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Iran: Welcome to the Nuclear Family

Ever since the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, humans have lived with the knowledge that we could bring about our own demise. This sentiment seems to increase whenever a new nation becomes a nuclear power and it can be seen to be happening right now as the world watches as Iran's nuclear program gathers speed. Will a nuclear armed Iran be a danger to the world? The Bush Administration, Scott Sagan and other scholars believe this to be so. However, Kenneth Waltz, other scholars, and history have shown that states and their leaders, driven by self interest and self preservation, will be very cautious with such powerful weapons, keeping them well safeguarded and possessing and using them only for deterrence purposes. Iran will continue to follow this pattern if it attains nuclear weapon capability. This paper will first describe Sagan and Waltz's nuclear weapon theories, then relate these, along with arguments from other scholars, specifically to Iran, and then conclude with a brief discussion about possible implications for the Middle East and the world if Iran does indeed become a nuclear armed state.

Sagan's Perspective

"Nuclear weapons do not produce perfect nuclear organizations; they only make their inevitable mistakes more deadly. Because of the inherent limits of organizational reliability, the spread of nuclear weapons is more to be feared than welcomed."¹
Scott Sagan, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons

¹ Sagan, Scott, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 2003, pg. 184

Scott Sagan is pessimistic about the safety and stability of a world with a continuing escalation of nuclear states. His pessimism is fueled by his view of international relations, which he believes are strongly affected by domestic military and other governmental organizations playing an intervening role between the interests of statesmen and the behavior of states. The information these organizations gather, the plans and routines they develop, and the prejudices they hold help shape the actions of states in very important ways.² The control of nuclear weapons is imbedded in these fallible and parochial domestic organizations and institutions and they have affected their use, and thankfully so far, their non-use.

Sagan argues the “long peace” between the U.S., U.S.S.R., and China during the Cold War was neither “automatic nor foolproof.”³ He describes how because of shortsightedness and narrow views within certain organizations in each country there were “incidents” where nuclear war was moments from taking place. Sagan also describes radical behavior by these powers which could have led to a nuclear war: Moscow’s aggressive behavior in West Berlin and Cuba, Mao ordering military ambushes of Soviet armed forces along their shared border, and the U.S. Joint Chief of Staffs recommending a missile assault on the Soviet’s Cuban missile sites with the knowledge that 10% of the Soviet’s missiles would be left in tack to retaliate.⁴ To Sagan, the greater number of nuclear weapon capable states, especially small countries with weak civil control mechanisms and governmental institutions, will lead to the increasing chance of

² Ibid, pg. 158

³ Sagan, Scott, “How to Keep the Bomb from Iran,” Foreign Affairs, New York, Sept. 2006, Vol. 85, Issue 5, pg. 47

⁴ Ibid, pg. 47

accidental explosions or launchings, quick trigger fingers, possible chaos ensuing if government's are overthrown, and loose security of weapons which terrorists may be able to exploit.

Waltz's Perspective

"In a conventional world, one is uncertain about winning or losing. In a nuclear world, one is uncertain about surviving or being annihilated.... When these are the pertinent questions, we stop thinking about running risks and start worrying about how to avoid them.... The gradual spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared."⁵ Kenneth Waltz, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons

Contrary to Sagan, Kenneth Waltz believes that the slow, inevitable growth of nuclear states is not a cause for alarm, but will actually lead to a more peaceful coexistence between nations. He argues that states that have nuclear weapons possess them for security reasons, as they are used to deter others from attacking their state. When states know that there is a chance that they may be annihilated if they go on the offensive, either with conventional or nuclear weapons, they will avoid the risk and act cautiously.⁶ Wars, he contends, will be less likely and if they do occur, both sides will want to make sure they do not escalate very far.

