actions validly framed as necessary to uphold this regime's norms, "bargains," protocols and procedures will be more constructive than actions undertaken without reference or fealty to them.

### **Conclusion**

Experts, scholars and diplomats who work on nuclear



non-proliferation and disarmament tend to think and talk a lot about “the non-proliferation regime.” There are good reasons for this. International regimes can be meaningful and effective, and few have been more meaningful and effective than the nuclear non-proliferation one.<sup>3</sup>

However, today the discord among major powers and uncertainty over their policies undermine the foundations of international regimes. The non-proliferation regime is old and strong enough to withstand this challenge, which hopefully is transitory. Only a handful of countries have the potential interest and capacity to seek nuclear weapons. But, for those countries that do – Iran, maybe Saudi Arabia, Turkey, ROK and Japan – the norms and institutions of the non-proliferation regime itself will be much less important than the words and deeds of their leaders and those of a few other nations – the United States, China, Russia, chief among them.

None of these national leaders will know or care much about the non-proliferation regime per se. But they will pay great attention to threats to themselves, their ruling circles, their economies, their nations. There is good reason to think that each of these nations and their leaders will conclude that fighting a war to seek nuclear weapons or to deny someone else from seeing them is less advisable than making a deal whereby one party stops seeking nuclear weapons and the others stop seeking to economically strangle them or otherwise force them from power. If and when this happens, everyone will also have an interest in emphasizing how important the non-proliferation regime is to maintaining such deals and preventing new proliferation crises from emerging. This will be partly true as a matter of fact and vitally true as a matter of international political belief.

<sup>3</sup> See Keohane R. The Demand for International Regimes // International Organization. 1982. Vol. 36. No. 2. Pp. 325-355; Chapter 6 in Keohane R. After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy. 1984. Princeton University Press. 290 p.; Oye K. Cooperation Under Anarchy. 1986. Princeton University Press. 260 p.; Solingen E. The Political Economy of Nuclear Restraint // International Security. 1994. Vol. 19. No. 2. Pp. 126-169. Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/447354/summary>; Fuhrmann M., Lupu Y. Do Arms Control Treaties Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty // International Studies Quarterly. 2016. Vol. 60. No. 3. Pp. 530-539.

## 3.2. THE 2015 JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION

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### Background

The JCPOA was signed in Vienna on 14 July 2015, between Iran and the E3/EU+3.<sup>2</sup> The Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2231 on 20 July 2015, in which it endorsed the JCPOA and terminated all provisions of previous UN Security Council resolutions on the Iranian nuclear issue – 1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), 1929 (2010) and 2224 (2015) – simultaneously with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)-verified implementation of agreed JCPOA nuclear-related provisions by Iran.<sup>3</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Tariq Rauf – Consulting Advisor for Policy and Outreach, Office of Executive Secretary, Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO); Principal, Global Nuclear Solutions (Former Director, Disarmament, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Program, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute; Head of the Verification and Security Policy Coordination Office of International Atomic Energy Agency); Ph.D. (Canada).
- <sup>2</sup> The full text of the JCPOA is available at, [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/docs/iran\\_agreement/iran\\_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf); International Atomic Energy Agency, INFCIRC/887 (31 July 2015); For a description of the elements of the JCPOA see Rauf T. Resolving Concerns About Iran's Nuclear Programme // Chapter 17.1, SIPRI Yearbook 2016. Stockholm. 806 p.; and E3/EU+3 stands for France, Germany and the United Kingdom (E3), European Union (EU), and China, Russian Federation and United States (+3).
- <sup>3</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2231 (2015), 20 July 2015; Resolution 2231 stipulated that within 30 days of receiving a notification by a JCPOA signatory state of an issue that that state believes constitutes significant non-performance of commitments under the JCPOA, the Council shall vote on a draft resolution to continue in effect the terminations of the provisions of previous Security Council resolutions. It further stipulated that if the Security Council does not adopt a resolution to continue in effect the termination of previous resolutions, then effective midnight

Under the JCPOA, Iran reaffirmed that under no circumstances would it ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons, and to implement the Additional Protocol to its NPT safeguards agreement with the IAEA. Iran voluntarily undertook to reduce its operating centrifuges from nearly 20,000 machines to 6,100 IR-1 centrifuges, of which 5,060 would remain operational. Excess centrifuges and related infrastructure at Natanz would be stored under continuous IAEA monitoring. Iran agreed to limit enrichment of uranium to 3.67 per cent U-235 and to ship out its inventory of enriched uranium (UF<sub>6</sub>) except for 300 kilograms (kg) – a level that would be maintained for 15 years.

The Fordow enrichment plant would be converted into a nuclear technology center with 1,044 IR-1 centrifuges that would be transitioned for stable isotope production, for a period of 15 years. Iran agreed to redesign and rebuild a modernized heavy-water reactor at Arak based on an internationally agreed design, use uranium hexafluoride (UF<sub>6</sub>) enriched to 3.67 per cent U-235 for reactor fuel, and to remove and render dysfunctional the core of the under construction 40 megawatt (MW) Arak reactor. Iran would not reprocess spent nuclear fuel and not build any other heavy-water reactors for 15 years; and would cap at 130 metric tons its stocks of nuclear grade heavy water.

Iran further agreed to implement the Additional Protocol to its NPT safeguards agreement and fully implement modified code 3.1 of the subsidiary arrangements to its safeguards agreement, on the early provision of design information of nuclear facilities.<sup>4</sup> Iran agreed to allow the IAEA to monitor the implementation of the voluntary measures on uranium

enrichment for their respective durations, as well as to implement transparency measures, including: a long-term IAEA inspector presence in Iran with daily visits to Natanz and Fordow; IAEA monitoring of uranium ore concentrate produced by Iran from all uranium ore concentrate plants for 25 years; containment and surveillance of centrifuge rotors and bellows for 20 years; use of IAEA approved and certified modern technologies including on-line enrichment measurement and electronic seals; and a reliable mechanism to ensure speedy resolution of IAEA access concerns for 15 years. Iran also agreed not to engage in activities, including at the R&D level that could contribute to the development of a nuclear explosive device including uranium or plutonium metallurgy activities.

Under the JCPOA, a Joint Commission was established to meet at the level of Political Directors of JCPOA participating States, chaired by the European External Action Service's (EEAS) Deputy Secretary General for Political Affairs.<sup>5</sup> The Commission serves as a dispute resolution mechanism, approves nuclear related procurements by Iran, oversees the Arak reactor conversion, and addresses concerns about non-compliance.

The JCPOA continued to be implemented by Iran as certified by the IAEA, however, during the 2016 presidential election campaign in the US, the Republican candidate Donald J. Trump bitterly attacked the JCPOA as the worst deal in history and pledged that his administration would renegotiate it and introduce additional restrictions on Iran including on its ballistic missile development program.<sup>6</sup> In May 2017, the US renewed sanctions waivers as required by its JCPOA obligations, marking the first time the Trump administration had waived sanctions and taken a proactive step to implement the agreement. In July 2017, the Trump administration certified Iran's compliance with the JCPOA but announced new non-nuclear sanctions on Iran. Later that same month, the US House of Representatives approved new

GMT after the thirtieth day after the notification to the Council, all of the provisions of resolutions 1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), 1929 (2010) and 2224 (2015) shall apply in the same manner as they applied before the adoption of resolution 2231.

4 Under the terms of its Safeguards Agreement and the JCPOA, Iran is required to implement the provisions of the modified Code 3.1 of the Subsidiary Arrangements General Part concerning the early provision of design information, i.e. in order to facilitate safeguards implementation to inform the IAEA of any plans to construct a new nuclear facility or to modify an existing nuclear facility as soon as the relevant decision is taken by competent authorities of Iran. For the modified Code 3.1, which is applicable to all States with safeguards agreements in force with the IAEA, see International Atomic Energy Agency, Strengthening the Effectiveness and Improving the Efficiency of the Safeguards System, Report by the Director General, GC(XXXVII)/1073 // IAEA. September 6, 1993. Available at: [https://www.iaea.org/About/Policy/GC/GC37/GC37Documents/English/gc37-1073\\_en.pdf](https://www.iaea.org/About/Policy/GC/GC37/GC37Documents/English/gc37-1073_en.pdf).

5 European Union External Action Service (EEAS), Press Release on the Outcome of the first Joint Commission on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear program. October 19, 2015. Available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/151019\\_03\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/151019_03_en.htm).

6 Torbati Y. Trump election puts Iran nuclear deal on shaky ground // Reuters. November 9, 2016. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-iran/trump-election-puts-iran-nuclear-deal-on-shaky-ground-idUSKBN13427E>.

sanctions.<sup>7</sup> In January 2018, the US announced its last extension of sanctions waivers. Finally, on 8 May 2018, President Trump announced that the US would no longer abide by the JCPOA and implemented the “highest level” of economic sanctions on Iran as part a “maximum pressure campaign”.<sup>8</sup>

## Current situation

The JCPOA now is in its fifth year of implementation albeit under severe threats from all sides. The Trump administration denounced the JCPOA in May 2018 citing various weaknesses in particular the exclusion of Iran’s ballistic missiles, re-imposed US sanctions that had been suspended pursuant to the JCPOA and launched a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran in response to which Iran implemented a graduated walk back from its nuclear restrictions.<sup>9</sup>

The E3/EU continue to support the JCPOA, in contrast to the US, and in this context in September 2018 established a “Special Purpose Vehicle” for financial transactions with Iran, called INSTEX (“Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges”).<sup>10</sup> Based in Paris, INSTEX is managed by German banking expert Per Fischer, a former manager at Commerzbank; with the UK heading up the supervisory board. However, the E3/EU have been unable to deliver economic benefits to Iran facing the threat of US extra-territorial economic sanctions; though at the end of March this year they have been able to send some medical supplies to Iran to help combat the COVID-19 virus pandemic that has badly affected Iran.<sup>11</sup>

After waiting nearly a year citing a policy of “strategic patience”,<sup>12</sup> beginning in May 2019, at subsequent two-month intervals, Iran began to respond with successive calibrated steps of incrementally stepping back from its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA but under monitoring by the IAEA, which though reversible have resulted in practically hollowing out the JCPOA.<sup>13</sup>

The incremental steps taken by Iran are:

(1) 8 May 2019: (one year after the Trump administration violated the JCPOA by re-imposing sanctions on Iran) stepping out of the limits of 130 metric tons of heavy water and 300 kg of low enriched uranium (limited to enrichment level of 3.67per cent UF<sub>6</sub>-uranium hexafluoride);

(2) 1 July: increased stock of low enriched uranium above 300 kg;

(3) 7 July: after the E3/EU failed to meet a 60-day deadline set by Iran to fulfill their JCPOA commitments, it announced that it would start enriching uranium above 3.67per cent, and on 8 July announced it was enriching at 4.5per cent<sup>14</sup> (U235) at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP);

(4) 5 September: Iran started to bring into operation advanced centrifuges;

(5) 5 November: Iran started to enrich uranium to 4.5per cent (U235) at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP);

(6) 16 November: Iran announced it had exceeded the 130 metric tons limit on its stock of heavy water;

(7) 5 January 2020: (following the 3 January US assassination of a senior Iranian general), Iran stated that its nuclear program was no longer under any operational restrictions, including the number of operational centrifuges, level of enrichment, stock of low enriched material, research

7 H.R.3364 – Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act // US Congress. July 25, 2017. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3364%20>.

8 White House, Fact Sheet, “President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal // White House. May 8, 2018. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>.

9 Read the Full Transcript of Trump’s Speech on the Iran Nuclear Deal // The New York Times. May 8, 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/us/politics/trump-speech-iran-deal.html?action=click&module=Intentional&pgtype=Article>.

10 Joint Statement on the Creation of INSTEX, the Special Purpose Vehicle Aimed at Facilitating Legitimate Trade with Iran in the Framework of the Efforts to Preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) // French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. January 31, 2019. Available at: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/news/article/joint-statement-on-the-creation-of-instex-the-special-purpose-vehicle-aimed-at>.

11 INSTEX Successfully Concludes First Transaction // UK Government. March 31, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/instex-successfully-concludes-first-transaction>.

12 Rome H. Why Iran Waits: Staying in the Nuclear Deal Is Its Worst Option, Except for All the Others // Foreign Affairs. January 10, 2019. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-01-10/why-iran-waits>; and Khamenei.ir, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=39796>.

13 Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran // Arms Control Association. Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran#2020>.

14 The range of enrichment levels for UF<sub>6</sub> for use for nuclear reactor fuel is from about 2% to 4.95% (U235).



and development on advanced centrifuges, and that henceforth Iran's nuclear activities would be developed solely on the basis technical requirements but that it was ready to return to its JCPOA commitments if sanctions were lifted.<sup>15</sup>

As reported in March 2020 by the IAEA,<sup>16</sup> as a result of no longer observing JCPOA limits Iran had accumulated a stock of 132.7 metric tons of heavy water; 1020.9 kg of uranium enriched below 5 per cent (comprising 268.5 kg up to 2 percent U235, 214.6 kg enriched up to 3.67 percent U235, 537.8 kg up to 4.5 percent U235; the stockpile of 1020.9 kg comprised 996.5 kg of uranium in the form of UF<sub>6</sub>; 9.7 kg of uranium in the form of uranium oxides and their intermediate products; 7.7 kg of uranium in fuel assemblies and rods; and 7.0 kg of uranium in liquid and solid scrap); at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant, for enrichment of UF<sub>6</sub>, Iran continued to use no more than 5060 IR-1 centrifuges installed in 30 cascades; at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant 1057 IR-1 centrifuges were installed; at the Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant (PFEP) at Natanz, Iran is operating or testing 15 types of centrifuges: IR-1, IR-2m, IR-3, IR-4, IR-5, IR-6, IR-6m, IR-6s, IR-6sm, IR-7, IR-8, IR-8s, IR-8 B, IR-s and IR-9; mainly in single machine configuration. Thus, overall, Iran has exceeded the numerical centrifuge limits only by a small number though its stock of low enriched uranium is nearly three times the limit allowed by the JCPOA.

On 17th January 2020, in the aftermath of the US killing of General Qasem Soleimani<sup>17</sup> by a drone strike and Iran's retaliatory ballistic missile strike on two US bases in Iraq<sup>18</sup>; Iran announced that its nuclear program was at pre-JCPOA level, i.e. that it could enrich uranium to

20 percent (U235) and the program would be the program would be governed by "technical needs." At the same time, Iran confirmed continuing its full cooperation with the IAEA, continued provisional application of its Additional Protocol and related JCPOA verification arrangements.

Given Iran's renunciation of JCPOA limits on its nuclear program and stepping out of its limitations and international travel restrictions due to COVID-19 and implications for IAEA verification in Iran, some commentators sounded a warning that Iran could develop a nuclear weapon in 12-18 months.<sup>19</sup> However, the IAEA confirmed that its nuclear verification operations were continuing uninterrupted despite COVID-19, and other commentators cautioned that concerns about a "break out" by Iran may be premature and exaggerated.<sup>20</sup> IAEA verification activities in Iran are shown in this graphic.



<sup>15</sup> Iran takes final JCPOA step, removing last limit on nuclear program // MEHR News Agency. January 5, 2020. Available at: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/154191/Iran-takes-final-JCPOA-step-removing-last-limit-on-nuclear-program>; Assessing the Risk Posed by Iran's Violations of the Nuclear Deal // Arms Control Association. January 29, 2020. Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2019-12/assessing-risk-posed-iran-violations-nuclear-deal>.

<sup>16</sup> Report by the Director General. Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015) // IAEA. March 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/03/gov2020-5.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Qasem Soleimani: US kills top Iranian general in Baghdad air strike // BBC News. January 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50979463>.

<sup>18</sup> Iran attack: US troops targeted with ballistic missiles // BBC News. January 8, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51028954>.

<sup>19</sup> Moore G. One potential victim of coronavirus? Nuclear inspections in Iran // Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. March 17, 2020. Available at: <https://thebulletin.org/2020/03/one-potential-victim-of-coronavirus-nuclear-inspections-in-iran/>; Goldston R. Coronavirus and the IAEA reports: From maximum pressure to humanitarian détente with Iran // Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. April 6, 2020. Available at: <https://thebulletin.org/2020/04/coronavirus-and-the-iaea-reports-from-maximum-pressure-to-humanitarian-detente-with-iran/>.

<sup>20</sup> Rauf T. Round-the-clock surveillance of Iran's uranium-enrichment sites continues, despite coronavirus // Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. March 24, 2020. Available at: <https://thebulletin.org/2020/03/round-the-clock-surveillance-of-irans-uranium-enrichment-sites-continues-despite-coronavirus/>.



On 14 January 2020, under US pressure of imposition of 25 per cent tariffs on exports to the US of automobiles and auto parts from France, Germany and the UK;<sup>21</sup> the E3 (France, Germany and the UK) triggered the JCPOA dispute resolution mechanism (DRM)<sup>22</sup> that potentially could lead to the re-imposition of pre-JCPOA UN sanctions against Iran after about two months. At the same time, the E3 in a joint statement noted that they wanted to preserve the JCPOA and would not join the US campaign to implement maximum pressure on Iran.<sup>23</sup> German defense minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer confirmed on 15 January that the E3 had triggered the DRM under threat of US sanctions.<sup>24</sup>

The triggering of the DRM by the E3 came as a surprise to Joseph Borrell, the successor to Federica Mogherini, the EU administrator of the JCPOA. Borrell met with Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, at the Raisina Dialogue 2020 in New Delhi on 16 January, but could not agree on the next steps pursuant to the DRM.<sup>25</sup> However, on 19 January, Iran's Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani informed the *Majlis* that if for any reason the E3 invoke UN sanctions, Iran will then review its cooperation with the IAEA.<sup>26</sup>

The assessment is that E3 may extend or stretch out the DRM consultations and negotiations by mutual agreement through the November 2020 US presidential election, in order to preserve the

JCPOA in the interim and to search for possible new diplomatic openings to de-escalate the confrontation between the US and Iran.

