

Nuclear non-proliferation in the Gulf

Roundtable report

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This is a themed report arising out of a BASIC roundtable event in Istanbul on March 25th and 26th, a few weeks before the 2013 Preparatory Committee in Geneva. Involving participants from all over the region, including GCC states, Iran, Egypt, Jordan and Turkey, as well as the United States, UK and Germany, this meeting discussed the health of the non-proliferation regime as it affected the Gulf region and placed today's debates in a longer-term context. This report attempts to draw out some of the themes behind perspectives expressed without necessarily endorsing them, whilst also reporting proposals on possible ways forward. The report does not reflect the views of BASIC or the project sponsor.

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1. Challenging the NPT complacency: where is the LEVERAGE?

Frustration: For all its short-comings, the broader non-proliferation regime has over the years expanded and matured, serving the interests of most states by constraining open proliferation, helping to establish important regional arrangements and offering a forum to press for and structure global nuclear disarmament. But it has also failed to live up to expectations.

International agreements over the control of nuclear technology require a sense of progress towards both universal participation and the realization of their ultimate objectives if member states are to have confidence in it. Otherwise, suspicions deepen that they are simply tools used by some inside and outside of the regime to freeze and legitimize existing nuclear weapon possession against the interests of those states most tightly controlled. For example, the Nuclear Suppliers Group decision to grant special privileges to India has gravely undermined the legitimacy of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, particularly in the eyes of many of the non-nuclear weapon member states.

There is a threat of domestic criticism of governments that allow themselves to be controlled by international regimes while their competitors sit outside the same scopes and regulations. States that feel this – and representatives from the Persian Gulf regional states represented at this meeting expressed differing degrees of frustration along these lines – will seek leverage over those they perceive to be manipulating the regime. Some feel that they traded away a key area of influence when they agreed to an indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 in return for the commitment to a Conference and associated process on a Middle East nuclear and WMD-free zone – which haven't yet materialized. One participant felt that the deal had been made in bad faith, and that insufficient attention had been given in 1995 to the option of limited 25-year extension.

Arab states feel that their options for leverage over other powerful states—both within and beyond the region—are now few, leading them into obstructive approaches, and contemplating desperate or apparently irrational measures. Frustration is focused on the United States for its shielding of Israel from wider discussion and contemplation about its nuclear forces and role outside of the NPT.

With all of the built up frustration, one participant said, 'the Middle East region needs a shock or a miracle' in order to deliver on NPT obligations and establish the WMD-free zone.

- 1.1 **Few options for Arab leverage:** International media have focused on Iran's nuclear program (see later section), but within the region media are just as intensely focused on how to pressure Israel to take up the very same responsibilities demanded of Iran. The attention right now is on how to encourage Israel to attend the Helsinki conference. Currently the Arab League has been resisting proposals for informal consultation in Geneva in advance for fear these could draw out the process and be seen as an alternative. They also see an opportunity to highlight the lack of progress at the forthcoming Preparatory Committee (PrepCom), and could reintroduce the IAEA General Conference resolution on Israel in September. But other than making formal complaints, what can Arab states do short of threatening departure from the NPT? Egypt already refuses to go beyond the NPT by strengthening non-proliferation measures such as the Additional Protocol, joining the CTBT, signing the Chemical Weapons Convention, or ratifying the Treaty of Pelindaba, until Israel joins in talks... but this has so far had little impact on Israel. The Arab League meeting on March 6th considered boycotts of the NPT meetings; at this stage such an action is unlikely, but the frustration amongst Arab states is likely to carry on until the PrepCom. Beyond damaging the reputation of the NPT, boycotting actions may actually harm the possibility of peaceful civil nuclear transfers to the region. Traditional forms of diplomatic leverage are felt to be in short supply.