Waltz believes in a "self-help" international system, where state's foreign policies will reflect and be predicated on their own self interests. Acting with their best interests in mind, nuclear capable state governments that may be radical at home will not be radical abroad, hostile neighbors will not attack each others vital interests, and weak governments will still take incredible care of their nuclear weapons.⁷ Unlike Sagan,

⁵ Waltz, Kenneth, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 2003, pg. 45

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid, pg. 12

Waltz trusts these new nuclear power states because he believes they obtained these weapons out of self interest, their own security, and they will use them in their own self interest, for deterrence, and not in anyway that might lead to their annihilation.

Waltz lists three main requirements for an effective deterrent force: 1. At least a part of a state's nuclear forces must appear to be able to survive an attack and launch one of its own. 2. Survival of forces must not require early firing in response to what may be false alarms. 3. Command and control must be reliably maintained; in other words weapons must not be susceptible to accidental or unauthorized use.⁸ As of today, nuclear states have been shown to fulfill all of these requirements. Deterrence does not take much, the thought that a state may still have one nuclear weapon left to launch is deterrent enough. Nuclear weapons breed cautious, not aggressive, behavior.

Combating Sagan's concerns Waltz's claims that states acting in their own interests will protect their nuclear weapons at all costs. They will never hand them over to terrorists, for why would they risk their national security by giving something so valuable and perilous to a person or group they cannot fully control?⁹ As for chaos during regime change or revolutions, Waltz counters that during China's Cultural Revolution, control of their nuclear weapons changed hands numerous times and nothing happened. For whose interests would it be in to launch an attack during a time of political turmoil? It would be in everyone's interests to keep the weapons safeguarded, and this has been shown to happen.¹⁰ No matter who is the state's leader or what

⁸ Ibid, pg. 20

⁹ Ibid, pg. 130

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 11

governmental organization is in charge of the nuclear weapons, they will act cautiously and carefully, for a mistake may mean the end of their regime and their lives.

Iran: A Nuclear Concern

Sagan and Waltz have laid two opposing frameworks for how the emergence of new nuclear states can be seen, but how do they and other scholars specifically view Iran as a nuclear state and which position is more accurate? For Sagan, Noah Feldman, Barry Rubin, and Efraim Inbar, an Iran with nuclear weapons would not only be one more nuclear state that would increase the chances of a nuclear accident or conflict, but also one that is more inherently dangerous because of the Iranian government's past radical actions and its inadequate and corruptible governmental institutions.

These authors' views differ in regards to their main concerns about a nuclear Iran, I will concentrate on Sagan's organizational theory and Feldman's argument of Islam's changing view of violence and increasing radicalization, but they all agree that Iran has shown itself to be an untrustworthy and possibly irrational and unwieldy state. Inbar actually refers to Iran as a "crazy state" based on its far reaching foreign policy, high risk policies, and unconventional diplomatic style.¹¹ Inbar and Barry Rubin both worry about Iran's previous actions and their current capabilities of supporting Shiite insurgencies throughout the Middle East, their alliance with a radical Syria, their sponsorship of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Palestine Islamic Jihad, their desire to

¹¹ Inbar, Efraim, "The Need to Block a Nuclear Iran," Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2006, pg. 88

spread the Islamic revolution in the region, and their possession of mid to long range missiles.¹²

Sagan compares Iran to Pakistan; an Islamic nuclear state that he believes is a risk to the world. Sagan describes in his and Waltz's book The Spread of Nuclear Weapons and in his recent article "How to Keep the Bomb from Iran," Pakistan's weak nuclear control system and how the country's conflicts with India over the Kashmir region have come close to nuclear warfare. He depicts the Kargil conflict, in the Kashmir region, between the two nations as an example that nuclear powers can indeed fight wars and how during this war Pakistan took dangerous steps toward a nuclear war.