On the other hand, there is a risk that one or more of the E3 might short-circuit the DRM process and call for the re-imposition of UN Security Council sanctions citing a threat to international peace and security (under chapter VII of the UN Charter). In such a situation, China and Russia would not be able to block the re-imposition (or "snap back") sanctions under the terms of the JCPOA, but they could block funds for the Security Council committee and experts tracking Iran's compliance with resolution 2231 (on the JCPOA). For its part, Iran has warned that were UN sanctions to be re-imposed, it would leave not only the JCPOA but also the NPT—thus ending IAEA NPT safeguards implementation in Iran.<sup>27</sup>

In a separate but related development, earlier on 5 December 2019, TVEL (a subsidiary of ROSATOM) terminated work on stable isotope production at the Fordow enrichment facility in Iran under threat of US sanctions.<sup>28</sup> The US sanctions threat remains over TVEL's fuel supply and ROSATOM's service contracts with Iran's Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant.

Furthermore, earlier on 7 November 2019, then IAEA Acting Director General (A/DG) Cornel Feruta informed the Board of Governors that the Agency had detected natural uranium (NU) particles of anthropogenic origin at a location in Iran (Turquzabad near Tehran) not declared to the Agency.<sup>29</sup> Since then, the Agency has continued interactions with Iran but it not received any additional information and the matter remains unresolved. A/DG Feruta added that it was essential that Iran work with the Agency to resolve this matter promptly and called upon Iran to provide full and timely cooperation to the Agency in implementing its Safeguards Agreement and

21 U.S. threatened Europe with auto tariffs over Iran nuclear program – Washington Post // Reuters. January 15, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-usa-autos/u-s-threatened-europe-with-auto-tariffs-over-iran-nuclear-program-washington-post-idUSKBN1ZE2L8>.

22 E3 foreign ministers' statement on the JCPOA: 14 January 2020 // UK Government. January 14, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/e3-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-jcpoa-14-january-2020>.

23 Ibid.

24 Wintour P. Germany confirms Trump made trade threat to Europe over Iran policy // The Guardian. January 16, 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/16/iran-says-it-is-enriching-more-uranium-than-before-nuclear-deal>.

25 EU's top diplomat Joseph Borrell meets Iranian Foreign Minister on Raisina Dialogue sidelines; discuss JCPOA // Business Standard. January 16, 2020. Available at: [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/eu-s-top-diplomat-josep-borrell-meets-iranian-foreign-minister-on-raisina-dialogue-sidelines-discuss-jcpoa-120011601594\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/eu-s-top-diplomat-josep-borrell-meets-iranian-foreign-minister-on-raisina-dialogue-sidelines-discuss-jcpoa-120011601594_1.html).

26 Dehghanpisheh B. Iran says it will quit global nuclear treaty if case goes to U.N. // Reuters. January 20, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear/iran-says-it-will-quit-global-nuclear-treaty-if-case-goes-to-un-idUSKBN1ZJ0ML>.

27 Ibid.

28 Russia Halts Work at Iran's Fordow Nuclear Facility // Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. December 5, 2019. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-halts-work-at-iran-s-fordow-nuclear-facility/30309634.html>.

29 Acting Director General's Introductory Statement to the Board of Governors // International Atomic Energy Agency. November 21, 2019. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/introductory-statement-to-the-board-of-governors-21-november-2019>.

Additional Protocol. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi stated in early March that the Agency was continuing with its implementation of safeguards and JCPOA verification in Iran, and that discussions were continuing with respect to the matter of the natural uranium particles and access to three locations in Iran.<sup>30</sup>

## Next steps

Total collapse of the JCPOA would be detrimental for the international community, regional and international security and could raise the possibilities for armed conflict leading to disruption of oil/gas exports from the region of the Persian Gulf. De-escalation of the JCPOA impasse could be attempted through third-party initiatives and the E3/EU to preserve the JCPOA or at the least to prevent its collapse and to seek an interim arrangement that could prevent further deterioration of the situation.

- One option could be to explore the possibility with the US to reinstate limited oil waivers, restore civil nuclear waivers and allow the E3/EU to properly implement INSTEX; in return for Iran's full implementation of the JCPOA, de-escalation of tension in the region and consider the elements of re-engagement of the E3/EU+3 and Iran on the broader issues of regional security including arms transfers, missiles and terrorism.
- A variation could be for the US to suspend key non-oil sanctions and restore civil nuclear waivers, and allow the E3/EU to implement INSTEX; in return for Iran agreeing to freeze its nuclear program at the current level and possibly to reverse its decision to enrich and stockpile uranium beyond JCPOA limits.
- The E3/EU could be encouraged to go slow on the DRM and extend the timeline of this process till the end of the year and in the interim to persuade Iran to resume implementation of the JCPOA

and in return deliver economic benefits to Iran envisaged under the JCPOA; though for this to happen the US would need to pull back from threatening secondary or extra-territorial sanctions on E3/EU enterprises carrying out commercial activities with Iran through INSTEX. And, the channel for humanitarian commerce with Iran through Switzerland could be normalized.

Despite tensions between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States and Iran, given US statements and actions that have raised uncertainties regarding US security support for allies and friends in the Gulf region, reportedly already some GCC States are engaging in back channel diplomacy with Iran to explore possibilities for re-engagement to build trust, reduce incentives or risks of inadvertent conflict through establishing a de-confliction and communications channel.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the international community could support France regarding reviving the proposal that was advanced in August 2019 by the President Emmanuel Macron aimed at securing a de-escalation agreement, whereby the E3 would provide Iran with a monetary transfer equivalent to the proceeds of several months' worth of Iran's oil exports, which Iran would deliver upon sanctions removal, facilitated by US willingness to allow the transactions. In return, Iran would resume full implementation of the JCPOA, cease provocative actions in the region and return to the negotiating table with the US.<sup>32</sup>

Reportedly, President Donald Trump indicated interest in this package at the G7 meeting in Biarritz in late August 2019, where the foreign ministers of France and Iran discussed the details of the proposed arrangement.<sup>33</sup> Further negotiations between France and Iran, and between France and the US, led the parties to aim for a

30 IAEA Director General's Introductory Statement to the Board of Governors // International Atomic Energy Agency. March 9, 2020. Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/iaea-director-generals-introductory-statement-to-the-board-of-governors-9-march-2020>.

31 Ulrichsen K. In 2020, diplomacy in the Gulf may be easier to achieve // Aljazeera Opinion. January 21, 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2020-diplomacy-gulf-easier-achieve-200121160253332.html>.

32 Chrisafis A. Emmanuel Macron Aims to Ease US-Iran Tensions at G7 Summit // The Guardian. August 21, 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/21/emmanuel-macron-aims-to-ease-us-iran-tensions-at-g7-summit>.

33 Macron Gets G7 Nod to Negotiate with Iran // DW. August 25, 2019. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/macron-gets-g7-nod-to-negotiate-with-iran/a-50157140>.

breakthrough on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in New York at the end of September 2019. But despite his best efforts, President Macron was unable to choreograph a Trump-Rouhani meeting, plans for which apparently broke down over sequencing.

Further momentum toward a negotiated breakthrough slowed following the setback in New York, but rebounded somewhat in mid-November 2019 when the French government proposed a timeline for mutual steps that each side would commit to fulfil to President Macron in writing. But then anti-government protests broke out in Iran that led President Trump and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo to believe that time was on their side and they encouraged the protestors to go for regime change. The French believe that contrary to his senior officials, President Trump could be interested in loosening pressure on Iran to reach a deal. The fact that on 7 December 2019, Iran and the US exchanged some prisoners in Zurich could be taken as a positive sign.<sup>34</sup> President Trump acknowledged “a very fair negotiation” and thanked Iran, adding, “See, we can make a deal together!” (Tweet by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, 9.32am, 7 December 2019).<sup>35</sup>

Some indications of a transactional thaw in relations between some GCC States and Iran could be built upon. For example, Ali al-Shamsi, director of the UAE’s National Intelligence Service, has visited Iran three times since June 2019, while his Iranian counterpart has visited the UAE once during that period.<sup>36</sup> On 1 August 2019, Iran and the UAE signed a memorandum of understanding on maritime cooperation after a six-year hiatus in discussions.<sup>37</sup> The reopening of some financial channels from Dubai to Iran has served to strengthen the Iranian rial, as the

UAE has released \$700m of Iran’s frozen assets.<sup>38</sup> These developments could be interpreted as the UAE hedging their bets: on the one hand sending their security officials to Tehran, and on the other supporting Washington’s maximum pressure strategy. It is thought that Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE will change their approach to Iran when they stop believing they can buy US security assurances; and now they are beginning to have doubts that the US will come to their rescue, but they might still believe the US will support them in a crunch?

Absent any new initiative by France or the GCC and given the reluctance thus far by either Iran or the US to take the first step in de-escalating tensions leaves three distinct, but interlinked, and unstable status quos: (a) internal discontent within Iran, whose economic and political drivers are likely to grow; (b) regional tensions, whose fault lines could deepen; and, (c) a hollowing JCPOA, whose survival is becoming increasingly uncertain.

## Conclusion

As already noted above, Iran’s steps to reduce implementation of the JCPOA led the E3 on 14 January 2020 to trigger the JCPOA’s dispute resolution mechanism that could result in the “snap back” of UN sanctions within a 65-day timeframe. Iran has stated that such action would lead to its withdrawal from both the JCPOA and the NPT. Recently, in an unprecedented move, the US is preparing a legal interpretation claiming that it remains a party to the JCPOA and thus can institute the steps to extend a UN conventional arms embargo against Iran due to expire in October this year, as well to re-impose UN sanctions without a vote in the Security Council as provided for in the DRM. The E3/EU has responded, as have China and the Russian Federation, that they would oppose any such moves by the US.<sup>39</sup>

34 Hafezi P., Brunnstrom D. United States and Iran swap prisoners in rare act of cooperation // Reuters. December 7, 2019. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-prisoners/united-states-and-iran-swap-prisoners-in-rare-act-of-cooperation-idUSKBN1YB08X?il=0>.

35 Crowley M. In Prisoner Swap, Iran Frees American Held Since 2016 // The New York Times. December 7, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/07/us/politics/iran-prisoner-swap-xiyue-wang.html>.

36 International Crisis Group interviews, Iranian and Gulf officials, August-December 2019.

37 Iran, UAE Sign Document to Boost Maritime Security Cooperation // Press TV. August 1, 2019. Available at: <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/08/01/602439/Iran-UAE-maritime-security>.

38 MP: UAE Has Released \$700m of Iran’s Frozen Assets // Tehran Times. October 20, 2019. Available at: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/441330/MP-UAE-has-released-700m-of-Iran-s-frozen-assets#:~:text=TEHRAN%20%E2%80%93%20The%20United%20Arab%20Emirates,Iranian%20lawmaker%20announced%20on%20Sunday>.

39 Sanger D. To Pressure Iran, Pompeo Turns to the Deal Trump Renounced // The New York Times.

While the E3 have claimed that the invocation of the DRM is not a first step toward re-imposition of UN sanctions, failure to resolve the dispute in the allotted time would make such an outcome increasingly inevitable unless the process is stretched over the next several months till after the November election in the US.

The E3/EU could take this latter option and stretch out the DRM negotiations till the end of the year in return for Iran to continue JCPOA implementation, refrain from further enrichment of uranium and continue full cooperation with the IAEA.

Another possible way out could be to for the GCC to formally take up for discussion to Iran's regional security initiative launched by President Hassan Rouhani at the UN in September 2019. In October, Kuwait's foreign minister passed President Rouhani's letter describing Iran's regional security initiative, the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE), to its GCC partners.<sup>40</sup> As of mid-January 2020, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar had either responded positively to the overture or provided feedback, while Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had not replied.<sup>41</sup>

One of the key elements of the JCPOA was to increase the possible "breakout time" for Iran to produce sufficient quantity of highly-enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon. By limiting the number of operational centrifuges and the inventory of low enriched uranium (3.67per cent U235), stock of heavy water and re-engineering the under-construction research reactor at Arak, the JCPOA claimed to have increased the projected breakout time from two- to three-months to about 12 months or more. Iran's announcement on 5 January 2020 involved going beyond these limitations and to operate its nuclear program according to "technical needs". Barring any re-imposition

of Security Council sanctions or hostile military operations directed by the US toward Iran, it is unlikely that Iran would institute a rapid buildup of enrichment capacity or restrict IAEA safeguards/verification.

To maintain this status quo of not operating advanced centrifuges in cascades configured for production of highly-enriched uranium and maintaining full cooperation with the IAEA, the E3/EU could propose an arrangement under which Iran would limit its nuclear operations at the current level and the E3/EU would refrain from "snap back" sanctions, and work with the US to implement INSTEX without the threat of secondary sanctions.

Under present circumstances of President Trump facing criticism of his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, revived nationalism in Iran in the aftermath of the US' attack on General Soleimani and protests following the accidental shoot down of a Ukrainian passenger aircraft by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC),<sup>42</sup> and forthcoming presidential elections in both Iran and the US; the conditions do not exist for major concessions either by Iran or by the US. As such, it is essential to de-escalate the situation through engagement between the E3/EU and Iran and look for or create the types of opportunities identified above to keep the JCPOA on lifeline and to prevent its total collapse.

April 26, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/world/middleeast/us-iran-nuclear-deal-pompeo.html>.

40 Iran's Hormuz Peace Initiative a Dialogue-Based Catalyst for Durable Security: MP // Tehran Times. January 21, 2020. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/444425/Iran-s-Hormuz-peace-initiative-a-dialogue-based-catalyst-for>.

41 Haghirian M., Zaccara L. Making Sense of HOPE: Can Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor succeed? // Atlantic Council. October 3, 2019. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/making-sense-of-hope-can-irans-hormuz-peace-endeavor-succeed/>.

42 Iran Plane Crash: Ukrainian Jet Was 'Unintentionally' Shot Down // BBC News. January 11, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51073621>.



Key Requirements and Actions Mandated by the JCPOA	
<b>Enrichment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For 10 years operating centrifuges reduced to 5,060 IR-1 machines, total machines is 6,104 IR-1s</li> <li>Excess centrifuges (over 13,000) dismantled and stored under IAEA monitoring</li> <li>For 15 years level of uranium enrichment capped at 3.67 percent uranium-235</li> <li>For 15 years enrichment only at Natanz</li> <li>For 10 years no production of additional IR-1 centrifuges</li> <li>Between years 11-13 Iran can replace IR-1s with the equivalent capacity of IR-6 and IR-8 machines and limits lasting to years 14-15</li> </ul>
<b>Uranium Stockpile</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For 15 years the stockpile is kept under 300 kilograms of 3.67 percent enriched uranium in total (all forms)</li> <li>Excess enriched uranium sold, shipped abroad for storage, or diluted to natural uranium levels</li> <li>Uranium oxide and scrap material enriched up to 20 percent fabricated into fuel for Tehran Research Reactor, blended down, or shipped out</li> </ul>
<b>Fordow</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Converted to research facility for stable isotope production with Russian cooperation</li> <li>1,044 IR-1 centrifuges in six cascades will remain here, 328 for production, the remaining 700 are idle</li> <li>For 15 years no introduction of uranium at the facility</li> </ul>
<b>Advanced Centrifuge Research and Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For 8.5 years Iran may conduct research with uranium on a single IR-4, IR-5, IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuge at Natanz</li> <li>After 8.5 years test up to 30 IR-6s and 30 IR-8s</li> <li>After 8 years manufacture up to 200 IR-6s and 200 IR-8s centrifuges without rotors</li> <li>For 10 years Joint Commission review and approval of changes to the research and development plan</li> </ul>
<b>Arak Reactor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remove and disable the original core of the Arak reactor</li> <li>Replace the core of the Arak reactor to reduce weapons-grade plutonium output, certified by the Joint Commission</li> <li>For 15 years no reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel with an intention to never reprocess</li> <li>Permanent commitment to ship out spent nuclear fuel</li> <li>For 15 years no heavy-water reactors in Iran</li> <li>For 15 years no accumulation of heavy water in Iran</li> <li>Construction of hot cells or shielded glove boxes of certain specifications subject to approval of the Joint Commission</li> </ul>
<b>Monitoring and Verification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By 15 October 2015 Iran fully implements PMD "roadmap" agreed with IAEA</li> <li>For 10 years approval of the purchase of dual-use materials by the Joint Commission working group</li> <li>For 25 years continuous monitoring of Iran's uranium mines and mills</li> <li>For 20 years continuous monitoring of Iran's centrifuge production facilities</li> <li>For 15 years Joint Commission oversight of IAEA access requests to inspect undeclared sites</li> <li>Permanent prohibition of certain weaponization related activities</li> <li>Implementation and eventual ratification of an additional protocol to Iran's safeguards agreement</li> <li>Permanent implementation of modified Code 3.1 of the Subsidiary Arrangements to its Safeguards Agreement</li> </ul>
<b>Joint Commission</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For 25 years Joint Commission (composed of PS+1, EU and Iran for a total of 8 voting members) will hold quarterly meetings, or by request, to oversee the deal</li> <li>Dispute resolution mechanism within 35 days; 15 day dispute resolution mechanism within the Joint Commission, with optional 15 day ministerial review and/or arbitration opinion from a 3 member panel, followed by 5 day review of the arbitration opinion. If no resolution and complaining party sees action as "significant non-performance," the unresolved issue can be treated as grounds to cease performing commitments in whole or part, complaining party will notify UN Security Council</li> <li>Any party can go to the UN Security Council to put sanctions back in place if there is noncompliance by vetoing a resolution calling for the continuance of sanctions</li> </ul>
<b>UN Sanctions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UNSC resolution 2231 endorsing JCPOA outlines termination of all previous resolutions targeting Iran's nuclear program—1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), 1929 (2010)—on implementation day.</li> <li>For 10 years sanctions are subject to snapback by veto of a resolution calling for the continuation of suspension</li> <li>After 10 years UN will cease to be seized of Iran's nuclear file</li> <li>For 5 years the heavy arms embargo will remain in place</li> <li>For 8 years the ballistic missile restrictions will remain in place</li> </ul>
<b>U.S. Sanctions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cease the application of economic sanctions against Iran's oil and banking sector allowing Iranian banks and companies to reconnect with international systems</li> <li>Will remove designation of certain entities and individuals</li> <li>Allows for licensed non-U.S. entities that are owned or controlled by a U.S. person to engage in activities with Iran permitted under JCPOA</li> <li>Allows for the sale of commercial passenger aircraft to Iran</li> <li>Allows for license for importing Iranian-origin carpets and foodstuffs into United States</li> <li>United States takes appropriate measures to address laws at state or local level preventing full implementation of JCPOA – United States will actively encourage officials to adhere to JCPOA policy</li> <li>For 8 years after Adoption date, or sooner if IAEA concludes that all nuclear activity in Iran remains peaceful, U.S. will seek legislative action to terminate/modify nuclear related sanctions</li> <li>U.S. sanctions on Iran targeting human rights, terrorism and missile activities remain</li> <li>United States can impose additional sanctions for non-nuclear issues (terrorism, human rights, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>EU Sanctions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Terminate all provisions of the EU Regulation related to Iran's nuclear program</li> <li>Includes: financial and banking transactions; transactions in Iranian Rial; provision of U.S. banknotes to Iranian government; access to SWIFT; insurance services; efforts to reduce Iran's crude oil and petrochemical product sales; investment; transactions with Iran's energy and shipping sector; trade in gold and other precious metals; trade with Iran's automotive sector</li> <li>Removes individuals and entities designated under sanctions</li> <li>EU refrains from re-introducing sanctions terminated under JCPOA (Iran views any re-introduction as grounds to cease performing its commitments)</li> <li>Refrain from policy intended to adversely affect normalization of economic relations with Iran</li> <li>For 8 years after adoption day or at the finding of the IAEA broader conclusion EU's arms embargo and restrictions on transfer of ballistic missiles remain</li> </ul>

Source: Arms Control Association<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance // Arms Control Association. Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

### 3.3. RE-ENVISIONING THE NPT IN THE COVID-19 ERA

*William Potter<sup>1</sup>*

It is appropriate on the 50th anniversary of the entry into force of the NPT to reflect on the impetus for its negotiation, its main accomplishments, and the continuing relevance of the treaty in a world beset by both new and continuing proliferation challenges. This essay does not attempt to analyze these issues in a comprehensive fashion, but rather highlights some relevant considerations.