2. The Helsinki Conference

- 2.1 **Objectives:** It was said that too many people focus upon the difficulty of agreeing a treaty establishing a zone completely free of WMD and fully verified throughout the Middle East, and that the apparent impossibility of this was stifling progress. Establishing the principle of reciprocity through region-wide talks on nuclear weapons and WMD is actually more realistic than thinking the status quo is sustainable. The process involves a more coordinated gradual adoption by all states of the already-existing WMD conventions, and when seen as a process that has already gone a long way down the road it ceases to appear so impossible. Israel itself has supported the WMD-free zone idea in principle at the United Nations on numerous occasions, even though it objects to the manner in which the proposals have arisen without its formal involvement.
- 2.2 **Preparatory work:** In response to the Facilitator's suggestion of informal consultations, the Arab League suggested a preparatory meeting of all states willing to participate in the official conference to discuss modalities and declare a date for the Conference; however, Israel is not yet prepared to commit to attend a meeting it feels is stacked against it. Yet Israel's participation is deemed as fundamental by many, so we appear to be in a Catch-22 situation. There seemed strong agreement that the cards were held by the United States, and they should appoint a Special Envoy and announce a new engagement at the Preparatory Committee in April.
- 2.3 **Confidence building measures (CBMs):** There are plenty of technical proposals that could be discussed at the Conference that include transparency steps, exchange of data and environmental sampling, radiation monitoring, and banning attacks on nuclear facilities (see [BASIC's report of its October Istanbul roundtable](#)).

3. Alternatives to Helsinki

- 3.1 **Gulf WMD-free zone:** An option strongly advocated by one participant from the GCC was a sub-regional zone involving Iran, Iraq and the GCC states – going ahead for now without Israeli participation. This may follow the example of other NWFZs, such as the Treaty of Tlatelolco in Latin America, when main protagonists Argentina and Brazil joined much later. However, the argument that a sub-regional zone would put Israel under moral pressure to join later was strongly denied by several other participants, who pointed to the existing lack of leverage on Israel existing outside the NPT, and the tendency of the United States and allies to emphasize compliance over pressure on states outside treaties to join them. Argentina, Brazil and South Africa had to experience regime change before coming on board: was that what it would take for Israel to join the NPT?

Nevertheless, Iranian participants suggested that there may be some limited Iranian interest in joining such an initiative, indicated by Iran's agreement to a high level of inspection, but there would need to be a clear incentive for the state to engage. They and others in the room felt there seemed little point, as the reason for a WMD-free zone would be to extend coverage for the WMD conventions – and Iran was already a full member of all three.

The principal resistance to the sub-regional zone would be the perceived loss of leverage over Israel, a concern shared by Arab states outside the sub-region. But a loss of leverage that currently seems elusive. The Arab League has not been supportive of the idea of a sub-regional zone, but equally, it seems unlikely that the Arab League would get in the way of GCC states initiating it, as long as it would be a complimentary zone (rather than an alternative) to the broader region-wide proposal.

3.2 **Regional inspections and cooperation:** There was a suggestion from Iranian participants for Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) or cross-Gulf regional visits or inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities as a gesture of good will. However, it was clear that there was some Arab suspicion that these had in the past been selective invitations and would bestow upon the facilities some level of legitimacy. Another was the sharing of fuel-cycle facilities across the Gulf, though this may be a complicated fit with suppliers from outside the region.

3.3 **Regional Security Dialogue:** Considerations of nuclear weapons and WMD must inevitably sit within a broader regional security context. All states will prioritize their own national security considerations within a regional context above and beyond their responsibilities to the international order. We do not have to deal with the full spectrum of complex security issues all in one go. We live with complexity on a daily basis where we simplify and draw boundaries around the challenges we face in order to understand them; there is nothing unusual about isolating nuclear weapons and other WMD in order to find improvements to regional security.