Sagan's main problem with Pakistan's nuclear system is that it is in the hands of the military, a parochial organization that relies on short sighted tactics and may not contemplate their possible consequences.¹³ During the Kargil conflict, the Pakistani military readied their nuclear weapons for use without even notifying Prime Minister Sharif!¹⁴ Sagan reports that Pakistan's government had given their notorious Inter-Service Intelligence(ISI), which had intimate ties with the Taliban and jihadist groups, nuclear command and control responsibilities.¹⁵ Sagan is also concerned with Pakistan's

¹² Ibid. pg. 89 & Rubin, Barry, "Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power," The Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2006

¹³ Sagan, Scott, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 2003, pg. 95

¹⁴Sagan, Scott, "How to Keep the Bomb from Iran," Foreign Affairs, New York, Sept. 2006, Vol. 85, Issue 5, pg. 49

¹⁵ Ibid, pg. 49

loose control over their own nuclear scientists, evidenced dramatically by A.Q. Khan and Bashiruddin Mahmood, a senior official who met with Osama bin Laden.¹⁶

Sagan feels that Iran would be a similarly irresponsible and dangerous nuclear power. Just like Inbar and Rubin, he is concerned about Iran's connections with terrorists, its revolutionary ambitions, and its rhetoric towards Israel. Like Islamabad, he believes Iran will be unlikely to maintain central control over their weapons and they will be controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps(IRGC), a group which recruits young "true believers" and subjects them to ideological indoctrinations and is also known to have ties with terrorist groups.¹⁷ Just like Pakistan, Iran and its IRGC will probably not utilize a reliable warning system, Permissive Action Links, which are electronic locks that require a special code for the weapon's activation, or a personnel reliability program, which is a set of psychological tests and organizational checks every year to recertify the personnel who guard the nuclear weapons.¹⁸ Sagan is also concerned about Iran's proximity to hostile neighbors Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey and a possible period of chaos following a change of government.

Noah Feldman, in his article "Islam, Terror, and the Second Nuclear Age," intriguingly portrays Iran as a dangerous nuclear power because of recent profound changes in the Islamic laws of Jihad. Feldman describes how in the last few years there has been an attempt within the Islamic world to justify the use of suicide bombing, specifically in result to the Palestinian's use of the practice against Israel. Since killing

¹⁶ Ibid, pg. 49

¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 50

¹⁸ , Scott, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 2003, pg. 103-105

yourself is against Islamic law, certain Islamist ideologues have come to treat the bomber as a martyr, which not only makes them innocent, but assures them passage into heaven.¹⁹ Well then, what about the Israelis these “martyrs” may kill, isn’t that against Islamic law as well? Feldman states that this Islamic law has been justified by the fact that all Israeli citizens are trained and available for combat, making them fair game.²⁰ Feldman fears that the Iranian Supreme leader or head of state may take this recently justified method of Islamic jihad and use nuclear weapons against the U.S. or Israel. He argues that this “suicide” theory undermines the theory of deterrence since, in this case the suicide martyr, Iran or its leaders would believe that they and all Muslim victims would be martyrs and therefore go to heaven.²¹ Feldman also prefaces this by describing how Ayatollah Khomeini and Iran’s current President Ahmadinejad have played on messianic overtones of the Shiite Islamic belief in a 12th Iman reappearing and restoring the Shiites to their rightful place and redeeming generations of suffering.²² Feldman by no means believes that the Iranian government may actually take such actions, but the fervent Islamic beliefs of its leadership, coupled with the loosening of Islamic laws of Jihad, give him pause about Iran’s future as a nuclear power.

Iran: Nuclear Caution

Kenneth Waltz, Barry Posen, John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Fred Halliday, and Ray Takeyh disagree with Sagan, Feldman, and the others and offer a more convincing

¹⁹ Feldman, Noah, “Islam, Terror, and the Second Nuclear Age,” New York Times Magazine, October 29, 2006, pg. 5,6

²⁰ Ibid, pg. 5

²¹ Ibid, pg. 3

²² Ibid, pg. 9

argument about the disposition and behavior of a nuclear Iran. Iran is a state and states conduct their foreign policy based on their own self interests. Reckless behavior with such elements as volatile as nuclear weapons would not benefit any state. These authors argue that Iran desires nuclear weapons for security reasons and to increase their political and diplomatic position in the region and world, not to start aggressive wars that may escalate to destructive levels.²³ Iran has had an aggressive foreign policy in the Caspian Sea and by supporting Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria, and the Iraqi insurgency, but these have been well thought out policy decisions and actions, and they have also showed restraint, not attacking any other nation's vital interests.