#### The non-proliferation imperative

The origins of the NPT cannot be divorced from a complex web of individuals, national threat perceptions, historical legacies, diplomatic initiatives, technological developments, and international trigger events. Arguably, the single most significant catalyst for negotiation of the treaty was the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the nuclear superpowers to the brink of nuclear war. In its aftermath, the leadership of both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized that regardless of their ideological differences, they shared an overarching interest in nuclear risk reduction, as well as non-proliferation cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Not

<sup>1</sup> William Potter – Director, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies; Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar Professor of Nonproliferation Studies, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, Ph.D. (USA).

<sup>2</sup> The evolution of this cooperation is discussed in Potter W., Bidgood S., eds., Once and Future

surprisingly, the Cuban Missile Crisis also had a profound impact on the leaders of many non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS), including those in Latin American and the Caribbean, and was the impetus for the negotiation of the world's first Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) in a populated area.<sup>3</sup>

The competing objectives of the architects of the NPT and the process by which the treaty was negotiated has been the subject of many studies.<sup>4</sup> Here, it is sufficient to recall that the principal divides among those negotiating the treaty involved the relative priorities attached to preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to additional states (and the Federal Republic of Germany in particular), cessation of the nuclear arms race, achievement of nuclear disarmament, and provision of the benefits of peaceful nuclear activities to all countries, including those in the developing world. The Treaty's preamble and eleven articles reflect these different priorities and gave rise to what is usually referred to as a "grand bargain" comprising three basic components. The first element was an agreement by the nuclear weapon states (NWS) to: (1) undertake good faith negotiations related to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament (Article VI), and (2) refrain from assisting NNWS to acquire nuclear weapons (Article I). The second element called for the NNWS to forego the acquisition of nuclear weapons and any assistance related to their manufacture (Article II) and to place their nuclear facilities under international safeguards in accordance with the International Atomic Energy Agency (Article III). The third component involved the right of all Parties to the Treaty to benefit from the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes (Article IV). Much of the history of the NPT and the NPT Review Process has revolved

about disagreements among States Parties over the perceived imbalance in the implementation of these different Treaty elements.

### The non-proliferation treaty balance sheet

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was opened for signatures in July 1968 and entered into force in March 1970. During the subsequent fifty years, 191 states joined the treaty, more than any other arms control and disarmament accord.<sup>5</sup> In terms of sheer numbers, therefore, one must regard the NPT as a resounding success. The treaty also has contributed to the much slower pace of proliferation than was anticipated at the time of its negotiation and provided a compelling argument for advocates of non-proliferation in countries that sought rid their territories of nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, during the period between the treaty's entry into force and its indefinite extension in 1995, it became clear that proliferation was not a one-way street and could be reversed as demonstrated in the cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and South Africa.

More difficult to ascertain, however, is the degree to which the bargain underlying the treaty has been observed. While few States Parties dispute the overall efficacy of its non-proliferation provisions, most NNWS are deeply dissatisfied with the progress that has been made in pursuing nuclear disarmament. These frustrations help to explain the powerful support on the part of most NNWS for the Humanitarian Impact Initiative, culminating in the negotiation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.<sup>7</sup> Many NNWS also express disappointment over perceived impediments to full access to the peaceful benefits of nuclear energy. These views have been on display at every

Partners: The United States, Russia and Nuclear Non-Proliferation. 2018. London: Routledge. 194 p.

3 That zone, codified in the Treaty of Tlatelolco, preceded the NPT; it was signed in February 1967 and entered into force in 1969.

4 The definitive analysis of the negotiation of the NPT remains Shaker M. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: Origin and Implementation, 1959-1979. 1980. London, Oceana Publications. Available at: <https://www.nonproliferation.org/the-nuclear-non-proliferation-treaty-origins-and-implementation-1959-1979/>.

5 The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) joined the NPT but subsequently announced its decision to withdraw from the Treaty. Other States parties to the Treaty disagree about the current NPT status of the DPRK due to different interpretations about its compliance with the withdrawal provisions.

6 For a discussion of the role of the NPT in influencing nonproliferation see Scheinman L. Does the NPT Matter? // Pilat J., Pendley R., eds., Beyond 1995: The Future of the NPT Regime. 1990. New York: Plenum Press. Pp 53-63; and Potter W. The NPT and the Sources of Nuclear Restraint // Daedalus. Winter 2020. Pp. 68- 81.

7 For an analysis of these developments, see Potter W. Disarmament Diplomacy and the Nuclear Ban Treaty // Survival. August-September 2017. Pp. 75-108.

NPT Review Conference since the initial one was convened in 1975,<sup>8</sup> and also are recurrent themes in the debates at all NPT Preparatory Committee meetings.

Although not explicitly part of the grand bargain, the NPT also addresses regional security issues in Article VII, which states that nothing in the treaty “affects the right of any group of States to conclude regional treaties in order to assure the total absence of nuclear weapons in their respective territories.” This treaty provision has been the focal point for major debates in the Review Conference Main Committees and Subsidiary Bodies dealing with both disarmament and non-proliferation. Although NWFZs have proved to be one of the most successful, if inadequately appreciated, disarmament and non-proliferation approaches, the related issue of a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Free Zone in the Middle East has routinely been a highly contentious issue, both in the NPT review process and at other international fora.

In assessing the NPT balance sheet, it is necessary to distinguish between the resilient quality of the treaty, which is not in doubt, and its relevance to the most pressing contemporary proliferation challenges. Having observed the past five NPT review conferences and 15 preparatory committee meetings as a delegate, the author is persuaded that what we too often observe in the NPT review process are deliberations over issues that are unrelated to many of the core threats to the health of the NPT and the broader nuclear non-proliferation regime. Indicative of the surreal quality to the review process is the usual reluctance of States Parties to discuss nuclear brinkmanship in South Asia, US, Russian, and Chinese nuclear force modernization, the demise of US-Russian (and increasingly Sino-US) nuclear relations, the dangers of nuclear terrorism, the impact on strategic stability of new disruptive technologies, the unravelling of the traditional nuclear arms control infrastructure, or even the risks of nuclear weapons use

<sup>8</sup> For an intriguing analysis of the first NPT Review Conference, see Epstein W. *The Last Chance: Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Control*. 1976. New York: The Free Press. 341 p. What is most striking when reading Epstein’s account today is how little has changed over time regarding the subjects of major debate and the positions of the key players.

due to accidents and misperceptions. There also is a disinclination on the part of most States Parties to address meaningfully the weaknesses of the so-called “strengthened review process,” to engage in any form of procedural or substantive policy innovation, or to hold accountable member States accountable when they act contrary to past NPT review conference decisions and outcome documents. One implication of this sorry state of affairs is that the success of an NPT review conference to yield a consensus Final Document tells one very little about the actual contribution of the negotiated document to the resolution of existing proliferation problems.

### What should we expect in 2021?

As Bob Einhorn has observed, COVID-19 has given the postponed 10th NPT Review Conference — originally scheduled for spring 2020—a reprieve. But as he also notes, the big question is if member states will have the necessary will and inclination to exploit the postponement to secure a successful Review Conference outcome.<sup>9</sup> The indications to date are not encouraging.

There are a number of factors likely to influence the outcome of the next review conference, tentatively scheduled for January 4-29, 2021.<sup>10</sup> They can be grouped, for purposes of discussion, into five categories: headway on nuclear arms control and disarmament, relations among the P5, domestic political developments in the United States, regional security developments, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the flexibility of the positions of key States Parties and regional and political groupings.

*Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament.* A crumbling nuclear arms control architecture looms over the next NPT review conference, and

<sup>9</sup> Einhorn R. COVID-19 Has Given the 2020 NPT Review Conference a Reprieve. Let’s Take Advantage of It // *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. May 13, 2020. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/covid-19-has-given-the-2020-npt-review-conference-a-reprieve-lets-take-advantage-of-it/>.

<sup>10</sup> The tentative dates were selected based on the availability of meeting room space at the United Nations headquarters in New York for a four-week period prior to May 2021. Based on the current status of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unlikely that the meeting will be held before summer 2021 unless its duration is reduced two several weeks.

there is every indication that the current US administration will continue to hammer away at any remaining remnants of that edifice. John Bolton has left, but his legacy of opposing any accord that limits US flexibility – even if it serves US national security interests – persists. This internally consistent philosophy underlies US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, notification of US intent to withdraw from the Open Skies, Washington's delay in extending the New START Treaty, and its expression of interest in resuming nuclear weapons testing. The US Government, sadly, is now its own worst enemy in the nuclear arms control sphere, and this self-inflicted punishment is apt to find expression at the start of the next review conference if it takes place in January 2021.

There is little or no prospect that the United States will support any new arms control and disarmament initiatives before the end of 2020.<sup>11</sup> It is conceivable, however, that Washington might agree to extend the New START Treaty, either in a conventional manner involving the five-year extension provision specified in the treaty or, perhaps, through a shorter extension designed to provide time to bring China into the accord.<sup>12</sup> Were an extension of New START to be achieved in advance of the Review Conference, it would almost certainly create a much more favorable environment for the discussion of other nuclear disarmament matters.

If extension of New START has the potential to impact positively on the debate over disarmament, any further signals that the United States plans to resume nuclear testing would have a pronounced opposite effect. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any single action by the

United States that would generate more condemnation by the overwhelming majority of NPT States Parties. Although some organization actors within the Russian Federation and China probably would welcome US resumption of testing as pretext for similar behavior on the part of their countries, those countries will be among those most forceful in criticizing US policy. Even the closest allies of the United States would find it hard not to join in the nearly universal condemnation of test preparations. Were this to occur, the United States would likely find itself increasingly isolated on many other issues not limited to those involving nuclear arms control.

Another disarmament development that could alter dynamics of the disarmament debate is entry-into-force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). As of this writing, 38 states had ratified the treaty, 12 short of the number needed for its entry-into-force. Should that number be reached prior to the Review Conference, it will be much more difficult for the gathering to avoid taking note of that milestone. Although a large majority of NPT States Parties will wish to welcome that achievement, others will only be prepared to acknowledge the fact, and some members of the P5 are likely to resist any reference to the TPNW—a situation, which could produce a very acrimonious debate and reduce further the prospect for consensus on the disarmament text for Main Committee I.

*P5 Relations.* US relations with both Russia and China have plummeted so dramatically that it is frightening to imagine their further deterioration. That possibility, however, cannot be excluded. Further revelations about the alleged bounty placed on US forces in Afghanistan, the potential for serious meddling in the November elections, imposition of additional sanctions, and more assertive action by both Russia Federation and China on the international stage in response to recurrent US missteps and perceptions of US weakness all have the potential to escalate with unforeseen consequences. These are bound to spill into the NPT review process and further poison the already toxic relationships between the United States and Russia and China. As a result, not

11 The only partial exception to this statement is the ongoing, if underdeveloped, US -promoted Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative. For several perspectives on the CEND Initiative, see Potter W. Taking the Pulse at the Inaugural Meeting of the CEND Initiative // Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (MIIS). July 15, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nonproliferation.org/taking-the-pulse-at-the-inaugural-meeting-of-the-cend-initiative/> and Williams H. CEND and a Changing Global Order // European Leadership Network. February 18, 2020. Available at: <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/cend-and-a-changing-global-nuclear-order/>.

12 These options are discussed in Bender B. White House Weighs Shorter Extension of Nuclear Arms Pact with Russia // Politico. May 5, 2020. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/20/white-house-russia-nuclear-271729>. It is unclear what the legal ramifications would be of an attempt obtain multiple extensions totaling less than five years under the provisions of the treaty.



only is there unlikely to be any remnant of traditional cooperation between Washington and Moscow on NPT matters, but one may well see increased sparring over relatively new issues such as the timely provision of visas to diplomats from Russia and other states and vitriolic and often highly personalized attacks during “right of reply” interventions. Should this occur, it will be an atmosphere in which cooperation on most issues will be nearly impossible and could deprive the Review Conference of an opportunity to hold constructive discussions on vital topics such as the dangers of accidental nuclear war, nuclear risk reduction, and reiteration or reformulation of the Reagan-Gorbachev principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

Depending on when the Review Conference is held, it is possible that the P5 may be able to issue some form of a joint statement. Under current circumstances, however, it is hard to imagine that it would be very substantive. Nevertheless, any joint statement is likely to be welcomed by most other states, especially if it demonstrates a readiness to address at least some issues of major concern to NNWS. A good indicator of the potential for P5 coordinated action at the next Review Conference, as well as the general environment for respectful discourse, will be the tenor of debate at the fall 2020 First Committee, assuming that it takes place.

*Domestic Politics.* Much, but not all, of the damage inflicted by the United States on the NPT and the broader array of multilateral arms control treaties and institutions can be remedied if a new president is elected in November 2020. It is instructive, in this regard, to recall the very positive impact of President Obama’s election victory in 2008 on the 2010 Review Conference. Obviously, the international state of play is very different today than it was in 2010, especially in terms of the erosion of international treaties, disrespect for international law, the rise of populism and anti-democratic tendencies around the world, and the global pandemic-induced economic crisis. This advanced state of disarray will not be corrected quickly or easily regardless of domestic political changes in the United States, and it is conceivable

that US-Russian relations, in particular, may become further strained if there is evidence of Russian interference in the electoral process. Moreover, it is important to recall that the NPT is a fifty-year saga of recurrent crises and challenges to its wellbeing. This was evident at the first Review Conference in 1975 as well as at the last conference in 2015, well before the arrival of the destructive nuclear arms control impulses of the current US administration.

In fairness to the United States, one should not ignore the corrosive impact on the NPT of the behavior by many other states. The list of culprits is a long one, and includes most nuclear weapons possessors, who continue to attach undue importance to nuclear weapons in their security policies. One also should not overlook numerous NNWS who pride themselves as principled, but pick and choose the principles to which they subscribe at any given time, witness the support for nuclear trade with India by members of three NWFZs in violation of legally-binding treaty prohibitions. In addition, multiple states in different regions give lip service to nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy, but act without adequate regard for sensitive nuclear exports, best practices in nuclear security, and stringent international safeguards and verification measures.

*Regional Security.* Regardless of the state of relations among the P5, the progress (or lack thereof) with respect to the three pillars of the NPT, and the party at the helm of the US government, the next NPT Review Conference will be unable to escape what has often been the thorniest conference issue – regional security developments. Although it is quite possible that dynamics on the Korean Peninsula will intrude significantly on the Review Conference, even more time is apt to be devoted to regional security issues pertaining to the Middle East. How the debate plays out will depend primarily on Iranian nuclear developments at the time of the conference and the degree to which headway is apparent in implementing the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East.

Although both issues are extremely contentious, consideration of the proposal for a WMD zone at an international conference under UN

auspices in November 2019 may reduce pressure to resolve the matter in the context of the NPT review process. Despite the absence of the United States and Israel, the first meeting on the zone in New York yielded more positive results than was anticipated, in part due to a constructive role played by the Russian Federation. If the second meeting, scheduled for fall 2020, is equally successful, most States Parties from the region will probably be less inclined to make the zone the centerpiece of their interventions at the Review Conference. Much will depend on how aggressively Egypt presses the matter, the support it receives from Russia, and the readiness of other key states to insist that the Review Conference acknowledge the outcomes of the first two international meetings

More problematic is how Iran's renewed pursuit of nuclear activities previously constrained by the JCPOA will play out at the Review Conference. There are many interconnected factors involved, which makes it difficult to forecast their collective impact. They include: Iranian short- and mid-term intentions, including calculations about the outcome of the forthcoming US presidential election; US and Israeli objectives and the tools (including military means) they are prepared to employ in their pursuit; Iranian readiness to abandon altogether its IAEA safeguards obligations and, possibly, even withdraw from the NPT; and the forcefulness and resourcefulness with which the EU and other interested parties attempt to preserve what little remains of the JCPOA. While the prospect of a new US administration may encourage Iran to display more reserve, an opposite inclination may be driven by domestic political consideration in advance of Tehran's own presidential election in 2021. In the best-case scenario from the standpoint of the Review Conference, the negative tendencies already in motion will not change qualitatively before the opening of the conference, no withdrawal decision will be announced, and serious military action will be avoided. In any case, however, the issue of the JCPOA will be a prominent item of debate at the conference and will likely provoke many vitriolic exchanges.

