



Extended Deterrence and the Middle East

Workshop Report

Hosted by the

USAF Institute for National Security Studies

and the

USAF Strategic Plans and Policies Division (A5XP)

SAIC Conference Center

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The Workshop

The USAF Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and the USAF Strategic Plans and Policy Division (HQ USAF/A5XP) held a two-day workshop titled "Extended Deterrence and the Middle East" on Wednesday, April 18 and Thursday, April 19 at the SAIC Conference Center in McLean, Virginia. The workshop examined the current status and projected future of various issues that shape the US extended deterrence posture toward the Middle East and provided a forum for discussion of extended deterrence issues, setting those issues into the broader strategic context, and promoting the sharing of ideas.

The workshop was conducted under "Chatham House Rules" with the goal of encouraging and facilitating open discussion based upon solid intellectual foundation. The format of the workshop included a mix of roundtable discussions and working group breakout sessions. While one day of the event was held at a classified level, this report covers only the unclassified sessions of the workshop. Speakers and panelists discussed the Middle East strategic landscape, extended deterrence and the Middle East, regional assurance perspectives, and military theater perspectives. Two working groups examined the implications of the preceding roundtable discussions for the Air Force.

This event was the concluding workshop in a three-part series on the topic of extended nuclear deterrence, with each event focused on a specific geographical region (the first workshop, held June 2011, focused on NATO/Europe; the second, held September 2011, focused on Northeast Asia). The workshop series brought together a range of experts – military and civilian, government and non-government – to encourage a cross-disciplinary dialogue and exchange of ideas on current and near-term challenges associated with extended deterrence.

Adversary Nuclear Policies, Capabilities, and Strategies

Iran's Nuclear Aspirations. In negotiating forums, Iran continues to assert a sovereign right to pursue the development of civilian nuclear energy, and maintains that its nuclear program is devoted to solely peaceful purposes. Experts agreed, however, that parallel to these diplomatic and public affairs efforts, Tehran has devoted considerable resources to constructing a dispersed and hardened nuclear weapons complex. Iran appears determined to pursue the development of an independent, indigenous nuclear-weapons capability. Experts stated that Tehran views this capability as vital to protecting the regime, balancing against nuclear-armed adversaries (the United States and Israel), and cementing its status as a hegemonic power within the region.

Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program. There was broad consensus amongst the expert presentations that the available evidence, as presented by the International Atomic Energy Agency and a number of state governments, points to Iran being very close (months rather than years) to an indigenous nuclear weapons capability. Experts debated, however, about whether Iran will seek to cross this threshold, and if so, whether it will do so openly or in a clandestine manner. Several experts argued that Iran is likely to stop "just short" of assembling a complete nuclear weapon. The Iranian government may

conclude that possessing all the necessary components for a nuclear device (or leading other states to believe they do) will grant them *de facto* recognition as a nuclear-weapons state, effectively deterring nuclear-armed opponents without requiring Tehran to openly violate or formally withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Experts also discussed the lack of clarity, whether in US commentary or analysis, regarding the threshold for Iran to become a “nuclear weapon state.” Experts and participants debated, but did not reach common agreement, on how to define this status: Will Iran acquire this status upon declaring a nuclear capability, conducting a nuclear test, or when it mates a nuclear warhead with a delivery system?

Iran’s Nascent Nuclear Strategy. Iran has yet to develop a nuclear strategy or openly discuss concepts of nuclear deterrence in large part because Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (the country’s “Supreme Leader”) has issued a *fatwa* stating Iran will not employ nuclear weapons. Although Iran is nevertheless developing nuclear weapon capabilities with the blessing of the Ayatollah Khamenei and other leading mullahs, the *fatwa* has the effect of preventing open discussion of nuclear weapons, to include nuclear strategy, within Iran. Iranian strategic thinkers both inside and outside of government, however, are developing ideas regarding the possible employment of nuclear weapons and their role within statecraft. These concepts range widely from acceptance of traditional Cold War theories of deterrence (borrowing from American thinkers such as Thomas Schelling) to ideas linking nuclear weapons with Shi’a ideologies. If a decision is made by Ayatollah Khamenei to allow open discourse on the subject of nuclear strategy, a vigorous debate between competing theories is likely, with the outcome difficult to predict. As such, the United States should not assume that Iranian views on nuclear strategy will ultimately resemble either Cold War theories or concepts developed by current nuclear weapon states.