Waltz refutes Sagan's beliefs that a nuclear state of Iran is dangerous because it has a radical domestic policy and will therefore have a radical foreign policy, that its close proximity with hostile neighbors will lead to greater chances of nuclear warfare, that it will have a military controlled nuclear program that will be treacherous, that domestic chaos such as a regime change will lead to unstable nukes, and that it will make it overtly or tacitly easier for terrorists to obtain a nuclear weapon.²⁴ First off, states that have a radical foreign policy will not be around for long. Iran's actions must stay away from other state's vital interests otherwise they may face retaliation. According to Waltz, states coexist in a "competitive arena," where the pressures of competition force them to behave in manageable ways.²⁵ The U.S.S.R. and China were hostile neighbors with

²³ Halliday, Fred, "Iran vs. the United States-Again," Open Democracy, 2006
Takeyh, Ray, Pollack, Kenneth, "Taking on Tehran," Foreign Affairs, March 2005, pg. 1

²⁴ Waltz, Kenneth, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 2003, pg. 12-20

²⁵ Ibid, pg. 12

nuclear weapons, but they never challenged each other's vital interests, so will be the case with Iran and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. The Kargil conflict did not include either of Pakistan's or India's vital interests; because of the presence of nuclear weapons, neither country wanted to push the other too far. If Iran chose a policy that threatened Saudi Arabia's or Israel's vital interests, could Iran be sure that the U.S., a state with more and better nuclear weapons, wouldn't attack them? Nuclear weapons breed cautious behavior, not aggressive.²⁶

Sagan and many others are concerned about Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) having control over nuclear weapons. However, militaries have been in charge of nuclear weapons in China, U.S.S.R., and Pakistan, and there have been no accidental or purposeful launchings.²⁷ One may prefer civilian control, but it is not necessary to prevent a destructive war. Waltz argues that military organizations are inherently more cautious than civilians, citing that generals and admirals do not like the uncertainty of fighting under unfamiliar conditions. What could be more unfamiliar than a nuclear war?²⁸ What about the IRGC being hazardous or allowing terrorists such as Hezbollah acquire a nuclear weapon? Why would a state spend so much time and resources building nuclear weapons and then not tightly and securely safeguard them? Waltz argues that small states, such as Iran, that have small amounts of nuclear weapons will guard them with almost "paranoiac zeal."²⁹ These weapons take a significant amount of

²⁶ Posen, Barry, "We Can Live With a Nuclear Iran," New York Times, February 27, 2006, Editorial

²⁷ Waltz, Kenneth, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 2003, pg. 15

²⁸ Ibid, pg. 15

²⁹ Ibid, pg. 131

time to build, so there is time to organize and set up secure arrangements for their safekeeping. Regarding Iran providing terrorists with these weapons either tacitly or overtly, this would be foolish and perilous to its national security, and they will be deterred from doing so. Holding these nuclear weapons is like holding your state's life in your own hands, why would you give such a device over to an uncontrolled entity? If Hezbollah or any other terrorist group used a nuclear weapon against Israel, the U.S., or any other state, all eyes and nuclear weapons would be pointed at Iran.³⁰ This would not be a stable way to keep the Islamic Government in power and the country of Iran in one piece.

Before the Iraq war, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt wrote an article claiming that Iraq and its leader Saddam Hussein were containable and could be deterred by the U.S., even if they obtained nuclear weapons, from further aggressive actions in the region and against the U.S. interests. They describe the Bush administration's belief that Saddam would use such weapons to "blackmail the world" and this was proven by his past reckless, relentless, and aggressive behavior.³¹ Mearsheimer and Walt consider this to be based on "distorted history" and "faulty logic." They describe Saddam's "aggressive" moves of starting the Iran-Iraq war and the Gulf War as being just opportunistic responses to significant national security threats which he believed would not provoke, especially in the latter, a U.S. or international response.³² Regarding the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam was worried about the possible spread of the recent Islamic revolution in Iran.