All participants appeared to support a greater effort to strengthen regional security dialogue, and establish more official tracks across a broad range of issues, with the objective of agreeing confidence-building measures focused not just on nuclear and other WMD technologies, but also conventional capabilities and greater economic collaboration. One model that could be used was the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (later the OSCE), a process started in 1975 to focus on the common interests of antagonists.

It was suggested that the dispute over Iran's nuclear program is largely instrumental, residing in a larger political game that involved both sides building up their bargaining chips. The distrust between Iran and GCC states predates even the Islamic Revolution, and has much to do with history, culture and systemic asymmetries. These have been exacerbated by the United States' toppling of Saddam Hussein and Iran's growing influence in Iraq, the conflict within Syria, and the emboldening ambitions of the Shia throughout the sub-region. Arab states have relied even more on entangling western states into their security by physical presence and the flow of western arms, a source of concern for Iran. Arabs participants saw no early end to foreign military engagement in the region, and in fact, it was suggested that such foreign military presence could still expand. Arab participants suggested that there are too many asymmetries and too little trust, but agreed there was scope to build greater mutual confidence. They recognized that this entanglement draws with it indirect Israeli lobbying influence on Washington, and could sit uncomfortably with regional transition.

4. The evolution of nuclear deterrence in the Persian Gulf

4.1 **Value attached to nuclear weapons:** There were clear divisions over the role of nuclear weapons. Possessing nuclear weapons is often perceived as providing a state with an added dimension. Such is modelled at times when the statuses of the five permanent states on the UN Security Council are linked to their possession of nuclear weapons. However, this perception was disputed by some participants, who argued that the latter argument is outdated because Security Council membership is historically rooted in the Second World War. It was suggested further that the power bestowed on nuclear weapons is illusionary for a number of reasons with the allure of nuclear weapons coming more from their destructive power and forbidden nature, rather than their practical utility. It was argued that in actual fact, nuclear weapons are unusable because they are messy, clumsy, and inappropriate for any realistically conceivable task. This is particularly true in the Middle East where populations are interspersed, distances are short, and damage even less likely to be confined to target

areas. More study on the humanitarian and environmental impacts of a nuclear exchange in the region could dent the allure of nuclear weapons possession.

The demise of the Cold War has rather undermined the perception that nuclear weapons could be used, and thus has undermined the logic of deterrence. One participant claimed that the historical record is starting to suggest that fear of nuclear weapons use rarely played a significant role in crisis decision-making, even between the two Cold War adversaries, and that deterrence frequently failed (Cuba '63, Israel '67, Falklands '82, Gulf War '91).

Another participant countered by saying that even if nuclear deterrence has holes in its application, the perception is that they have great impact as a determinant of power; in that particular game, perception is critical. Israel has exercised some form of escalation dominance in the region as it is perceived that they can always take the conflict to the next level to overwhelm any opponent. It is an open question whether they would have had this capability without nuclear weapons. Yet, there are dangers in relying upon reputation and perception if competitors sense a bluff and call it.

- 4.2 **Israel:** There was a particular problem associated with Israel's policy of nuclear opacity. The country's nuclear opacity re-enforces the status quo, undermines efforts at regional transparency and confidence-building, and leads to uncertainty as to what Israel's red lines really are. Although nuclear weapons possessors world-wide seem attached to ambiguity as an approach to complicate their adversaries' military planning, this comes at a direct cost to diplomacy and international stability. The benefits to Israel of opacity, including escalation dominance and its ability to project power, may be more than outweighed by the costs, but these are not widely recognized in Israeli strategic circles.

- 4.3 **Importance of discussing nuclear deterrence:** Nuclear deterrence has yet to establish itself in the Persian Gulf region. One view is that by discussing nuclear deterrence in the Gulf we normalize it and give it legitimacy. Another is that if we do not consider the possibilities fully, regional actors may sleep-walk into a dangerous unplanned situation rife with under-developed assumptions and rivalries punctuated by misreading or signals.