Does Nuclear Deterrence Apply to a Nuclear-Armed Iran? Experts directly addressed the question of whether a nuclear-armed Iran can be deterred, and agreed that traditional concepts of nuclear deterrence do apply to Iran. Although Iran has engaged in regional “adventurism,” to include material support to insurgents and terrorist groups in a number of Middle Eastern states, it has also abandoned allies when faced with direct external pressure. Iran’s leadership is unwilling to risk provoking the United States into using its military forces to directly oust the regime. Experts were skeptical of the claim, stated by some policymakers in the region and the United States, that Iran is likely to transfer a completed nuclear weapon to a proxy. Iran has extensive supplies of biological and chemical weapons, and has never transferred these types of weapons of mass destruction to proxy actors.

US Extended Deterrence Policies, Capabilities, and Strategies

A Policy of Prevention. The United States has clearly stated that it will not accept a nuclear-armed Iran. Less clear is what the United States will do if Iran achieves this status despite US-led efforts to halt its nuclear weapons development. To date, US policies toward Iran’s nuclear program have prioritized prevention. The United States government interagency has extensively coordinated diplomatic, economic, and military efforts focused on preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The United States has also sought to diplomatically and economically isolate Iran. Some

experts, however, criticized US policymakers for failing to effectively communicate clear “red lines” – and consequences if these lines are crossed – to Tehran regarding Iran’s nuclear weapons development.

Possible Response Strategies. If the United States and its allies fail to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons capabilities, US leaders may need to consider possible military options to strike Iran’s nuclear weapons complex (and defend against Iranian reprisals). The United States has deployed Aegis and Patriot ballistic missile defense capabilities to the region and repostured aircraft, carriers, and troops; at present the US military forces arrayed against Iran are greater than those facing North Korea. Experts warned, however, that military action would likely merely delay, rather than halt, Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

Experts also identified several potential policy alternatives to deterrence by punishment. The United States could seek to bolster deterrence by denial. It could continue to strengthen missile defenses in the region (both its own and those of allies). The United States could also improve allied civil defenses and harden its military facilities in the region. Experts also discussed the importance of improving US nuclear forensic capabilities, and broadcasting this improvement so Iran fully understands that any use of an Iranian-manufactured weapon (whether by Iran or a proxy) will be traced back to Tehran. The US conventional military presence in the region was also noted for its importance in denying Iran from using a potential future nuclear weapon to intimidate and coerce other Middle Eastern states.

Experts also discussed the possible strategy of responding to a nuclear-armed Iran by issuing a more express series of extended deterrence guarantees to regional allies, both to counter Iran and to prevent allies from seeking to develop or acquire their own nuclear capabilities.

US Capabilities. At present, US nuclear capabilities are not central to deterring potential regional adversaries due to the United States' superior conventional forces. The United States does not base nuclear weapons in the Middle East (as it does in Europe for NATO), nor does it have a policy of “continuous presence” of nuclear-capable forces in the region (as it does in the Pacific). However, if Iran becomes nuclear-capable the role of nuclear weapons will likely be elevated as a means of extending deterrence in the region.