³⁰ Mearsheimer, John, Walt, Stephen, "An Unnecessary War," Foreign Policy, Jan. 2003, 134, pg. 58

³¹ Ibid, pg. 53, 58

³² Ibid, pg. 54-56

He believed that the revolution was causing an upheaval within Iran's military, and saw this as an opportunity to acquire a portion of previously disputed Iranian territory. In the case of the Gulf War, Saddam first utilized diplomacy to secure loan money from Kuwait as well as to persuade the country to stop undercutting Iraqi oil prices to no avail. Then Saddam was tacitly given the green light to invade the tiny country by the U.S.! Deterrence did not stop Saddam because it was not even tried. In both cases Saddam weighed his options, was facing serious challenges, and believed that he would not provoke other powers.³³

Mearsheimer and Walt also showed how deterrence affected Saddam since he only launched scud missiles at Saudi Arabia, U.S. forces, and Israel. Saddam definitely had weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. had helped him attain them and he had used them against the Kurds and the Iranians, but he knew that if used them the U.S. and Israel would retaliate with even greater force.³⁴ The only time he did use weapons of mass destruction was against forces that did not have such weapons themselves or an ally with them either, the Kurds and Iranians. From this viewpoint, Saddam's behavior and actions seem rational and planned out, yet he would have to be considered more aggressive than Iran's government has been. If Saddam Hussein can be deterred from using weapons of mass destruction and starting major conflicts than so can the Iranians.

It is the job of every state and its head of states to keep its nation secure. Iranian President Ahmadinejad and its Supreme Leader Khameni will be cautious with such powerful weapons for they not only want to stay in power and keep the Islamic

³³ Ibid, pg. 5,6

³⁴ Ibid, pg. 6

Revolution alive, but they also want a country that exists in which to rule. They will follow their own interests and not such irrational or reckless behavior described by Feldman's "suicide bomber" theory. These leaders will have to consider the vital interests of other states before they act, for their security is at stake. Iran will have greater security with a nuclear weapon, but it will not diminish the security of surrounding states as long as nuclear states such as the U.S., Israel, Russia, Pakistan, India, and others' vital interests are in play.

A Nuclear Iran: Implications(In Brief)

If, or when Iran officially becomes a nuclear power they will be deterred from major conflicts, especially ones involving nuclear weapons, concerning other state's vital interests, but their power, prestige, and influence in the Middle East and the world will rise. Scholars who fear Iran's potential as a nuclear power believe Iran will use their new found power and influence aggressively in the region. They assume an emboldened Iran will disrupt the region and the U.S. interests by raising oil prices, starting proxy wars with the likes of Hezbollah and Hamas, creating a Shiite Crescent with Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah, and actively spread their Islamic revolution.³⁵

Iran will be more aggressive with the possession of such powerful weapons, but these weapons, which guarantee their security, will also cause them to act cautiously and not to threaten other powerful states vital interests. Scholars such as Richard Haas, Vali

³⁵ Feldman, Noah, "Islam, Terror, and the Second Nuclear Age," New York Times Magazine, October 29, 2006, pg. 12
Sagan, Scott, "How to Keep the Bomb from Iran," Foreign Affairs, New York, Sept. 2006, Vol. 85, Issue 5, pg. 50
Rubin, Barry, "Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power," The Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2006

Nasr, Barry Posen, Ray Takeyh, Jay Solomon, and Sanam Vakil have written about Iran's growing power, but they understand the nation does not live in a vacuum and is still surrounded by states with powerful interests and friends, mainly the United States. The last few years have been very beneficial to Iran. The U.S. has uprooted two of its hostile neighbors, the Taliban government in Afghanistan and Saddam in Iraq, and replaced them with friendly governments, particularly a Shiite controlled Iraq. These wars have also weakened the U.S. leverage in the region and left a vacuum of influence that Iran is filling in nicely.