Although it is clear that the Cold War held tremendous dangers, any multi-polar regional nuclear deterrence relationship likely to emerge in the Middle East would be complex, unstable and potentially chaotic. It would be influenced by deep rivalries, shifting alliances, external actors, anxieties over religious and political subversion, proxy warfare, terrorism and sabotage, major asymmetries undermining balances and creating uncertainty of outcomes, and the instability caused by short distances and flight times. The regional challenges are deepened by the depth of distrust in which talking itself is seen as a concession, and any experience of transparency is in its infancy.

Extended deterrence guarantees are often taken for granted in strategic debate, but there is some degree of uncertainty connected with the depth and credibility of U.S. extended deterrence for its allies. If it is problematic to extend deterrence over one's own occupied territories (Israel '67, Falklands '82), then surely it is so much more so when guaranteeing allies' security?

- 4.4 **Iran's nuclear program:** Iran may have a variety of motivations for developing its nuclear program, including a desire for independence and integrity. It was said that this is seen as an even more important protection of national freedom than the nationalization of oil in the early 1950s. However, this domestic popularity behind the program was described as a double-edged sword, with sanctions weakening U.S. soft power within Iran, polarizing and entrenching Iranian views, and limiting freedom to negotiate deals with the West.

One Iranian participant hinted that Iran's ambiguity did include security incentives – a possible implied deterrence through the development of capabilities. Iran experienced a 'strategic loneliness' in the

region, deepened by the war experience with Iraq in the 1980s. There was agreement among some participants that whatever the purpose of Iran's program, it was not directed against the Gulf states, though it could embolden Iran's claim to regional hegemony. Nevertheless, there was no desire from the GCC to become embroiled in the current negotiations.

There was some Iranian frustration expressed that the continual dispute with the IAEA stokes up fear and a military response from the Gulf states indicative of the increased purchasing of conventional arms and building of stronger relationships with foreign powers. Iranian participants argued that Iran is simply exercising its rights, and that unique demands continue to be made of them that no other state has been asked to endure. In return, non-Iranians expressed frustration with Iran's apparent lack of willingness to properly come clean on its incentives, its choice of technology development, and its less-than-full cooperation with the IAEA. If Iran has nothing to hide, why can it not properly reassure its neighbors?

4.5 **Iran's options:** There are many national security reasons why Iran should pause before actively pursuing a nuclear weapon capability, including: the further isolation of Iran from the international community, the discrediting of the NPT which backs up their legal claims, the likely strengthening of foreign militaries in the region, and the possibilities of sparking regional proliferation. While Iran bases much of its argument on the NPT, the Treaty is losing support from Iranians because they believe they experience few benefits from being a member state, and that it is being used to block Iran's access to technology. There is already talk of withdrawing from the NPT but not producing a bomb, though ironically this may not fit with the terms of Article X. This would be a highly dangerous strategy for Iran: undermining the NPT could give free rein to its adversaries to use tougher measures against it.

4.6 **Regional proliferation:** We were reminded that proliferation, far from being inevitable, is actually historically rare for a variety of reasons. Nuclear weapons programs are expensive, vulnerable, and can damage a state's reputation. There was some debate over whether the international community would prevent or penalize Saudi Arabia for developing nuclear weapons in response to an Iranian break-out. The experience of nuclear proliferation with India and Pakistan suggests that the world could simply come to live with the transition. On the other hand, another participant stated that the United States would try to limit the damage to Israel's nuclear monopoly.

It could be more effective for Gulf states to entangle stronger allies into deeper and less ambiguous extended deterrence and broader military relationships. Of course, from an Iranian perspective, this entanglement is just as threatening, and may be a good reason to pay more attention to reassuring their Gulf neighbors.