*Impact of Pandemic.* At a time when every nation on this planet is experiencing an extraordinary affliction provoked by a virulent but nearly invisible adversary, one reasonably might expect that States Parties at the next Review Conference would put aside some of their traditional posturing and invest in joint action to address existential threats involving a convergence, if not perfect congruence, of perceptions and interests. At a minimum, it should be possible to take some concrete measures to mitigate the risks of nuclear use due to accidents and misperceptions and to agree on a joint declaration that reinforces the 75-year old taboo against nuclear weapons use.<sup>13</sup> As Tariq Rauf points out, it also is conceivable that the international community's shared experience with COVID-19 will lead to greater receptivity on the part of NPT States Parties to give greater attention to "human" and "cooperative"—as opposed to "national" security.<sup>14</sup> Although the circumstances were very different, the shared perception the 2000 NPT Review Conference that the NPT was under severe challenge led key states to adopt more flexible negotiating positions, which enabled the conference to adopt a consensus final document. Regrettably, there is little evidence to date to suggest that such flexibility will manifest itself when States Parties next assemble for the tenth NPT Review Conference.

## Conclusion

One of the hallmarks of past NPT Review Conferences has been US-Soviet and US-Russian cooperation. That cooperation has persisted since the first NPT Review Conference, as both countries recognized their shared interests in preventing nuclear war and non-proliferation. Today, however, not only is there no meaningful cooperation, but there are not even routine high-level consultations as was the case during the peak of

<sup>13</sup> See Lewis Dunn and William Potter for a discussion of various ways to reiterate the Reagan-Gorbachev principle.

<sup>14</sup> Rauf T. Postponement of the 2020 NPT Review Conference: Possible Implications. Working Paper prepared for the CNS Working Group on Alternative Approaches to Nuclear Disarmament // MIIS. May 2020. Available at: [https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/postponement\\_2020\\_npt\\_reviewcon.pdf](https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/postponement_2020_npt_reviewcon.pdf).

the Cold War. Neither side displays any empathy, trust, or respect at a time when those qualities are most needed.

Perhaps the NPT will persevere even in the absence of US-Russian cooperation, but its relevance to contemporary proliferation challenges will be greatly diminished. The credibility of the Review Conference to serve as a forum for reviewing “the operation of the treaty with a view to assuring that the purposes of the Preamble and all provisions are being realized” also will be in jeopardy if States Parties ignore what was agreed to at past NPT Review Conferences under the pretense that conditions have changed and therefore prior commitments are no longer relevant.<sup>15</sup> If NPT members accept that argument, one must ask what is the utility of negotiating further agreements, including watered down Review Conference outcome documents.

United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres observed recently that “a wind of madness is sweeping the globe, making everything more unpredictable and uncontrollable.”<sup>16</sup> He is absolutely correct, and yet most States Parties to the NPT continue to act as if business is usual, albeit modified by the need to conduct more deliberations online. If that inclination persists, one should not be surprised if delegations spend four weeks at the next Review Conference trying to hammer out a lowest common denominator to the effect that the NPT is still very valuable 50 years after it entered into force. If that is the best they can muster, there is a good chance that the pandemic we are experiencing in the biological sphere will only be a prelude to a far more devastating nuclear nightmare.

<sup>15</sup> Article VIII (3) specifies the purpose of the Review Conference. A mandate for a strengthened review process was specified in Decision One of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, which in turn was modified at the 2000 NPT Review Conference.

<sup>16</sup> See Chappel B. ‘Wind Of Madness’ Is Sweeping Earth, U.N. Secretary-General Says // NPR. February 4, 2020. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/04/802723312/-wind-of-madness-is-sweeping-earth-u-n-s-guterres-warns>.

## IV

# MILITARY CAPABILITIES, SCENARIOS AND CONFLICTS

## 4.1. THE SOLEIMANI ASSASSINATION, LIMITED NUCLEAR OPTIONS AND THE PROBLEM OF ESCALATION CONTROL

*Robert Legvold<sup>1</sup>*

On January 3, 2020, a half-hour after midnight, operators at the US Air Force base in Creech, Nevada fired two Hellfire R9X Ninja missiles from a MQ-9 Reaper drone launched from an air base in Qatar at vans carrying Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, and five others as they left the Bagdad airport. For those contemplating the photos of their incinerated vehicles, doubtless few thought in terms of the insights the stream of events leading to Soleimani's assassination and what was likely to follow provided into the risks inherent in the different ways China, India, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States are—and are not—approaching the challenge of controlling escalation once the nuclear threshold is crossed. Escalation risks and the idea of controlling them is—or should be—an urgent focus as the major nuclear powers struggle with integrating the limited or refined use of nuclear weapons into their theories of nuclear deterrence, their plans for waging a large-scale conventional conflict, and their response if nuclear deterrence fails. And the Soleimani story has something to say

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about the choices they are making.

The idea of using nuclear weapons in a war in limited fashion is not new. The US government began considering a role for tactical nuclear weapons in limited warfare as early as 1948. In 1953 the US Army indicated that it was studying the effect that nuclear weapons would have on combat operations, and in 1954 the NATO Council announced that tactical nuclear weapons would be used to defend Europe. By the mid-1950s among civilian analysts the pros and cons of planning for a limited nuclear war were being vigorously debated, even while in 1956 the US Army reported the “it had activated its first division capable of fighting with nuclear weapons.”<sup>2</sup> The Kennedy Administration, in substituting a “flexible response” strategy for the Eisenhower Administration’s “massive retaliation” strategy, incorporated plans for the use of tactical nuclear weapons (to counter a Soviet conventional attack that had overwhelmed NATO forces) into its new multi-level, multi-option defense policy intended to deal with the full spectrum of war.

Over the years the United States developed a vast array of nuclear weapons intended for missions short of all-out nuclear war. They included gravity bombs, like the M-57 deployed in 1963, artillery shells, depth charges, torpedoes, shipborne surface-to-air missiles, air-to-air missiles, and small portable weapons, such as land mines, other “special atomic demolition munitions” and the Davy Crockett recoilless rifle. Meanwhile the Soviet Union built a comparable arsenal of so-called sub-strategic weapons—nuclear-armed rocket launchers, artillery, short-range ballistic missiles, nuclear torpedoes, and nuclear land mines and other small atomic demolition devices.

The concepts justifying these weapons, the way they figured in defense planning, and the concerns they raised, however, were very different in the two countries. And, as important for the analysis in this essay, very different in the United States today from how they

were treated then. In the United States by the late 1950s, civilian strategists were wrestling with how limited a limited nuclear war would remain and whether the resort to tactical nuclear weapons actually favored the side asymmetrically disadvantaged by an imbalance in conventional forces.

The animating fear that NATO forces could not stop a conventional Warsaw Pact onslaught in turn co-existed with the existential threat of a nuclear strike against the United States itself. The two came together in the US concept of deterrence. For US defense planners in the early 1960s a limited nuclear options strategy was viewed as strengthening nuclear deterrence. They saw a strategy of massive retaliation as a non-tenable approach to nuclear deterrence, leaving the United States with only a choice between “suicide or surrender.”

In 1974, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger united a response to the two threats by announcing a decision to introduce flexibility in the United States’ strategic targeting plans. The resort to selective counterforce strike options was meant, in Schlesinger’s words, to “limit the chance of uncontrolled escalation” in a strategic nuclear exchange. But the strategy was also intended to enhance deterrence against a Soviet-initiated conventional war in Europe or, if it occurred, to cut it short. A theater war fought in Europe with tactical nuclear weapons, Schlesinger recognized, would destroy Europe, while leaving the Soviet Union untouched by the nuclear conflagration. The prospect of suffering selective nuclear strikes against strategic targets in the Soviet Union, it was reasoned, would alter Soviet risk calculations in launching or continuing a conventional war in Europe, while limiting the chance of all-out nuclear war.

In the years before Schlesinger’s innovation and the decade after, to the extent that strategists in the United States wrestled with the question of escalation risks and the prospect of controlling them, it was, with one major exception, indirectly. Proponents of “flexible response” and the use of tactical nuclear weapons argued that by carefully selecting targets and/or by employing weapons

<sup>2</sup> Halperin M. Nuclear Weapons and Limited War // The Journal of Conflict Resolution. 1961. Vol. 5. No. 2. P. 147.

causing less fallout war across the nuclear threshold could be kept limited—although the scale attached to “limited” was never specified. To this they added the faith that leaders in both countries had an overriding desire to avoid nuclear Armageddon, and this elemental impulse could be reinforced by a US declaratory policy affirming the limited aims of US nuclear strategy.

The exception involved a more direct consideration, one that cuts to the heart of the challenge of controlling escalation in a nuclear war. For war to remain limited after nuclear weapons are used, some recognized, both sides must share a common understanding of where the thresholds are, what the cutoff points are after which a nuclear war is no longer limited, and which weapons and their use will be recognized as intended to control further escalation. Each must understand where the critical decision-points are for the other side and what criteria inform those decisions. Failing these conditions, the critics of limited nuclear options stressed, the likelihood that one side will misread the actions or intentions of the other creates an inherent risk that escalation cannot be controlled. At a minimum, as Henry Kissinger argued when he was among the early advocates of limited nuclear war options (a position he would eventually reject), “the ability to conduct a limited war depends . . . on an understanding of the psychology by which the opponent calculates his risks and on the ability to present him at every point with an opportunity for a settlement that appears more favorable than would result if the war were continued.”

Therein lies the problem. Over these Cold War years and still true today, it is far from evident that Soviet military planners shared US perspectives or that their Russian successors do today. Neither Soviet military writing nor operational plans reflected an interest or belief in intrawar deterrence, war termination through intrawar bargaining, or the fine art of gauging the other side’s critical decision-making points. Instead the evidence indicated that Soviet defense planners integrated nuclear weapons in a combined-arms approach at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels designed to achieve military objectives, not

to engage in “tacit bargaining” and to maintain escalation control.

While US military analysts and defense planners wrestled with the merits and requirements of limited nuclear war, their Soviet counterparts from the beginning flatly rejected the idea and insisted that, as Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov put it in 1984, “‘the restricted use’ of nuclear weapons would inevitably and immediately lead to the use of the entire nuclear stockpiles of the warring parties.” The trouble was that, to quote Andrei Kokoshin, “the Soviet art of war, including strategy, operational art, and tactics prescribed relevant nuclear means to deter the other side from using forces, particularly nuclear force.”<sup>3</sup>

The seeming ambiguity traces to the most fundamental asymmetry at the root of what separates the United States from Russia in the way that they do (or do not) take account of the escalation risks attached to options for the limited use of nuclear weapons. From this gulf arises the specter of inadvertent nuclear war. If anything, that gulf is currently widening.

Beyond the variable but permanent mutual fear that the other side could develop the ability to execute a disarming nuclear first strike, geostrategic reality dictates that the aggression each country fears from the other differs fundamentally. From the beginning of the nuclear era, for the United States the primary challenge has been to protect allies near Russian borders from a large-scale Russian conventional assault. The US answer has been, in addition to deploying forces in Europe and Asia, to extend its nuclear umbrella over these allies. Given that the United States is separated from its European and Asian allies by oceans, and, therefore, that their security is potentially de-linked from that of the United States, the problem has always been persuading an adversary that when push comes to shove the United States will rally to its allies’ defense.

The Russian preoccupation has been different: how to deter and, deterrence failing, to defend against a US-led NATO war against the

3 Kokoshin A. *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91*. 1998. Cambridge: The MIT Press. P. 135.

homeland. The Soviet and now Russian response—designed overwhelming by military leadership, not civilian strategists—has been to prepare to wage war at all levels and by all means—including nuclear. The discrepancy between the way the United States has thought about and then struggled with maintaining extended deterrence and the way the Soviet Union and now Russia has thought about and struggled with sustaining defense of the homeland has long created the risk of inadvertent nuclear war. And, as already noted, that discrepancy and, with it, the risk of inadvertent nuclear war may be growing.

For the United States over the last decade—and particularly in the context of the Ukrainian crisis—the growing concern has been what the Obama and now the Trump administration see as a Russia eager to redraw the European security map, and to do so by employing military intimidation or a stealth intervention as in Crimea or even direct aggression by conventional forces backed by threat to use sub-strategic nuclear weapons should NATO dare to respond.

Gone is the former preoccupation with massive Soviet conventional forces pouring through the Fulda Gap and the associated risk of a large-scale nuclear war. In its place the United States worries, as Brad Roberts has written, that Russia embraces a “strategy of deterrence built on the foundations of coercion through blackmail and brinkmanship” and underpinned “by a credible threat to employ . . . kinetic and nonkinetic weapons as well as nuclear and non-nuclear strategic options” to present “the enemy with unacceptable risks of escalation” at every level of conflict.<sup>4</sup>

The 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) asserts that Russia believes “that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide . . . a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict.” Russia, it is said, thinks these weapons and this strategy “would serve to ‘de-escalate’ a conflict on terms favorable to Russia.” To counter this threat and the advantage Russia is said to

have in the quantity and quality of its sub-strategic nuclear weapons as well as its enhanced defenses against an effective US counter, the United States is deploying low-yield nuclear warheads on the Trident D5 SLBM, enhancing the nuclear gravity bomb on dual-capable aircraft stationed in Europe, planning to develop a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile, and moving forward with a variety of conventionally-armed hypersonic weapons.

US defense planners envisage using these weapons in modulated fashion as part of what since the Clinton administration has been a US strategy of “tailored nuclear deterrence.” It is an approach designed to deter in different regional contexts different adversaries that pose different threats, including any notion Russia may have that by stealth or by creating a quick *fait accompli* it can achieve political or territorial gains and checkmate a US response by threatening to over-match it at every level of escalation. It, as the 2018 NPR says, is meant “to communicate the costs of aggression to potential adversaries, taking into consideration how they uniquely calculate costs and risks.”

### Where US and Russian perspectives conflict and dangers arise

This brings us back to the crux of the problem of coping with escalation risks and the idea of escalation control when designing nuclear deterrence and planning for its failure. Assessing how adversaries “uniquely calculate costs and risks” must be accurate. Miscalculation opens the way to potentially uncontrolled escalation. The level at which misperception or misunderstanding adds to this risk, however, is still more complex. As Roberts has argued, “for deterrence in a regional contest to be effective, it must be capable of influencing in a decisive manner the adversary’s assessments of resolve and restraint at each of the decision points in the spectrum of deterrence challenges.”<sup>5</sup> To influence “in a decisive manner” an adversary’s “resolve and restraint”

<sup>4</sup> Roberts B. On Adapting Nuclear Deterrence to Reduce Nuclear Risk // *Dædalus*. 2020. March 23, 2020. P. 76. Available at: [https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/daed\\_a\\_01790](https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/daed_a_01790).

<sup>5</sup> Roberts B. *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*. 2016. Stanford: Stanford University Press. P. 83.

at key decision points, however, one has to know what they are. If misjudged, the consequence could be catastrophic. And the likelihood of misjudgment appears to be substantial.

Russia assigns a role to sub-strategic nuclear weapons, but it almost certainly is not to serve the “escalate to de-escalate” strategy widely believed to be the case by US observers and assumed in the 2018 NPR. Nor, contrary to speculation in the 2018 NPR, has Russia lowered the threshold for nuclear use. Quite the opposite, the Russian military has stressed the move to non-nuclear deterrence and more robust conventional forces as the core of a “strategic deterrence” strategy.” Thus, to quote Nikolai Sokov, “the U.S. 2018 NPR seems to respond to a Russian policy that was in force until 2010 or, at the latest, 2014”—a period of weakness in Russia’s conventional forces when nuclear weapons were featured and some voices spoke loosely of using them to “sober” the other side were it to launch a conventional war against Russia.<sup>6</sup>

Rather Russian military planning appears to maintain the long-standing commitment to waging a combined-arms war in which operationally and tactically all services, units, and weapons, including sub-strategic nuclear weapons, are focused on prevailing over an opponent in actual combat. Over the last decade and half, Russia has worked hard to arm itself with precision-strike conventional forces allowing it to fare well in the early phases of a conflict, but many of these systems are dual-capable, and at higher levels of escalation their non-strategic nuclear versions would presumably be used to augment a faltering conventional offensive.

Neither in Russian military exercises or in formal military doctrine is there any hint of plans to threaten to use sub-strategic nuclear weapons to secure a swiftly executed military coup or to impose on an adversary a major *political* defeat. If non-strategic nuclear weapons figure in Russian thinking about terminating war on the most favorable

or, alternatively, least unfavorable terms, it appears to be by their actual use in executing combat missions.<sup>7</sup>

What then might be the practical implications of the discrepancy in the way the two countries approach the prospect of crossing the nuclear threshold? What when combined with the possibility that each misjudges the thinking of the other? Assume, as I do, that war in Europe will not come from a brazen move by one side against the other, but out of escalating tensions over instability in a country or countries neighboring Russia, prompting Russian intervention and escalating counter moves by both sides. In this context, the growing fear in the United States and among European allies is that NATO cannot defend its eastern front, because of Russia’s enhanced multilevel air defenses and expanding arsenal of precision-strike nuclear and non-nuclear weapons.

The US response to this “anti-access/area denial” (A2/AD) problem appears to be the early use of its own long-range precision strike weapons, such as the planned conventionally armed AGM-183 air-launched hypersonic cruise missile. As General John Hyten, the former Commander of US Strategic Command, noted, these weapons permit “responsive, long-range strike options against distant, defended, and/or time-critical threats [such as road-mobile missiles] when other forces are unavailable, denied access, or not preferred.”<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps this

7 In a recent and the most detailed available study on how Russian military analysts write about the use of force for “escalation management,” including the resort to non-strategic nuclear weapons, the core Russian concern, while mentioning “unintended escalation,” is with creating a credible threat scenario that will deter US/NATO aggression and, failing that, that will guarantee the Russian military options allowing it to prevail at whatever level of escalation the other side appears ready to risk. Escalation risks and the loss of control are not a focus. Their concept of “deterrent damage” implies applying “calibrated amounts of damage . . . iteratively to the target as opposed to a singular strike,” but the concept, the authors say, is fuzzy and moving. They stress that, as Russian thinking and capabilities evolve, the emphasis is on shifting the burden from nuclear to conventional precision-strike weapons as key to the Russian concept of strategic deterrence. They also note that, when dealing with the moment military action is likely, Russian military writers “display a noticeable desire for preemption and an expectation that Russian forces will seek to neutralize the threat as it is forming.” (Kofman M., Fink A., Edmonds J. Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Concepts // CNA Research Memorandum (April 2020). Pp. 29, 35).