Iran’s heavy investment in rockets and ballistic missiles has led many analysts to conclude that Iran views land-based ballistic missiles as the primary delivery method for its future nuclear force. The United States has an active and growing missile defense presence in the region, and experts noted the increased interest from regional allies in purchasing and operating missile defense systems – an interest directly linked to anxiety about Iran’s military capabilities and nuclear ambitions. At the same time, the United States is reducing other types of conventional military forces across the region as it winds down operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and shifts its attention to the security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. Experts agreed that the United States will likely retain a significant military presence in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, but noted that US policymakers

will face difficult questions in determining the appropriate basing, mix, and strategies to ensure these forces can deter Iran and address a range of other threats across the region.

Assuring Allies in the Middle East

Many Individual Partnerships, No Grand Alliances. Experts repeatedly stressed the lack of a common allied threat perception and formal alliance mechanism for coordinating the policies, plans, and forces of friendly states. For the foreseeable future the United States will continue to address national security cooperation with Israel on a separate track from its defense cooperation with Arab allies. Many leaders of Sunni-majority countries are bandwagoning against Iran, viewing it as a common threat, but smaller states are wary of Saudi Arabia's regional ambitions and are reluctant or outright opposed to coordinating defense policies and strategies. All of these factors effectively force the United States to address a broad range of differing assurance needs across the region with a series of bilateral defense partnerships.

Allied Perspectives of the Iranian Threat. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has publicly stated that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose an "existential threat" to his country, would be likely to blackmail states across the Middle East, and would catalyze a "proliferation cascade" leading to several governments pursuing the development or acquisition of nuclear weapons. Experts were divided, however, over whether these views are shared by other key Israeli policymakers: do they agree with the Prime Minister, or do they view a nuclear-armed Iran as a serious, but manageable, threat? Experts also debated the extent of support amongst Israeli elites and the body politic for a unilateral Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. There was general agreement, however, that the next few months are critical, with Israeli leaders closely monitoring international diplomatic efforts to halt Iran's further development of nuclear weapons, instability within Syria, the upcoming US presidential elections, and other geopolitical developments that may factor into their decision-making processes regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Arab states in the region watching the development of the Iranian nuclear program fear that the progress of the program will encourage Tehran to pressure and undermine their own regimes, and are currently considering a broad range of options to counter a future nuclear-armed Iran. Several Middle Eastern states have recently declared an interest in developing civilian nuclear programs, which may signal a desire to seek a hedge against Iran's nuclear weapons program. Regimes attempting to balance a nuclear-armed Iran may even consider attempting to buy or "lease" foreign nuclear weapons. Experts agreed that regional states are unlikely to seriously pursue nuclear weapons capabilities for a host of political and technological reasons, but emphasized the importance of the United States directly addressing allied concerns about how they will be defended from an aggressive, nuclear-armed Iran.

Strategic or Nuclear Umbrellas? Experts underlined the enduring importance of the US military presence in the Middle East to assuring regional allies. The longstanding US model for regional assurance includes the presence of US military bases, US arms sales, bilateral security arrangements, and joint exercises with partner militaries.

To date, however, US assurance of Middle Eastern allies has remained restricted to activities and guarantees involving conventional military forces. One participant noted that Secretary of State Hilary Clinton used the term “strategic umbrella” rather than “nuclear umbrella” in comments intended to reassure regional allies concerned about the Iranian nuclear program. The United States does not officially extend nuclear assurances to any state within the region. Experts debated whether this may change if Iran were to become a nuclear weapons state. One noted that the American public is likely to support extending a nuclear umbrella over Israel but may question or even oppose its extension over other regional allies.

Experts discussed a range of reasons for the lack of express nuclear guarantees in the region, to include the lack of any declared nuclear states (one state is believed to possess weapons but remains “opaque” regarding its capabilities) and general domestic opposition to nuclear weapons in several countries. However, they also acknowledged that most Arab allies strongly prefer to negotiate and confirm security assurances, whether conventional or otherwise, behind closed doors. This reflects both a general preference for face-to-face diplomacy fostering personal relationships between key leaders and the fact that close security cooperation with the United States may be domestically unpopular. If Iran becomes a nuclear weapon state, Arab allies are not likely to seek a formal extension of the US nuclear umbrella over their states, but may expect US policymakers to quietly – but firmly – communicate to their leadership that US nuclear weapons will be employed to defend them in the event of an Iranian-initiated nuclear crisis.