5. Regional transition

5.1 **Pressure to challenge the status quo:** It is still too early to judge the impact of regional social and political transitions upon WMD diplomacy, but it seems likely that attention will focus upon fairness as much as upon security, and upon Israel's role. Leaderships that fail to challenge perceived discrimination in the application of international rules at the expense of their own nations will be seen as weak. This may put greater pressure on Israel to engage in ways it currently eschews. At this critical time, the historic importance of the Helsinki Conference as an opportunity to tie states into a regional dialogue on the basis of universal engagement and mutual security appears to be underestimated in other parts of the international community.

5.2 **Weakening ties with the United States:** It is also likely to hamper Gulf states' abilities or willingness to entangle themselves with the United States for security reasons when that relationship

exacerbates popular demands for change, and when the United States also demands greater democracy. The Arab awakening and the U.S. withdrawal of support for President Mubarek has weakened regional assurance and encouraged the Saudis and GCC states to attempt more independence.

- 5.3 **Islamic Ummah:** The struggle in Egypt over the role of religion in politics, the place of non-Muslims and the country's role as nation-state or head of an Islamic Ummah, is one familiar to Iranians. Most of our group seemed to believe that Egypt would come to terms in the long run as a regional nation-state where Islamic and secular forces would co-exist.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 **Is the NPT the norm we seek to uphold and strengthen?** If so, then those states outside the regime deploying nuclear weapons with impunity are more of a threat to the norm than those inside that may be challenging the application of its rules, and the international community needs to act accordingly. If not, then how can states relying on their own or allies' nuclear deterrence demand more of the non-nuclear weapon states? Trust in international regimes is undermined when the powerful states let their short term interests trump the principles behind the regimes. True, the regimes are not strong enough to guarantee the objectives underlying them, and new instruments are needed beyond those in place to strengthen international confidence, but extra standards need to be applied transparently and fairly if they are to receive the support of all member states, and address effectively the security concerns of all their members.
- 6.2 **No leverage? Change the game:** This meeting considered the possible futures of nuclear deterrence in the Persian Gulf and concluded they held serious dangers for stability and the likely use of nuclear weapons. Yet states appear willing to risk the future of the NPT in preference to short term gain or through frustration with others' manipulation. One radical alternative could be for states to call the bluff on nuclear weapons themselves, to recognize that they hold no strategic value because they are unusable, and to move forward in building stronger regional security relationships without them. If any particular states are unwilling to move forward on this basis, perhaps the most appropriate response is to move without them, and to encourage those states to see their nuclear weapons capability for the liability it really is.
- 6.3 **Equity and security in the neighborhood:** There was an overwhelming sentiment from participants about the need for equal treatment under international norms in the interests of regional security. States want to feel secure in their region, and are wary of being discriminated against in relation to neighboring states. There is undoubtedly a trust deficit, but requiring trust for progress may be too ambitious—as one participant put it, states may simply need a working relationship and aim for relationships based upon mutual respect.



BASIC is a small, transatlantic non-profit organization, working to build confidence in a shared, sustainable security agenda. We seek to test traditional concepts of nuclear deterrence as a security safeguard, and to bring policy-shapers together to focus on the collective security interests of non-proliferation and disarmament.

BASIC works in both nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapon states, with a specific expert focus on the United Kingdom, United States, Europe and the Middle East. By bridging political and geographical divides, creating links between different perspectives in the nuclear weapons policy debate, and improving processes of negotiation and decision-making over nuclear weapons, we aim to address some of the strategic challenges posed by the changing global nuclear landscape.

BASIC is not a conventional advocacy organization. Nor is it a traditional think tank. What distinguishes BASIC from other organizations is our uniquely non-partisan, dialogue-based approach. We provide a discreet forum for constructive engagement between individuals from different geographical, political or cultural backgrounds on traditionally sensitive or complex issues. Our aim is to break through existing barriers, rather than reinforce entrenched thinking; to build understanding of different perspectives and identify commonalities; to use this to encourage fresh or alternative approaches; and to feed these findings back in to existing policy debate.

Our work aims to complement that of policy-makers, think-tanks, research organizations and advocacy groups.

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