8 Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress. The Congressional Research Service. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45811> (accessed 17 March 2020).

6 Sokov N. The Elusive Russian Nuclear Threshold // PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 625. November 2019. P. 3.



would be a mission for the new low-yield Trident D5 SLBM. And some tout the new B61-12 precision low-yield gravity bomb delivered by the B-2 with a new Defensive Management System (DMS-M), designed for modernized Russian air-defense systems, or by the F-35 as suited for tactical missions, including earth-penetrating attacks.

Russian planners, however, have their minds focused on a very different scenario. Their fear appears to be, as war looms, a US/NATO-initiated large-scale air and space attack similar to, only massively more elaborate than, the air war waged against Serbia in the 1999 Kosovo crisis. To deal with “air-space war,” the threat they have stressed over the last two decades, the Russian military-command appears to plan early in a conflict to destroy the systems and support facilities that the Western powers would employ in such an attack by using their own enhanced arsenal of dual-capable sub-strategic weapons. Whichever side acted first on its fear, the result is not likely to be a neatly choreographed series of graduated escalatory steps, including with tactical nuclear weapons, but a rapid leap to theater-wide regional war far up the escalatory ladder.

Whether this scenario is the most likely or others are more likely, in all of them, if one or both sides embrace a strategy predicated on the notion that at or across the nuclear threshold escalation can be controlled because the opponent’s risk calculus is understood, the strategy likely rests on a false assumption. This being the case, the potential consequences of the error should be a primary factor in deterrence planning, not simply in the US-Russia case, but in all competitive nuclear relationships.

Faced with an increasingly well-armed China and a relationship sliding toward great-power strategic rivalry, the United States finds preserving its extended deterrence commitments in East Asia no easier than in Europe. The way that in a crisis it plans to blunt China’s ability to undermine its security guarantees to allies, however, exposes in increasingly sharp terms the gulf between the US and Chinese understanding of how a war might unfold, the role that nuclear weapons

could play, and the chance of controlling escalation, including the risk of a miscalculation leading to inadvertent nuclear war.

The implications of this discrepancy loom larger because, at an elemental level, the political-strategic stakes have changed for both countries. The most likely crisis scenario is over Taiwan. Were events surrounding the status of Taiwan to spiral out of control and prompt aggressive Chinese actions, both countries are likely to see the crisis as testing a shift in the larger geo-strategic balance. Rather than a local, albeit critical, conflict pitting the United States against China, it would parallel the significance of the 1958-1961 Berlin crises during the Cold War.

Thus, it matters more than ever that the United States and China appear to think quite differently about escalation risks in a war that could go nuclear, and the feasibility of controlling escalation were it to do so. As the United States proceeds to develop its “tailored deterrence” strategy, it focuses on smaller “usable” nuclear weapons that satisfy the principles of “discrimination and proportionality,” a consideration that by implication, suggests confidence that nuclear escalation can be controlled. In contrast, the Chinese, while giving elaborate attention to managing escalation in a conventional war, have thought little about the issue once the nuclear threshold is crossed, a neglect that presumably stems from an apparent conviction that when nuclear weapons of any kind are used uncontrolled escalation will follow.<sup>9</sup>

Most importantly, these contrasting perspectives produce dangers at an eminently practical level. For example, the Chinese appear to believe that in a conventional war were they to destroy satellites key to US maritime operations, even though these satellites are part of the US early nuclear warning system, the United States would not mistake their purpose and assume a nuclear attack might be entrained. Similarly, they appear to believe that, because a nuclear war would be so apocalyptic, the United States will do whatever is necessary to avoid it, including restraining allies.

<sup>9</sup> Cunningham F., Fravel T. Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation // *International Security*. Fall 2019. Vol. 44. No. 2. Pp. 61-109.

On the other side, the United States, fearing as in Europe the adversary's A2/AD capabilities, plans early in a war to destroy China's mainland-based cruise and ballistic missiles and their command-and-control facilities with its precision conventional strike weapons based at sea, in the air, and, if a new generation of GLCMs is deployed to Guam, on land. Because many of China's medium- and intermediate range ballistic missiles are either dual-capable or co-located as are some C3I networks, a strike against conventional systems threatening US maritime forces or air bases risks hitting nuclear weapons instead. Or, as Caitlin Talmadge notes, in the heat of war US anti-submarine operations directed against Chinese attack submarines conducting a blockade of Taiwanese ports, bombing facilities on Taiwan, or threatening US forces in the area could strike submarines shielding one or more of China's four SSBNs put to sea—or worse, by mistake, one of those SSBNs.<sup>10</sup>

The pathways to inadvertent nuclear war between the United States and China are more than those just described. Whatever the pathway, however, miscalculating the other side's reading of a situation and likely response—particularly, because of the potential entanglement of precision-strike conventional weapons with nuclear weapons—plays a central role.<sup>11</sup> And, if in the US-Russian and US-Chinese cases escalation risks leading to inadvertent nuclear war are neglected or ill-considered, in the Indian-Pakistani case the situation appears still worse.

The pathways to disaster in this case multiply with each new stage in the two countries' nuclear preparations, a menace augmented by the level of tension between them, a tension that regularly explodes in violence. The scenario where the failure to weigh adequately

escalation risks seems most consequential is Pakistan's putative plan to use battlefield nuclear weapons to stop an Indian conventional assault. India says in its public posture that it will answer any nuclear use with large-scale “punitive” nuclear retaliation, but even if in actual operational plans the response is less, uncontrolled escalation appears all too probable.<sup>12</sup> Another avenue to a similar outcome would be Pakistan's plans to load nuclear-tipped cruise missiles aboard conventional submarines and tactical nuclear weapons on surface ships. How they might be used in other than conventional contingencies, such as against an Indian maritime blockade, remains intentionally shrouded. The list can easily be extended because other elements of each side's nuclear programs, plans, and posture also carry inherently large but neglected escalation risks.

### The assassination of Soleimani

So, what do the events leading up to and following Soleimani's assassination add to this picture? As in any likely crisis between the United States and Russia or the United States and China, initially, despite rising tensions between the two countries, both governments had carefully avoided direct attacks on the forces and installations of the other side. That began to change in fall 2019, when Iranian proxies escalated the number of rocket attacks on sites from which US allies and partners were operating. Slowly thresholds were being crossed. December 27, Iranian-backed forces launched thirty rockets against the K-1 Air Base in northern Iraq, injuring four US soldiers and killing a US civilian contractor. Two days later the United States retaliated by bombing five sites in Iraq and Syria used by the Iranian-backed militia, Kataib Hezbollah, killing twenty-five and wounding more than fifty. Trump had been presented with more limited options, but he chose this more aggressive step.

<sup>10</sup> Talmadge C. Beijing's Nuclear Option: Why a U.S.-Chinese War Could Spiral Out of Control // Foreign Affairs. November/December 2018. Pp. 46-7.

<sup>11</sup> The entanglement problem and China's seeming indifference to it are explored in Zhao T., Bin L. The Underappreciate Risks of Entanglement: A Chinese Perspective // James A. Acton, ed., Entanglement: Russian and Chinese Perspectives on Non-Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Risks. 2017. Washington DC: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Pp. 47-75.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed analysis explaining why this is so, see Sankaran J. Pakistan's Battlefield Nuclear Policy: A Risky Solution to an Exaggerated Threat // International Security. Winter 2014/15. Vol. 39. No. 3. P. 147.

If in doing so the calculation was that a bloody nose this big would cause the Iranian side to temper its attacks, it was a miscalculation. New Year's Eve, on the heels of a funeral for the victims of the US air attacks, supporters of Kataib Hezbollah lay siege to the US Embassy in Baghdad, setting the reception area ablaze and driving security personnel deeper into the compound. At this point the vector along which the escalation had been unfolding turned sharply. Trump, at his retreat in Mar-a-Lago, tweeted that now Iran "will pay a very BIG PRICE!". Suddenly the stakes had changed. Seeing a US Embassy under assault and in flames recalled images of the 2012 Benghazi attack, and the president knew how the political opposition had used that event against the Obama administration.

Again, senior defense officials presented him with graded options. One was to continue as before with more but escalated air attacks against militia bases. The other vaulted up the escalatory ladder. It featured "targeted killings," a legal category invented to cover killing terrorists by drones, because assassinations of state officials had been outlawed during the Reagan administration. The candidates were local militia leaders, but at one extreme the target was Soleimani. Military officials did not think this option would be taken seriously, and were startled when Trump chose it.

Killing a high-level state official – even if rationalized by his "dual-hatted" role in controlling militias in Iraq (particularly a figure close to Iran's supreme leader) – took the attack-response sequence to another level. Administration officials as well as the world watching, fully aware that the conflict was in danger of spinning out of control, waited for Iran's response. The threshold that if breached promised large-scale escalation and a potential US-Iranian war appeared to be an attack that killed US personnel. Thus, when Iran struck two military bases in Iraq where US troops were stationed with fifteen ballistic missiles fired from Iran without causing US casualties, both sides seized the moment to retreat. Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, said that Iran had "concluded proportionate measures in self-defense," and did

not "seek escalation or war." Trump quickly noted that the damage was minimal and stressed that no life was lost. Iran, he said, "appeared to be standing down."

An argument can be made that the Iranian story shows that countries can manage the escalation cycle and, when they approach the abyss, both sides can and will draw back. If this is the lesson drawn, it misses the larger cautionary tale this moment contains. As would likely be the case between the United States and Russia or the United States and China, the context shaping the crisis shifted randomly, rendering the course of events unpredictable. At the outset in 2017 the low intensity US-Iranian shadow war intensified, when, with the Syrian war slowing and ISIS rolled back, Iran diverted more of its attention to US and Israeli operations in Iraq and Syria. As might have been predicted, the attacks on Israeli and US-supported installations increased after May 2018 when the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA and announced a new round of sanctions. What could not have been predicted, starting with Trump's election, was the arrival in office that spring of two of the nuclear agreement's most determined foes, Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State and John Bolton as National Security Advisor. Both men were set on doing much greater military damage to the Iranian regime, and nearly succeeded in summer 2019 when Iranian forces shot down a US surveillance drone over the Hormuz Strait. At the last minute, Trump cancelled the order to launch cruise missiles against Iranian strategic sites. His decision was consistent with what appeared to be his general reluctance to get into a war with Iran, but here entered a third factor: Israel, increasingly frustrated by the administration's reluctance to strike back hard against Soleimani's militias, sharply increased its assault on these forces, an escalation that the Iranians viewed as in collaboration with the United States.

The next unexpected turn occurred between two tightly connected events. It is not clear whether Iranian authorities understood that the December 27 rocket barrage against the Iraqi base that killed a

US civilian contractor had triggered a “trip wire,” and that the US response would no longer be proportionate. But neither they nor most observers could have anticipated what followed: the siege against the US Embassy in Bagdad over which its instigators appeared to lose control, creating a specter that instantly obscured the conventional security calculations guiding US policy to this point and put front and center the potential political fallout threatening the administration’s status back home.

In deterrence theory the idea of a “trip wire – for example, the deployment of US troops in Europe during the Cold War – works by putting the defender in a position from which it cannot retreat, thus, facing a potential attacker with near certainty that aggression will produce retaliation and the risk of uncontrolled escalation. Iran may not have understood that a military assault that killed US personnel was a trip wire when an American died in the December 27 attack, because US messaging had been muted and muddled. Or its military leadership may have doubted that it was a trip wire, because it was persuaded that when push came to shove Washington would never risk an all-out war. But all the signs indicate that for Trump the significant loss of American life in any Iranian retaliation for Soleimani’s assassination would have been taken as leaving him no choice other than a dramatic escalation. Therefore, what might have but did not happen becomes critical.

Some at the time noted that the missile attack on the Ayn Al Asad and Erbil airbases appeared designed to avoid US casualties, and the commander of the Revolutionary Guards air force indicated somewhat ambiguously that that was the case. That no US military died in the attack, however, owed almost entirely to the advanced warning the US side had received through secret intelligence signals allowing them to fly many of the US troops out and lock down the bases. That the remaining US military were not killed appears to be by pure chance. Iran fired fifteen ballistic missiles at the two bases. Four never hit their target, including one Fateh-313 missile that missed the Erbil airport by

twenty miles. Iran could not have been trying to avoid US deaths by choosing to use weapons of this dubious accuracy—indeed, as senior US military officials concluded.

Based on this case, three observations relevant to the problem of escalation risks and the prospect of escalation control are worth considering. First, as a general, banal but critical point, war, including the risk of inadvertent nuclear war, does not happen on its own, but rather more often than not in the context of a worsening political-military crisis. As the Iranian case shows, however, it is the internal dynamics of a crisis that matter—the point when quantity changes into quality, when choices that are made launch a rapid acceleration in escalation. That appears to have happened between the Iranian attack that killed a US contractor and the elevated US response. As noted, it is difficult to see how that convergence of circumstance could have been anticipated.

Second, once that threshold was crossed the next phases of escalation were not gradual with each step a carefully calibrated ascent. Instead the process was discontinuous. The action-reaction sequence skipped steps and rapidly reached a point at which, but for chance, escalation control would have been lost. Third, although this crisis passed without exploding into a large-scale war, the risk of uncontrolled escalation had not ended. It had simply passed to the next moment of crisis, when the stakes for both sides would likely be higher, and the two would start on the escalation ladder where they had left off or on a higher rung.

All three aspects of the way that events leading up to and after Soleimani’s assassination unfolded seem likely to be replicated in any crisis that turns violent between the United States and Russia, the United States and China, or India and Pakistan. Only in each of these cases, the ultimate risk is of inadvertent nuclear war

Or put more simply, in a crisis between countries with nuclear weapons the chance that the decisions taken will be “distorted by misinformation, miscalculation, and misjudgment” is never small enough.



The words just quoted are those of Robert McNamara when describing a narrow miss during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Here is his account:

The contingency plans called for a first-day air attack of 1,080 sorties – a huge attack. An invasion of 180,000 troops was assembled in southeastern U.S. ports. . . Had Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev not publicly announced on that Sunday, October 28th that he was removing the missiles, I believe that on Monday, a majority of Kennedy's military and civilian advisers would have recommended launching the attacks.

During a subsequent conference in Havana in January 1992 . . . we were told by the former Warsaw Pact chief of staff, General Anatoly Gribkov, that in 1962 the Soviet forces in Cuba possessed not only nuclear warheads for their intermediate-range missiles targeted on US cities, but nuclear bombs and tactical nuclear warheads as well. The tactical warheads were to be used against US invasion forces. At the time the CIA was reporting no warheads on the island – they believed the first batch was to be delivered by a Russian ship named the Poltava.

We learned more . . . Soviet forces on Cuba possessed a total of 162 nuclear warheads, including at least 90 tactical warheads. . . [and] on October 26, 1962 – a moment of great tension—warheads were moved from their storage sites to positions closer to their delivery vehicles in anticipation of a U.S. invasion. . . Although a U.S. invasion force would not have been equipped with tactical nuclear warheads – President Kennedy and I had specifically prohibited that – no one should believe that had American troops been attacked with nuclear weapons, the United States would have refrained from a nuclear response.<sup>13</sup>

Given the high probability of error because of “misinformation, miscalculation, and misjudgment” when waging war in the shadow of nuclear weapons, the uncertain realm of escalation control should be central to the calculations of the nuclear-weapons possessing states. It is not. Therefore, two recommendations seem appropriate. First, while military strategists and defense planners go about designing and implementing what they believe to be an optimal nuclear posture, civilian leaders, who will have the ultimate decision to use nuclear weapons, should superimpose on the process a mechanism by which they can inform themselves of the nature and severity of potential escalation risks associated with the plans they are signing on to.

Second, ideally the nuclear powers should engage one another on the topic. Ideally in a two-plus-two format, involving military leaders and senior policymakers, the United States and Russia, the United States and China, and India and Pakistan should embrace the idea of strategic dialogue and make one of its principal focuses escalation risks, inherent in their disparate threat analyses, doctrines, and nuclear strategies. But this is an ideal and its likelihood improbable any time soon. Thus, a more practical suggestion may be that of the Chinese analyst, Tong Zhao, when he advocates in the US-Chinese case “in depth expert exchanges, and by using tools such as joint table-top exercises or simulations [in] unofficial-level dialogues and exchanges.”<sup>14</sup>

At a minimum as the number of states with nuclear weapons multiple and they struggle with ways to enhance their nuclear deterrents, particularly by making these weapons more usable or by substituting conventional strategic strike weapons for nuclear weapons, they and their expert communities should make the challenges to and the intricacies of escalation control a central concern.

<sup>13</sup> McNamara R., Blight J. *Wilson's Ghost*. 2001. New York: Public Affairs. Pp. 189-90.

<sup>14</sup> Zhao T. What the United States Can Do to Stabilize Its Nuclear Relationship with China // *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. January 2019. P. 22.

## 4.2. MIDDLE EASTERN CONFLICTS: TRANSFORMATION OF REGIONAL CENTERS OF POWER

*Alexander Shumilin<sup>1</sup>*

**W**ith the end of the Cold War, the very notion of ‘Middle Eastern conflict’ underwent substantial change: the term ‘Arab-Israeli conflict’ receded into the past with the emerging confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites becoming ever more prominent, indeed – recently – even within the Sunni space, and the sustained influence of non-state actors resurrecting centuries-old stereotypes of radically re-loaded intra-Islamic strife. This paper focusses primarily on an analysis of the strategies of the principal regional players – countries whose populations, although in the majority professing Islam, nevertheless still cleave to interpretations, not so much of Islam’s holiest book, as to traditions which emerged long after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. In so doing, the author seeks to draw a distinction between conflict situations such as civil wars (Libya, Syria, Yemen), governments fighting terrorist organizations (Egypt, Iraq), and the consequences of Sunni-Shiite confrontation both within individual states (the outbreaks of mass disorder in Iraq and Lebanon as well as civil wars in Yemen and Syria) and at regional level (the revelation by the UN of camouflaged missile strikes by Iran on facilities in Saudi Arabia<sup>2</sup>). In a number of cases one sees the dovetailing

of various conflict ‘fault-lines’, more particularly between civil war and the Sunni-Shiite confrontation (Syria, Yemen).