An important consequence of the rise of a nuclear Iran would be the possible growth of a Shiite Crescent across the Middle East where Iran could spread its power and influence. Vali Nasr, Richard Haas, and the U.S. Iraqi Study Group discuss this growing possibility and the rift it would cause throughout the region, not only separating Shiite led nations from ones led by Sunnis, but also fragment internal populations within Middle Eastern countries.³⁶ The Iraq Study Group Report states that ambassadors from Iraq's neighboring countries were fearful of Sunni-Shiite clashes across the Islamic world and feared Iran backed Shiite insurrections in Sunni ruled states.³⁷ Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak was quoted last April stating; "Shiites are mostly always loyal to Iran and not the countries where they live."³⁸ Iran, by supporting the Iraqi and Hezbollah insurgencies against the Arab world's most visible belligerents the U.S. and Israel, is taking advantage

³⁶ Nasr, Vali, "When the Shiites Rise," Foreign Affairs, July 2006
Haas, Richard, "The New Middle East," Foreign Affairs, November 2006
The Iraq Study Group Report, 2006, pg. 33, 34

³⁷ The Iraq Study Group Report, 2006, pg. 34

³⁸ Nasr, Vali, "When the Shiites Rise," Foreign Affairs, July 2006, pg. 6

of its strong Islamic ideological stance to spread its influence throughout the region and this should only increase with their future possession of nuclear weapons.

However, Wall Street Journal writer and scholars Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh warn that the acquisition of nuclear weapons will just further isolate Iran from the world at large and create a backlash within the Middle East, particularly in the Sunni majority and led nations of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, pushing these states closer to the U.S. and the West. Pollack and Takeyh quote the former Iranian minister of defense, Ali Shamkhani, who warned that the “existence of nuclear weapons will turn us into a threat to others that could be exploited in a dangerous way to harm our relations with the countries of the region.”³⁹ The minister warns about the possibility of increased multilateral economic sanctions and the flight of capital as well. Solomon reports the increasing relations between the U.S. and Sunni led states such as Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, exemplified by recent visits by President Bush, Secretary of State Rice, and various other U.S. diplomats to the region, as a joint effort to offset Iran’s growing regional ambitions.⁴⁰ He reports that the U.S. has recently conducted war games in conjunction with Bahrain, Qatar, U.A.E., and about a dozen other countries. U.S. officials have also met with the six states that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), along with Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon to work on revamping the region’s security framework.⁴¹ A nuclear Iran will cause regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt to look even more for protection from the United States. How

³⁹ Pollack, Kenneth, Takeyh, Ray, “Taking on Tehran,” Foreign Affairs, March 2005, pg. 3

⁴⁰ Solomon, Jay, “Religious Divide: To Contain Iran, U.S. Seeks Help from Arab Allies,” Wall Street Journal, New York, Nov. 24, 2006

⁴¹ Ibid

the United States answers this call will be crucial to the balance of power within the Middle East for years to come. Iran's control of nuclear weapons will have a dramatic affect on the region and the world in a multitude of ways.

Conclusion

Citizens of the world and heads of states should be concerned when a new nation becomes a nuclear power, but they should trust that the laws of deterrence and self interest will create cautiousness and stability out of these threatening weapons. Scott Sagan and others have helped showcase that nuclear peace is by no means a certainty, but this pessimism should be curbed by the fact that it is in a state's best interests to maintain the security of not only their nuclear weapons, but of their state as a whole. Iran and its leaders will not threaten the vital interests of other states, for they cannot guarantee that retaliation from that state or its ally, possibly the much more powerful United States, will not cause great destruction within their own boundaries. Iran can be expected to act like the present nuclear power states, but its attainment of nuclear weapons will have a significant impact in the Middle East and the world. The rise of a Shiite Crescent and a Sunni state backlash with the U.S. support are just one of thousands of consequences and implications that could come along with a nuclear armed Iran. Iran may be a nuclear state that can be deterred and one that will have a sensible foreign policy, but it will be far from boring, that can be sure.