Of particular interest to this analysis are the strategies of Iran and Turkey, which, through their either direct or indirect meddling in conflict situations, aim not only at creating ‘security zones’ along their borders (Turkey on the territory of Syria and Iraq, Iran in Iraq), but also at ensuring their predominant influence over a broader swathe in the region by resorting to historical references (‘Neo-Ottomanism’ in Turkey, the ‘Shiite Crescent’ and the ‘Persian Empire’ in Iran). The pursuit of these expansionist (neo-imperialist) ideologies and strategies by Ankara and Teheran spurs the elites of the Sunni-Arab bloc of countries (the Gulf monarchies, Egypt, Jordan) to resist them ever more vigorously. This is precisely what is happening in Syria and Libya.

This author ascribes to the category of ‘Middle Eastern Conflicts’ (in the modern sense of the term) those situations of exploding internal political confrontations in individual countries which entail both a clash of interests and the substantive involvement of other regional states. In some such cases, states beyond the region (e.g. Russia in Syria) are involved. Along with this, we are witnessing new complications on the Palestinian-Israeli track: the intention of Benjamin Netanyahu’s government to annex part of the territory of the West Bank increases tension and has the effect of reinstating the Palestinian issue on the list of regional priorities and the international agenda. This is liable to complicate the emerging cooperation between Israel and the Sunni monarchies in their joint confrontation with Iran. The governments in Teheran and Ankara will almost certainly leverage the ‘Palestinian card’ propagandistically to underpin their policy of expanding their influence in the region.

### **Iran: the specter of the Persian Empire**

The early signs of new parameters that would re-define the situation in the Middle East and cause its qualitative transformation appeared soon

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<sup>2</sup> Nichols M. Arms Seized by U.S., Missiles Used to Attack Saudi Arabia ‘Of Iranian Origin’: U.N. //

Reuters. June 12, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-un/arms-seized-by-u-s-missiles-used-to-attack-saudi-arabia-of-iranian-origin-u-n-idUSKBN23J08C>.

after (and as a direct result of) the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. The region saw the first Islamist regime emerge, one based on the phenomenon of combining religion and politics (specifically on the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, which assumes a concentration of political power in the hands of the clergy).

Initially, the idea of such a revolution was promoted by the ayatollahs not so much as a call for the Shiite branch of Islam to prevail over the Sunni (something that always seemed unrealistic, inasmuch as the Sunnis had historically constituted the majority in Arab countries), but more as a call for the ‘triumph of justice’, as the beginning of the process of transformation of the entire Muslim world.<sup>3</sup> [...] while the Islamic Revolution may have been distinctly Shia in its apparent origins, its ambitions were global, drawing on Islamic history as well as a rich heritage of Iranian universalism (one might even describe it as an imperial mentality). These concepts were married to a Marxist inheritance that sought to appeal to the oppressed of the world. Indeed, Khomeini’s division of the world into the oppressed and the oppressors arguably owed as much to Marx as to Islam’, note Ali Ansari and Kasra Aarabi, prominent researchers at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.<sup>4</sup>

The main means for ensuring the ‘revolution of the great world of Islam’ was the concept of exporting revolution based on the interpretation of what happened in Iran in 1979, i.e. that it was not a unique, ‘but a permanent process, inescapably directed both inwards (in Iran – A. Sh.) and outwards, and thus is not limited to the confines of a single country.’<sup>5</sup> As the Ayatollah R. Khomeini said: ‘the revolution would have been doomed to failure if it had been confined to within the geographic borders of Iran’.<sup>6</sup> The ayatollahs considered that a successful promotion of the

revolution was possible only by resisting the three principal adversaries in the region, which constituted a single ‘[Sunni] Arab-Zionist-Western axis’.<sup>7</sup>

Already the very first steps of the new leadership of the Islamic Republic in implementing the concept of exporting the revolution led to a sharp deterioration in relations between Iran and Arab countries in 1979-80 – especially with Egypt (it was in Egypt that the exiled Shah Reza Pehlevi made his first stop), with Saudi Arabia (the leader of the Sunni monarchies and custodian of the two main mosques of Islam) and with Iraq, where tension spilled over into military action, coming to an end only in 1988.

After the death of Rahbar (Supreme Leader) Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, there were discussions in the elite circles of Teheran in which the prevailing view emerged that the policy of exporting the revolution to the region had been ineffective, and to all intents and purposes a failure, if only because Iran was now in a problematic situation: the influence of the Islamic Republic had been minimized by the efforts of its enemies in virtually all the Arab countries with Shiite communities (save Syria and Libya).<sup>8</sup> Given the patently predominant influence of Sunni monarchies (after the ‘Desert Storm’ operation in 1991 and the toughening up of the Clinton administration’s policy of containment of Iran), the decision was taken in Teheran not to push for the export of revolution ‘on all fronts’, but to concentrate on direct use-of-force and material support of legitimate pro-Iranian organizations (for example, Hezbollah in Lebanon) and undercover (and mainly subversive) groups in those Arab countries which were seen (for example, by Saudi Arabia<sup>9</sup>) as inimical. It was with this aim

3 “The Iranian people’s revolution is only a point in the start of the revolution of the great world of Islam”, stated Khomeini in 1989. Khomeini R. Speech to the People During the Imposed War. Tehran, Iran, March 22, 1989. Available at: <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81494977>.

4 Ansari A., Aarabi K. Ideology and Iran’s Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World // The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. February 2019. Available at: <https://institute.global/policy/ideology-and-irans-revolution-how-1979-changed-world>.

5 The Export of the Islamic Revolution // The Islamic Revolution – Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow. January 18, 2020. Available at: <https://iran1979.ru/eksport-islamskoj-revoljucii/>.

6 Ibid.

7 Aarabi K. Beyond Borders: The Expansionist Ideology of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps // Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. February 2020. Available at: <https://institute.global/policy/beyond-borders-expansionist-ideology-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>.

8 Cohen R. Iranian Export of Revolution Doctrine and Implementation // The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, Institute for Policy and Strategy. May 1, 2007. Available at: <https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/ips/documents/publication/5/2582roni-cohen2007.pdf>.

9 Report: Iranian-Backed Spy Ring in Saudi Arabia Trained by IRGC in Mashhad // The Iran Observer. August 2017. Available at: <https://www.iranobserver.org/report-iranian-backed-spy-ring-in-saudi-arabia-trained-by-irgc-in-mashhad/>.

that at the end of the 1980s the elite unit called Quds ('Jerusalem') was established within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, reporting directly to the Supreme Leader. Apart from Lebanon, the government saw Iraq as amongst its top priority operational tasks – Iraq, where an infrastructure of resistance to Western presence had developed after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. The mainstay of this infrastructure became the Popular Mobilization Units – the PMUs, militarized groups under the control of Iran. With the beginning of the Arab Spring (2011), one notes an upsurge of activity on the part of Quds in practically all Arab countries with Shiite communities, even though public unrest has affected these countries in varying degrees (Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria). The Arab monarchies headed by Saudi Arabia started mobilizing military capability to suppress Shiite uprisings, assuming that Iran was behind them: in March 2011 they send a limited contingent of troops to Bahrain and in February 2015 they initiated combat action against the Houthis (the local Shiites) in Yemen.

The phenomenon of the Arab Spring was perceived in Teheran as none other than a continuation of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and was on the whole supported by the Ayatollahs.<sup>10</sup> This was understandable inasmuch as the chain of upheaval in Arab countries had begun to change the political landscape in the Middle Eastern region quite radically. Officially, however, the Iranian leadership ignored the electoral successes of secular political forces and made a point of greeting representatives of religious (Islamist) groups in the new government structures of Arab countries. As a rule, these were organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood association. A clear example was the sudden improvement of relations between Teheran and Cairo after the party representing the Brotherhood, headed by elected President M. Morsi, came to power in Egypt in 2012. These relations collapsed just as quickly with the overthrow of Morsi by the army chiefs in July 2013.

As events unfolded during the Arab Spring, the Iranian strategists

<sup>10</sup> Chubin S. Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated // Carnegie Endowment. September 2012. Available at: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Iran\\_and\\_Arab\\_Spring\\_2873.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Iran_and_Arab_Spring_2873.pdf).

set about strengthening their ties with the Muslim Brotherhood groups which had emerged from underground and had created factions in the parliaments of countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen. Despite the fact that the basic religious doctrines of the Brotherhood were built on the premises of Sunni Islam, the Iranian leadership saw this organization as a force capable of subverting the *status quo* in the region, and above all in the Arabian Peninsula, i.e. in the Arab monarchies of the Gulf and Yemen. The monarchies themselves had already been persecuting members of the Brotherhood for decades, viewing them as a threat to the stability of their own political regimes. The core of the problem is that the doctrine of the Muslim Brotherhood envisages the creation of the state on the basis of the 'founding principles of Islam' – a merging of religion and politics (as is the case, note, in Iran), as well as the electability of the institutions of representative government and the leader (in Iran the executive branch and parliament are also elected by the people). This of course goes against the practice rooted in the monarchies of transfer of hereditary power and the separation of politics and religion.<sup>11</sup> It is no surprise that the Iranian leadership decided to establish and develop links with the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood: thus, for example, a 'secret summit' was organized on Turkish soil, in the course of which highly-placed leaders of the Brotherhood and the Iranian Quds agreed to join forces in combatting Saudi Arabia.<sup>12</sup>

It is patently clear that Iran's regional strategy is founded on three basic components: defense of Shiite coreligionists in Arab countries; Muslim solidarity (alliance with the Sunnis of the Muslim Brotherhood); and the enlargement of the area of IRI's influence, mindful of the possibilities for improved sustainable and effective communication between Iran and the territories under its control. This explains the concentration

<sup>11</sup> Tsaregorodtseva I. The Politico-Legal Concepts of the Ideologists of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Movement // Research Papers of the Kazan University. Humanities Series. 2013. Vol. 155. Pp. 98-110. Available at: <https://publications.hse.ru/articles/98283212>.

<sup>12</sup> Risen J. A Secret Summit. Iran's Quds Force and the Muslim Brotherhood Considered an Alliance Against Saudi Arabia // The Intercept. November 18, 2019. Available at: <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/18/iran-muslim-brotherhood-quds-force/>.



of Quds's main efforts in such Arabic countries as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain. As early as 2004 King Abdullah of Jordan aptly called this geographical dimension of Iranian strategy 'the Shiite Crescent extending from Beirut to the Persian Gulf'.<sup>13</sup>

In each of these Arab countries the leadership of Quds adopts situation-specific tactics under the overall single strategy of achieving the dominant political influence of Iran. In Syria – direct military support to the ruling Alawites (Shiite) senior command, headed by Bashar Assad's clan (by Quds forces and Shiite militia, in particular, Kataib Hezbollah); in Iraq – support of Shiite politicians and parties and the creation of pro-Iranian militarized Popular Mobilization Forces (the PMF – they are incorporated into the Iraqi army and funded by the Baghdad government, although also by Quds), along with Kataib Hezbollah (it is partially incorporated into the PMF, but it is primarily funded by the Quds); in Lebanon – full material and financial backing for the politico-military group Hezbollah, led from Teheran; in Yemen – military support to Houthi (Shiite) rebels, who overthrew the Sunni government headed by Hadi; in Bahrain – instigation of mass riots with the help of undercover Shiite groups, in particular sponsored by Iran's Saray al-Ashtar and the Military Wing of Hezbollah in Bahrain.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that in all the countries they are focusing on, Iranian strategists are placing their bets on Hezbollah-type formations active in specific conditions – both legally and underground.

By including these Arab countries in their area of security interests, the Iranian leadership frequently invokes history. Their rhetoric makes mention in particular of the Persian empires which existed at various historical periods on their territories, defined today as the Middle East – especially the most extensive of them – the Safavid Empire (16th and 17th centuries). Thus, in May 2017 the Iranian Minister of Defense Hossein

13 King Abdullah II of Jordan in Hardball with Chris Matthews // NBCNews. December 9, 2004. Available at: [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6679774/ns/msnbcball\\_with\\_chris\\_matthews/t/king-abdullah-ii-jordan/#.UcV3GZymV9s](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6679774/ns/msnbcball_with_chris_matthews/t/king-abdullah-ii-jordan/#.UcV3GZymV9s).

14 Belfer M., Al Shaikh K. Iran's Clandestine War on the Kingdom of Bahrain: Saraya al-Ashtar and the Military Wing of Hezbollah Bahrain // King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. 2019. Riyadh. Available at: <https://www.kfcris.com/pdf/09677d7a8899e33b05594dd8c0c433975d69199a5cf98.pdf>.

Dehghan stated that after 2003 Iraq 'became part of the Persian empire and will not return to the Arab fold, or be an Arab country again'. He added: 'We (Iran – A. Sh.) have once again become a superpower as we were in the past, and everyone must understand this. We are the masters of the region in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria and soon Bahrain.'<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, in the middle ages the Ottoman (Turkish) empire stood in the way of the westwards expansion of the Safavid empire. The Persians could never push past it – however much they tried to secure a foothold on the Mediterranean by conquering the territory where Syria is now located. It looks though as if today's imperial successors to the Persians are at least in part succeeding: by maintaining its influence over Assad's government, Iran is securing its influence over that part of Syria under the control of Damascus. By the same token it solves the problem of establishing ground communications with Lebanon and also gains access to the borders of Israel so as to continue the fight against the 'Zionist enemy'. The northern part of Syria is still under the control of Turkey, whose leadership – like that of Iran – also occasionally invokes historical references, in their case, to the 'grandeur of the Ottoman Empire.'

### Turkey: 'neo-ottomanism' Erdogan-style

In the last two decades Turkey has asserted itself as the third center of power in the Islamic space of the Middle East and North Africa – alongside Saudi Arabia and Iran – one with far-reaching regional ambitions. Militarily speaking (in terms of equipment, training and combat power) it clearly supersedes the two other centers of power.<sup>16</sup> The highly professional level of Turkey's armed forces is largely explained by the experience of almost 70 years of membership in the North Atlantic Alliance and

15 Oudat B. What Iran Hides Behind Shiism: Reviving the Persian Safavid Empire // The London Post. September 15, 2017. Available at: <http://thelondonpost.net/iran-hides-behind-shiism-reviving-persian-safavid-empire-says-bassel-oudat/>.

16 Comparison Results (Turkey vs Iran) // GFP. Available at: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.asp?form=form&country1=turkey&country2=iran&Submit=COMPARE>; Comparison Results (Turkey vs Saudi Arabia) // GFP. Available at: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.asp?form=form&country1=turkey&country2=saudi-arabia&Submit=COMPARE>.

by compliance with NATO's weapons' and other standards it accepted. The other feature of Turkey is that it is only in the last two decades that the its leadership has actively cultivated a Middle Eastern identity for the country and its population – before that, 'secular Turkey' had always preferred to see itself as part of European space while at the same time preserving the particularities of its culture and traditions.

Such fundamental shifts in the geopolitical positioning of Turkey are linked to the fact that the Party for Justice and Development headed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power in Ankara in 2002. The party's ideological platform is associated with the phenomenon of 'moderate Islamism' in the spirit of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the party initially attempted to link up to a narrative along the lines of developing democratic processes in the country (given the outlook for membership of the EU). This led to a reduction in the influence of the military in the political arena (the most recent episode in this respect was the failure of the attempted military coup in 2016). Later on – already in the context of Erdogan reinforcing the authoritarianism of his regime – the tendency to increased complications in Turkey's relations with the US and the EU became apparent. This turn of events in Turkey was the objective cause for a slackening of the tension that had existed in previous decades in its relations with Iran. Relations between the two have become pragmatic, with an emphasis on trade and economic links, the Sunni-Shiite division holding practically no sway. The 'shadows of the past', however, continue to hover over the situation today: when defining the priorities of its geopolitical strategy, Erdogan's entourage from time to time turns to history, to the times of the Ottoman Empire, and more particularly to the period of its resistance to the Persian empire of the Safavids.<sup>17</sup> This allusion to the historical rivalry between the successors of the two empires is made by specific circles in Ankara in order, amongst other things, to put a brake on the process of rapprochement between Turkey and Iran under the pretext of preventing any likelihood of Turkey falling into the 'trap of Iranian

expansionism'.

Many in both capitals are inclined to view the collision between Ankara and Teheran in Syria (Turkey against Bashar Assad's regime, Iran providing it with assistance across the board) as confirmation of 'historical legitimacy' ('the clash of two empires'). This confrontation, however, has not led to a collapse or even a serious complication in Turkish-Iranian relations – the governments of both regional powers collaborate, in particular in an attempt to reach compromise solutions with respect to Syria, solutions that will be reached by the participants in the Astana format, i.e. Russia, Turkey, Iran). On the battlefield (for example, in the north and north-east of the country) Turkish and Iranian forces strive to avoid any direct confrontation. All the more so, since at this stage in the Syrian conflict Ankara no longer sets itself the aim of overthrowing Assad's regime in Damascus, but is trying to secure its 'minimal interests' by establishing 'security zones' in the northern area of Syria bordering Turkish territory in a bid to prevent the appearance there of militarized formations linked to the Kurdish Workers' Party, designated not only by Turkey, but by the US and EU, as a 'terrorist organization'. Part of this plan to provide security is to retain Ankara's hold over the Syrian province of Idlib, among other reasons, to prevent a mass exodus of the local population, which would significantly increase the already heavy migratory pressure on Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

'Intragroup' relations between Turkey and the leading countries of the Sunni-Arab bloc (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) are evolving, it would seem, in a much more complex way. These states perceive Ankara's politics as a leadership claim to the Sunni segment of the Middle East, a claim reinforced by historical allusions, reminding the Arabs of the times when the Ottoman Empire dominated their region. However, the current Turkish leadership goes beyond these aspects of history as it has staked its bets on the ideology and practice of the Muslim Brotherhood groupings, against which the Sunni monarchies have long been resolutely fighting. *Whilst for these states Iran is the incarnation of the external (Shiite)*

<sup>17</sup> Elias F. Iran's High Strategic Value for Turkey // The Washington Institute. July 17, 2019. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/irans-high-strategic-value-for-turkey>.

<sup>18</sup> Turkey has camps on its territory in which for some years now there have been in the order of 4 million Syrian refugees.

*threat, which rallies the population's cohesiveness around its rulers, the Muslim Brotherhood, supported by Erdogan, is viewed by the monarchical regimes as an internal (Sunni) threat to their sustainability and survivability.*<sup>19</sup>

These dividing lines within the Sunni branch of Islam are all the more prominent in the conflicts in Syria and Libya. It is interesting that of the monarchies on the front line, it is the UAE that shows greater involvement than the generally recognized leader of the Sunni bloc of Arab states, Saudi Arabia. This is in part connected with the fact that Washington takes a kindlier view of the leadership of the Emirates than of officials from Saudi Arabia (in view of the murder of the journalist Khashoggi in spring 2018) or Turkey (because of the S-400 surface-to-air missile deal with Russia); added to which, there is the UAE's ability to reach agreement with both the US and Russia.<sup>20</sup> Ostensibly, the long-standing general position of Turkey and the Arab monarchies against the continued rule of Assad's regime should have been the basis for their mutual understanding up until today. In fact, though, the real situation is somewhat different: the leaders of the Arab monarchies have apparently accepted for now that Assad's regime (propped up by Russia and Iran) is sustainable for the near future and have therefore changed their approach to it – instead of the previous calls for Assad to resign, Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi now talk of their willingness to assist the regime in post-war reconstruction, albeit on the strict condition that 'all foreign troops', first and foremost the Iranian Quds and pro-Iranian Shiite militias, leave the country.<sup>21</sup> This policy of the monarchies presupposes the restoration of the sovereignty of Damascus over the entire territory of Syria. But Ankara's pursuit of a policy of establishing a 'security zone' in the north of Syria, maintaining the province of Idlib under the *de*

*facto* control of Turkey, and its control over vast swathes of territory in the North-East of Syria (where the oil deposits are located), are seen by the monarchies as Turkey entrenching its position and influence in the region as a whole, 'at the expense of Arab space'. And this, it should be recalled, is linked by the ruling families in the monarchies first and foremost with the potential threat of the Muslim Brotherhood strengthening its position and influence.

This was the context in which the monarchies negatively viewed the October 2019 agreements between Moscow and Ankara on stabilizing the situation in the Syrian province of Idlib, according to which the territory remained *de facto* under the control of Turkey. The media reported that the monarchies, more especially the UAE, had tried to derail the agreements, allegedly promising Assad the sum of \$ 3 billion to resume combat, so as at least to create problems for Turkey and distract it from the Libyan conflict (what is more, the UAE Crown Prince Muhammad ben Zaid had supposedly already paid \$ 250 million as a down-payment). But Russia wrecked the plan.<sup>22</sup> Irrespective of whether the reports were true, their very appearance is symptomatic against the background of information flows confirming the participation of UAE and Saudi Arabia in funding Field Marshall Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), which was attempting to overthrow the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj in Libya. The overt move on Turkey's part to back the Libyan government at the beginning of this year upset Haftar's plans.

Confrontation in the Sunni segment of the region is particularly conspicuous in the Libyan conflict in which the same regional actors as in Syria (along with the so-called Russian volunteers, but without the participation of Iran) are involved, with virtually the same motivation (strategic significance of Libya in the Mediterranean, oil reserves, transport routes etc.). Only Turkey is directly involved in the conflict in favor of one of the parties

19 Cook S., Ibish H. Turkey's Resurgence as a Regional Power Confronts a Fractured GCC // The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW). December 18, 2019. Available at: <https://agsiw.org/turkeys-resurgence-as-a-regional-power-confronts-a-fractured-gcc/>.

20 Dorsey J. UAE-Turkish Rivalry Wreaks Regional Havoc in Libya and Syria // Modern Diplomacy. May 24, 2020. Available at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/05/24/uae-turkish-rivalry-wreaks-regional-havoc-in-libya-and-syria/>.

21 Daher J. Syria, the Gulf, and Reconstruction – What Possible Future? // Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy. April 25, 2020. Available at: <https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/2020/04/25/syria-the-gulf-and-reconstruction-what-possible-future/>.

22 Dorsey J. UAE-Turkish Rivalry Wreaks Regional Havoc in Libya and Syria // Modern Diplomacy. May 24, 2020. Available at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/05/24/uae-turkish-rivalry-wreaks-regional-havoc-in-libya-and-syria/>.

(namely the GNA) – whereas the other actors signal their official neutrality. In reality, support from regional states and Russia<sup>23</sup> for the Libyan protagonists looks as follows: on the side of GNA – Turkey and Qatar; on Haftar's – Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Russia. All actors, whether directly or indirectly involved in the conflict, are motivated by geopolitical interests which (as opposed to Russia) are closely related to a religious subtext. Essentially, it boils down to Turkey and Qatar supporting the proponents of the Muslim Brotherhood,<sup>24</sup> who are present in the GNA institutions, and conversely, Haftar and his supporters rejecting this religious component.<sup>25</sup>

In the wake of local and sporadic fighting throughout 2017-18 between the GNA and the LNA, in April 2019 Haftar launched a strategic attack in a bid to seize the capital Tripoli, but was halted first by armed groups on the side of the GNA, and then by units of the Turkish army units deployed in January 2020 in the suburbs of the capital. International efforts aimed at assisting the parties in the Libyan conflict to reach a compromise (conference in Berlin, January 2020) were not, by the look of things, able to reach any result. In spring 2020 Haftar resumed combat operations in the suburbs of Tripoli and on 30 April proclaimed himself the sole ruler of Libya by 'popular mandate.'<sup>26</sup> The LNA commander could only have taken such a step thanks to continued military and financial aid from the above-mentioned regional partners. The Libyan conflict is clearly escalating.

23 UN Confirms Russian Mercenaries Are Fighting in Libya: Diplomats // AFP. May 7, 2020. Available at: <https://www.afp.com/en/news/15/un-confirms-russian-mercenaries-are-fighting-libya-diplomats-doc-1r18di4>. Moscow does not deny the presence of Russian 'volunteers' in Libya on the side of Haftar, but they are active there not in the interests of the state and are not funded from the Russian budget. See Putin's answer to the question about Russian mercenaries in Libya. For more details see Putin Answered the Question About Russian Mercenaries in Libya // RBC. January 11, 2020. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/01/2020/5e19ec739a7947935050700d>.

24 Turkey's Attempt to Tighten the Muslim Brotherhood's Grip on Libya // European Eye on Radicalization. January 10, 2020. Available at: <https://europeaneyeonradicalization.com/turkeys-attempt-to-tighten-the-muslim-brotherhoods-grip-on-libya/>.

25 Allahoum R. Libya's War: Who Is Supporting Whom // Al Jazeera. January 9, 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/libya-war-supporting-200104110325735.html>.

26 Didili Z. Haftar Declares Himself Ruler of Libya, LNA to Take Formal Control // New Europe. April 30, 2020. Available at: <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/haftar-declares-himself-ruler-of-libya-lna-to-take-formal-control/>.

## Time for flexible alliances

Local conflicts (especially civil wars) in the Middle East almost invariably spill over into regional conflicts and thereby become points where the relations between the main centers of power – Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia/the Arab monarchies of the Gulf – crystallize. A new phenomenon of the last decade has been the transformation of Israel from a target of the long-standing so-called 'strategies of resistance to the Zionist enemy' of practically all three Islamic centers of power (at varying degrees of enmity) to an independent center of power capable of engaging other important regional players as partners on a shared security agenda (resistance to Iranian expansion). The first years of the 21st century were in this respect crucial:

- the consequences of the mega-terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, when the Saudi Arabian royal family, which was subjected to a barrage of criticism from the US as a result of the revelation of the identities and nationality of the perpetrators (the majority of terrorists were citizens of the Kingdom), set about improving its image by modifying its policy, in particular by proposing, in 2002, on behalf of the Arab countries, a plan to conclude a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel, the so-called Arab Peace Initiative;

- information surfacing in 2002 about Iran commencing work on the design of nuclear weapons;

- the coming to power in Turkey in 2002 of Erdogan's party with its links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

As a result, there is a noticeable intensification of contacts at various levels between Israel and the leading Arab Gulf monarchies, as well with many other significant Arab countries. Representatives of the politico-military establishments of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain, countries minded to confront the IRI head-on, have had periodic meetings with Israel in an attempt to shore up cooperation.<sup>27</sup> For example, Israel's ac-

27 Heller J., Kalin S. Israeli Minister Reveals Covert Contacts with Saudi Arabia // Reuters. November 19, 2017. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-saudi/israeli-minister-reveals-covert-contacts-with-saudi-arabia-idUSKBN1DJ0S1>.



tions in Syria (its attacks on Iran's military facilities there) are tacitly supported and approved of by the elites of these Arab countries. It should be noted that the strengthening of the military alliance between Israel and the Arab monarchies was, and indeed remains, amongst the most important objectives of the Middle Eastern policy of the Trump administration. The ultimate achievement of that goal (including public avowal of the fact) remains problematic in view of the still unresolved Palestinian issue. However, the parties are clearly avoiding a situation arising whereby the problem might become a stumbling-block to mutual understanding with Israel in terms of taking a stand against Iran.

The involvement of the Sunni bloc of monarchies in the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen has brought to a head a crisis which has been brewing for some time now within the main organization which brings these countries together<sup>28</sup> – the Cooperation Council for the Arab Gulf States (GCC). In 2017 the leading countries of the bloc (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain), as well as Egypt, boycotted and isolated another influential member of the GCC – the Emirate of Qatar – on account of the loyal relations enjoyed by its leadership with the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as its commercial and economic cooperation with Iran. The monarchies also reproached the ruling al-Thani family of the Emirate for having special relations with Turkey and in particular with Erdogan and his party. Ideological discord between the Arab monarchies and Qatar had gathered head long ago, but had become exacerbated during the Arab Spring, when Doha, together with Ankara, had adopted a clear position in support of the protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, as a result of which the Muslim Brotherhood had been legalized in those countries (in Egypt, after the overthrow of President Morsi in 2013, they were once again outlawed). The Arab monarchies call the partnership between Qatar and Turkey the 'Sunni-Islamist bloc.'<sup>29</sup> As a result of the Arab boycott this alliance was even further strengthened, with Ankara providing Doha

with every possible assistance – from food supplies to reinforcing its military presence in Qatar (incidentally, the leadership of Iran also proposed Qatar assistance, but the latter refused). At present there is virtually no sign of the confrontation between the monarchies and Qatar abating. Apart from anything else, it is being rekindled by the conflict in Libya, in which Doha is adopting the self-same position as Ankara (supporting the GNA), whereas the monarchies and Egypt, it should not be forgotten, are financing and equipping the main adversary of the government – Haftar's LNA. The fact should nevertheless be stressed that Qatar is still officially a member of the GCC.

The conflict in Yemen has caused a rift in relations between what were supposedly the closest of GCC allies and brothers-in-arms – Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They were the principal initiators in building an Arab coalition to fight against the Houthis in Yemen. The escalation of military activity, however, has not yielded any tangible results in terms of liberating the Yemeni capital from Houthis or restoring the legitimate government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Furthermore, a rift has opened up within the Yemeni army: one side has come out in support of the separatist government of South Yemen with its administrative center in Aden. Whilst Riyadh criticizes the separatists and insists on prolonging military combat until the country is completely liberated, the UAE leadership appears to view them more favorably.<sup>30</sup> One way or another, the Emirates have started a partial withdrawal of their forces from Yemen – also pre-texting their decision by arguing that the Yemeni units have supposedly now acquired experience and arms, so no longer need enhanced support from neighboring Arab countries. In terms of their approach to the current situation in Syria, there are also marked differences in the assessments of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. That does not, at least as of now, preclude their being the closest of allies.

To conclude, it should be stressed that, given the extremely turbulent

<sup>28</sup> Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar are members of the GCC.

<sup>29</sup> Cook S., Ibish H. Turkey's Resurgence as a Regional Power Confronts a Fractured GCC // The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW). December 18, 2019. Available at: <https://agsiw.org/turkeys-resurgence-as-a-regional-power-confronts-a-fractured-gcc/>.

<sup>30</sup> Harb I. Why the United Arab Emirates Is Abandoning Saudi Arabia in Yemen // Foreign Policy. August 1, 2019. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/01/why-the-united-arab-emirates-is-abandoning-saudi-arabia-in-yemen/>.

political landscape of the Middle East, local conflicts there inevitably take on regional significance and ascend to the orbit where the adversarial relationship between three regional centers of power – the Shiite-Iranian (Iran, Libya, Syria, potentially Iraq and possibly Yemen); the Turkish-Islamist (Turkey, Qatar and potentially – Libya<sup>31</sup>); and the Sunni-Arab (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Egypt and potentially Libya and Yemen) – plays out. Each of these centers is in rivalry with the other two. Moreover, whilst the first two centers tend towards internal consolidation (largely because of the dominant influence of the basic components – Iran and Turkey, respectively), the Sunni-Arab bloc at present shows a lack of cohesion: on the one hand, it cannot afford to formalize its relations with Israel, and, on the other, it cannot cut off relations with Qatar. Thus, the leading countries of this bloc act on an *ad hoc* basis and demonstrate functional flexibility. A factor determining the potential strengthening of the bloc may become the emerging rapprochement between the Arab monarchies and Israel, militarily the most powerful of the states in the region. This road, however, is still fraught with many problems which could complicate matters further if Netanyahu's government embarks on annexing part of the territories on the West Bank.

31 Depending on the outcome of the civil war.

### 4.3. IRAN AND ISRAEL ON A COLLISION COURSE

*Ariel Levite*<sup>1</sup>

Iran and Israel used to be allies and regional partners until the fall of the Shah in 1979. The Islamic revolution upended these ties almost overnight. Thereafter, and for the past forty years the two have found themselves in an ever-worsening conflict, occasionally even in indirect military confrontations. This state of affairs is proving unstable, presently threatening to boil over into an outright direct military clash. This short article reviews the origins and evolution of this rivalry, examines its current contours, and discusses its prospects going forward.

A good point of departure is in the period before the Islamic revolution. Notwithstanding a large and vibrant Jewish community in Iran, and extremely close defense and economic ties (and even tight collaboration in facilitating Iranian oil exports), Iran has consistently refused to establish formal diplomatic ties with Israel. Throughout the entire duration of the Shah's reign, and notwithstanding extensive bilateral collaboration, the Iranian regime has sustained its reservations about formally recognizing Israel as an independent Jewish

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state and consistently refused to establish normal diplomatic relations with Israel. And while the Jewish community as a whole continued to flourish in Iran until the Islamic revolution, more traditional elements in the Iranian society manifested deeply rooted hostility toward Jews treating them as unholy.

This entrenched anti-Semitism has never entirely dissipated in Iran and still resonates especially powerfully among the Islamic clergy in Iran that has ascended to power after the 1979 revolution. But the extensive Israeli collaboration with the Shah's regime, coupled with a sense of being cheated upon by Israel and the US (in what has become known as the "Iran Contra affair") at a time in which Iraqi aggression had forced its back against the wall have clearly made a bad situation worse. They helped transform the hostility into a policy, in fact a mission to see independent Jewish state of Israel eradicated from the face of the earth. Calls to that effect and actions to help bring it by massive assistance to states and organizations that physically target Israel have since become a consistent pattern in official Iranian discourse and regional behavior. Having intermittently failed to ease this rivalry, Israel, for its part, has moved on to officially designate Iran as an enemy state, and gradually stepped up its own efforts to de-legitimize and isolate the Islamic republic internationally, encourage domestic dissent against the regime, undermine its nuclear ambitions, and, most recently, also energetically strive to check its regional ambitions.

If the Iranian revolution was the first watershed in Israeli Iranian relations. The second was US invasion of Iraq in the second Gulf War (2003), and the subsequent almost complete US troop withdrawal from area. These have greatly accentuated the Iranian Israeli rivalry in three critical ways. First, they have both tremendously weakened Iraq as a state and de facto terminated its historical role as a buffer state between the Gulf and the Levant, opening the way for Iran to project its power and influence into Iraq and through Iraq to the Levant. Second, the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime and the termination of Iraq's nuclear weapons ambition have eased Iranian security concerns about

its threatening immediate neighbor, changing in the process the rationale behind its nuclear and WMD pursuits, and freeing its hands to focus more aggressively on confronting Israel. And third, the same developments have also completely eased the earlier Israeli security pre-occupation with Iraq and reoriented its concern toward Iran, its budding nuclear weapons program and its force projection into the Levant.

More recently the battleground between Iran and Israel has greatly expanded further, both substantively and geographically, and grown dramatically in terms of intensity. It is no longer confined to Iran's nuclear ambitions which have been the uppermost Israeli concern for the past two decades but extends also to Iran's buildup of long-range force projection capabilities and its regional behavior. High on the former agenda is Iran's rapidly growing long-range missile capability, which is increasingly bringing Israel into range, with ever heavier payloads, menacing precision, and sophistication. And on the latter, Israel is now increasingly alarmed by Iranian efforts to build a permanent military presence in (and a demographic "bridge" to) the Levant, in particular Syria, which it views as the ideal base around which to construct a second front against Israel. Complementing the one it has painstaking helped Hezbollah erect in Lebanon with massive Iranian assistance over the past several decades. An additional source of friction is the Iranian support to and leveraging of various regional proxies in Iraq (extend its force projection capability toward Israel) as well as Gaza, and Yemen (to regularly harass Israel and attack Israeli targets) has also emerged as an issue of great Israeli concern. Furthermore, some of the clashes between Iran and Israel also have occasionally spilled over into arenas outside the Middle East, be it in the context of Israeli effort to undermine Iranian global clandestine procurement networks or Iranian retaliation against Israeli and Jewish targets in both Asia and Latin America.

The dramatic rise in intensity of the bilateral confrontation now manifests itself in almost daily clashes between Iranian and Israeli interests and assets in both the virtual and physical spaces. Israel is

officially and publicly committed to an assertive coercive strategy aimed at both preventing especially destabilizing Iranian strategic weapons from making their way to Syria, Lebanon, Gaza (and perhaps also western Iraq) and evicting Iranian military (IRGC) presence from Syria. This strategy now reportedly involves very frequent Israeli airborne and perhaps also covert attacks too against Iranian facilities and supplies in Syria, and less often also in Lebanon and Western Iraq. Yet thus far, notwithstanding mounting costs and casualties Iran has shown little readiness to diminish its foothold in these locations or curtail its efforts to reinforce and leverage its regional allies and proxies while also constantly seeking avenge Israeli interdiction strikes and dissuade further attacks. Not in the least through aggressive Iranian cyber operations directed at critical Israeli infrastructure (most recently on critical water facilities: pumping stations, sewage treatment facilities and the like). Both Iranian and Israeli actions are accompanied by vitriolic propaganda toward each other. And clearly also by concerted diplomatic initiatives by Israel to tighten further the so called “maximum pressure” on Iran and by the latter to relax and bypass this effort at coercive diplomacy employing economic strangulation.

Notwithstanding the growing intensity and explosive nature of the friction between Iran and Israel, their exchanges have not thus far spilled over into a direct, overt Israeli Iranian confrontation. Both sides preferring for now an intense diplomatic confrontation and shadow war over an overt military duel. Because neither side has thus far felt that such escalation would serve its best interests. Iran because its economy is in free fall (due to the combined effect of US sanctions and massive inefficiency, widespread corruption and depressed oil prices), popular discontent against its regime simmering, and of late also its struggle to cope with the overall toll and distraction imposed by COVID-19. While Israel is held back by the primarily by the anxiety about the potential spillover of any overt Israeli Iranian confrontation into a war that targets the Israeli heartland and populations centers (including by direct missile attacks from Iran as well as its proxies

elsewhere in the region) and a spillover of the exchange into a broad confrontation with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria, and perhaps the Gaza strip as well. Naturally, the economic price exacted by the pandemic is also beginning to weigh in on the Israeli policy makers, encouraging moderation of military and other expenditures much as they have been absorbed by more than a year of political paralysis produced by a series of inconclusive elections’ results.

While these indigenous factors undoubtedly play an important role in shaping the preferences of both parties, the role played by US, Russia, and to a lesser extent the EU, in moderating the behavior of both parties should not be underestimated. Much as their actions are hardly coordinated. As for the US, its policy under the Trump administration has been instrumental in both unleashing and restraining Israel. On the one hand giving Israel a free hand to quietly go after Iran regional interests as and on the other hand holding it back, providing it with a reason and an excuse not to attack Iran by both deterring Iran from scaling up its most worrisome nuclear activities and imposing on it severe economic costs. The US has also been instrumental in dissuading Israel from escalating the confrontation with Iran due to deep felt US reluctance to be drawn into a war in the Middle East, in fact a strong desire to diminish its overall military presence in the region.

While the US has been the dominant external power in the region for several decades, Russia’s return to the region more recently has given it considerable sway over regional developments, not in the least in this context. Especially in light of developments affecting the US regional role. Thus, Russia has been literally dominant in shaping the ground rules affecting Israeli-Iranian confrontation in and over Syria (and to a more modest degree also Lebanon) as well as over the nuclear issue. It has initially encouraged Iranian military deployment in Syria to help save the Assad regime and crush his opposition but has also weighed in to moderate the scope, duration, and locations of this deployment (the latter in deference to some Israeli concerns). It has tolerated frequent Israeli attacks on the Iranian presence in and supplies through



Syria but has also intervened to cap the scope of this offensive, drawing red lines around the types of action it would find unacceptable for Israel to undertake. Not least in importance, Russia has also been playing a significant role in influencing Iran's nuclear behavior. On the one hand legitimizing Iran's policy to shake loose of some of the nuclear constraints imposed on it by the JCPOA in retaliation for the US withdrawal from the accord and the re-imposition of economic sanctions. But, on the other hand, also exercising its considerable influence to dissuade Iran from taking more provocative operational nuclear steps as well as diminishing its collaboration with the IAEA. Russia's has been able to mediate these potentially clashing interests by skillfully seizing on crises as opportunities, leveraging its diplomatic clout in the Joint Commission set up under the JCPOA, the IAEA Board of Governors, and the UN Security Council, and masterfully simultaneously positioning of itself as an ally of Iran but also a solid partner of Israel.

Russia's hand in this domain has been helped by some commonality of interests with China, and a more limited convergence of interests with the EU, Japan, India, and the ROK. None of which wish to see Iran entirely breaking loose of its JCPOA commitments or reneging on IAEA Safeguards obligations. And all clearly dread the prospect of Iran and Israel sliding toward an all-out military confrontation that could engulf much the Middle East and hurt some of their interests in the region, not in the least disrupting vital oil supplies (and adding a sizable risk premium to their price). Although Russia clearly differs from the rest insofar that it stands to benefit from crisis that temporarily cause oil price hikes.

While all these moderating forces are quite compelling, they may not ultimately suffice to hold back Iranian Israeli confrontation for going overboard, transforming an intense "shadow war" into a direct and open confrontation. Be it as a result of a conscious choice by one party or due to an accident or miscalculation. What could trigger such development? The most potent (if for now not the most likely) trigger undoubtedly is Iran's nuclear behavior. Over the past year, largely in

response to the unilateral US withdrawal from the JCPOA and re-imposition of sanctions, Iran has already greatly exceeded the agreed upon JCPOA limitation on production and accumulation of low enriched uranium. It has also reneged on some other significant JCPOA provisions, which bring it meaningfully closer once again to one Significant Quantity necessary for a nuclear device. Its dual capable missile program has also been making significant headway in the interim, significantly cutting back on the breakout time necessary to reach to a nuclear arsenal. And in parallel, it has also been discovered by the IAEA to have consistently mislead the Agency about its declared past fuel cycle (covered by its unrelated Safeguards obligations) activities of military significance, subsequently also proving less than forthcoming with the IAEA inquiries and access requests designed to clarify these findings.

Taken together with Iran's past accomplishments in and resolve to develop nuclear weapons, its maintenance of the human and technical infrastructure to resume such work, its progress in manufacturing dual use missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, and the lack of a viable economic rationale for much of its nuclear activities, the confidence in Iran's peaceful nuclear intentions is in short supply. As is the window of opportunity to resolve diplomatically any outstanding issue before Israel and/or the US decides that they have no choice but to resort to a military action before Iran gets to within striking distance of the Bomb. Thus, further Iranian nuclear progress, be it as part of a sabre rattling strategy, or as an Iranian exercise in enhancing its nuclear hedge, risks unleashing a major crisis with only modest prospects and limited time to resolve peacefully. The most worrisome variant of this scenario is a situation in which the Iranian leadership not merely makes nuclear progress through muddling through but actually attempts to emulate the DPRK model: clandestinely move toward the Bomb, after which it expects to enjoy both immunity from attack, domestic prestige, and diplomatic leverage over its international partners. The growing plight of the Iranian economy and leadership coupled with the narrowing distance to such goal increases the odds that this scenario could materialize.

A more likely (for now) trigger for escalation is a scenario where either Israel or Iran triggers an outright confrontation unintentionally due to underappreciation of the other's red lines. There are many possible permutations to this scenario. One is a situation in which either party inadvertently triggers escalation because it undertakes action that produces effects that are far more consequential than it had intended to cause, propelling the other to aggressively retaliate. This dynamic is illustrated by the presumed May 9, 2020 disruptive cyber-attack (notably one for which Israel also indirectly took credit) on the Iranian Shahid Rajaee port terminal, allegedly in retaliation for the Iranian cyber-attack on the Israeli water facilities, and as a powerful signal about its red lines. Another involves developments that undermine one or both parties' capacity to contain escalation in response to real or perceived adversarial action against it (that it has thus far been able to resist), most likely because of domestic political pressures. Then there are scenarios in which external parties meddle in the situation be it by feeding either or both unduly alarming information or masquerading themselves to be either Iran or Israel and make the other believe that it has been or is being aggressively provoked by the other. Finally, perhaps the most likely scenario involves covert operations by or actions by proxies of one or the other that go awry, at least to the extent that the identity of those who commissioned it is compromised, providing the aggrieved party both the incentive and legitimacy to respond forcefully to the provocation. A similar situation might also arise when one or the other party takes credit, worst still boasts, about successful clandestine operations it has taken against the other. Putting that party on the spot may force him to retaliate even if he would have otherwise been restraint inclined.

The most probable way in which the latter scenario could play out in the short run is associated with the stepped-up Israeli campaign to evict the IRGC out of the basis it has been building in Syria, nominally (and initially) to assist president Assad fight the Syrian civil war but predominantly over time to develop a second front against Israel on

its border. And its related sustained effort to undermine Iran's capacity to hand over advanced arms and weapons technology to its regional allies (especially precise rockets and missiles (ballistic and cruise), kits and technology to indigenously manufacture and assemble them and air defense assets. But also tighten further the economic noose on Iran and cripple Iran's its most important regional proxy--Hezbollah. This campaign, which has been ongoing for some time, has apparently greatly increased in intensity and audacity lately due to a combination of necessity and opportunity.

The perceived necessity to act comes from the step-change Israel sees in the Iranian drive to dramatically expand and embed its military presence in Syria and build-up its strike capability against Israel directly from Iran or Syria, and through its pro-Iranian militias and proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and to a lesser extent also those in Iraq, Gaza, and Yemen. Whereas the opportunity is inherent in three factors. First in the understanding, de facto backing, this Israeli campaign receives from the Trump administration (which may create anxiety in Israel that the window of opportunity for Israel to operate more assertively could be narrowing as Trump's first term draws to an end). Second, an Israeli concern that the lapsing of the UN arms embargo on Iran could see Russia (and to a lesser extent China) racing ahead to provide Iran advanced weapon systems that could significantly bolster both its self-confidence and operational military capabilities. Third, an Israeli assessment that Iran's weakness and domestic preoccupation make it much more difficult for it (politically, economically, and operationally) to be drawn into a full-fledged confrontation with Israel, let alone one in which the US is likely to step in in support of Israel.

So, we are looking at a situation in which the stakes are high, the margins for error in managing the conflict small, and the opportunities for diplomatic intervention to de-escalate greatly diminished. And we face a serious prospect that further escalation in the current friction between Iran and Israel could quickly involve *direct* attacks on each other's territory, and eventually also engulf much of the Middle

East. There are several reasons why such scope now looks eminently possible. First, because provocations by Iran (and/or its proxies) above a certain scale, especially in the nuclear realm, are bound to trigger Israeli retaliation against targets inside Iran. Second, Iran's response under these circumstances would likely involve a concerted effort to draw into the fight its regional proxies, first and foremost Hezbollah, but may well also include direct use of its growing arsenal of long-range missiles against Israel. Such attacks on Israel would most likely not go unanswered, drawing Lebanon, Syria and perhaps also Gaza and Iraq into the fray. Third, because Iran might be tempted to draw in the US into the fight in order to lean on Israel to stop fighting. Toward that end it might deliver on its oft repeated threat to take action against movement of oil through the straits of Hormuz or elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, and strike US targets and its allies in the region. Naturally, any of these scenarios is bound to produce further conflagration before the fighting comes to an end.

Looking ahead, there are only two developments that could potentially defuse the current crisis. One is negotiations with the current Iranian regime, the other a regime change in Iran towards a more moderate quasi democratic one, or alternatively (possibly after the passing away of the current supreme leader) an overt military autocracy that emphasizes Persian over Shiite/religious nationalism, and decides to deemphasize its conflict with Israel. It is exceedingly difficult to assess the likelihood of the latter, let alone significantly influence it from the outside. Nor does regime change guarantee that Iran would moderate its stance toward Israel or diminish the pursuit of a nuclear hedge, let alone weapons. Which makes it prudent to seriously explore the first option. This, presumably, is also the intended objective of the US sanctions that have also been strongly supported by Israel, much as it has been pursued largely incoherently. One thing is clear about this option. It is no longer prudent to consider return to the JCPOA as a viable option for addressing the Iranian challenge. True, the JCPOA has bought the international community some valuable time to develop a more comprehensive

agreement with Iran. But much valuable time has been lost, and the process for developing a credible long-term arrangement with Iran is nowhere in sight. While in the interim the glaring limitations of the JCPOA are becoming increasingly transparent.

The JCPOA has not produced for Iran the hoped-for windfall, though Iran has mainly itself to blame for this feat. But it has also fallen woefully short in delivering the benefits to the others. Concretely, it has proven an abysmal failure in fundamentally transforming the contours of the Iranian nuclear (and related missile) program toward a more peaceful (and with missiles—conventional) direction and producing a positive spillover either into Iran's domestic conduct or into its foreign and regional orientation. Worse still, some important provisions of the JCPOA (such as the Broader Conclusion, the limitations on weaponization activity (so called "Section T"), and even the export and import regime) have proven difficult if not impossible to implement. And in any event, with the passage of time the value of the JCPOA provisions in constraining Iranian behavior is dramatically declining, given the so called "sunset provisions" on many of the Iranian obligations, some (such as those pertaining to conventional arms transfers to Iran) are already due to expire later this year.

Any future negotiated arrangement with Iran would have to go beyond the scope of the JCPOA. It would have to address the long term (namely be open ended or at the very least of prolonged duration) and address two additional domains. One is Iran's development and fielding of a formidable arsenal of dual capable long-range missiles, the other is its direct and indirect regional force projection, especially into the Levant and Yemen. Such comprehensive agreement would not be easy to accomplish. Furthermore, capping the Iranian activities and capabilities of utmost concern could not be realistically accomplished diplomatically on the basis of a pressure campaign alone, much as Iran is presently seriously hurting politically and socially and hemorrhaging economically. Iran would have to be rewarded for agreeing to cap and in some cases roll back its behavior for years to come perhaps by tolerating

consolidation of its predominant role in Iraq as well a credible offer for a serious and sustainable sanction relief. It would have to be offered face saving deal to abandon indigenous domestic enrichment of uranium (such as through a regional arrangement or more likely a Russian Iranian joint venture). And the missile limitations would be difficult to accomplish unless some others in the region (or at the very minimum the Gulf sub-region) adopted them as well.

Negotiations with Iranian are never easy, if only because their bargaining skills and style. Convincing Iran to credibly surrender some assets (and freedom of action) it covets are bound to make such negotiations even harder. Iran would also legitimately seek assurances that other parties to the deal (especially the US) would deliver on them for the duration (for example by restricting the President's discretion to walk out of a deal absent a clear Iranian violation) much as it would (initially) seek stronger guarantees for unconditional rewards without offering in return similar guarantees for its own conduct. Deep mistrust and oversized concern for pride will also inevitably play an important role for Iran in restarting and sustaining such negotiations, if only because of their profound domestic political implications. Several European states could be helpful in facilitating the early phases of the negotiations. Chinese, Indian, Japanese (and Turkish) support would be equally useful in other respects. But ultimately the key to success resides in Washington and Moscow, probably in tight collaboration between them. Not in the least in convincing their respective regional allies to go along with a new agreement and contribute their share to it. Obviously, all this presents a tall order, especially given the major clouds hanging over current US-Russian relations. But much as this factor presents a hindrance, it could also provide an opportunity for experimenting with a bilateral reset, especially after the upcoming US presidential elections (and regardless of their outcome). And both parties share a strong interest, once again, to prevent Israeli/US-Iranian military confrontation that would present them with unpalatable choices and painful consequences.

## **Declaration of the Conference of the International Luxembourg Forum on Preventing Nuclear Catastrophe**

### **A NEW IRANIAN CRISIS: STOPPING ESCALATION**

*July 14, 2020*

**T**he conference participants consider important and urgent to highlight the great danger of the current crisis.

The practical termination of the JCPOA, which was adopted in 2015 as a result of many years of exhausting efforts by the US, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France and Germany in negotiations with Iran, is bringing the situation of an acute crisis around Iran's nuclear program back to the point where Iran is capable of developing nuclear weapons in the shortest possible timeframe (not more than one year).

Iran is currently violating one after the other the limitations and prohibitions established under the JCPOA by openly obstructing legitimate IAEA operations as it pursues uranium enrichment, increases uranium stockpile and hindering IAEA inspections of suspicious facilities.

At the same time, Iran continues to test longer-range missiles and presently possesses a full range of missile systems capable of striking regional and European states.

The escalating confrontation between Iran, Israel and other countries of the region is a direct path to another armed conflict in the Middle East which may escalate to a larger-scale war with the high probability of involvement of the great powers.

The escalation of political tension and violence in the Middle East is one of the most dangerous regional crises, which is growing against



the backdrop of confrontation between major global powers and the tragic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is taking place against the background of the virtual collapse of arms control regimes and the accelerating development of new types of nuclear and conventional weapons and military technologies.

Urgent measures are needed to de-escalate the crisis in the Middle East.

1. The current phase of the Iranian nuclear crisis was provoked by the Trump administration's decision to unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018, contrary to the objections of all other parties to the agreement. Russia and China continue to fully meet their obligations under the JCPOA. The European Union states, while disagreeing with U.S. policy, are still unable to fully uphold their commitments vis-à-vis Iran under the JCPOA due to the U.S. pressure.

The conference participants call on the Trump administration to reconsider its destructive course on the Iranian nuclear issue and to stop obstructing other states from fulfilling all the conditions of the JCPOA.

2. European parties to the JCPOA should resist U.S. pressure on the Iranian issue and develop economic solutions and tools to meet their obligations under the JCPOA. Further development of Iran's nuclear programme and long-range missile systems most of all threatens the security of Europe.

3. The IRI leaders must stop their provocative activities and return to strict compliance with all provisions of the JCPOA, as all parties to the JCPOA, except one, are fulfilling their obligations. Otherwise, the anti-Iranian sanctions will expand in terms of their impact and the number of participants.

We are convinced that the implementation of the proposals presented above will make it possible to de-escalate the new Iranian nuclear crisis, which could lead to a major war in the Middle East.

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