Credible Assurance and Crisis Stability. Experts expressed the urgent need for the United States to set a regional “strategic stability” agenda. Despite its recent shift in focus to the Asia-Pacific, the United States remains the pivotal player in the Middle East. Its credibility as a security partner, however, may erode over time if regional states view Iran as escaping “punishment” for its continued intransigence over nuclear weapons development and interpret the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan as signaling a lack of interest in devoting American blood or treasure to future regional security challenges. One speaker referenced the “Healy Theorem” offered by UK Defence Minister Denis Healy during the Cold War (“it takes only five per cent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five per cent credibility to reassure the Europeans”)¹ stating that the United States faces a similar credibility challenge in the contemporary Middle East.

Experts also discussed various policies for encouraging regional stability in the event Iran successfully develops a nuclear weapon. One presenter listed several reasons why Iran and Israel may represent an unstable nuclear dyad: each side may view the other’s nuclear forces and command-and-control systems as vulnerable to a first strike; there is a very short time between launch and impact; and monitoring, detection, and warning systems and procedures may not be robust, particularly in Iran. This led to discussion and debate about how to improve regional nuclear crisis stability: Should the United States assist Israel in hardening its command-and-control systems?

¹ Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 243.

Should some type of “hotline” similar to that set up between Washington DC and Moscow during the Cold War be set up between Tel Aviv and Tehran? If so, who would build and maintain it? Experts noted the many challenges to attempting to establish any kind of communications link between two states that do not have diplomatic relations.

Conclusion

The United States’ extended deterrence policy and posture toward the Middle East is summarized by the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPR): “[In] the Middle East – where there are no multilateral alliance structures analogous to NATO – the United States has maintained extended deterrence through bilateral alliances and security relationships and through its forward military presence and security guarantees.”² The United States has longstanding strategic interests in the Middle East, allies and partners across the region, and a significant military presence in theater. Regional instability, the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, and the lack of common security architecture across the Middle East present the United States, the Department of Defense, and the Air Force with a number of near- and long-term challenges in regard to the nuclear deterrence of potential adversaries and the assurance of allies.

Key Issues and Questions for Air Force Senior Leaders

Questions regarding Iran:

- In regard to nuclear deterrence of Iran, what is our desired end state?
 - Is it to prevent Iranian nuclear use, proliferation, major conventional attack on neighbors, emboldened foreign meddling (including by proxies)?
 - How do we communicate these “red lines” to Iran – and to regional allies?
- What is the Air Force role in “deterrence by punishment” strategies for Iran, and how are these calibrated to specific milestones in Iran’s development of nuclear weapons?
- What is the Air Force role in “deterrence by denial” strategies for Iran?
- What role will remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs) play in future Middle East extended deterrence and assurance strategies?
- What will be the role of missile defenses in deterring a future nuclear-armed Iran? What will be the “division of labor” between US systems and those purchased by allies?
- Can we afford to provide theater basing and other requirements? Is this worth the cost to the United States?
- If Iran becomes a nuclear state, do we need to consider establishing a formal regional alliance to accomplish our goals? Or are bilateral agreements enough? What is the Air Force perspective, given its past and present interactions with regional allies?

² Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2010), xiii.

- If the United States goes to lower numbers of nuclear forces, how will this affect (or will this affect) the US ability to deter a nuclear-armed Iran?
- What steps should the United States take to reduce regional nuclear crisis instability if Iran successfully develops a nuclear weapon?

Questions regarding assurance of Middle Eastern allies:

- Do we need (or want) a formal mutual defense agreement in the region? Does NATO provide a model?
- If allies request some form of extended deterrence strategy that visibly demonstrates to them, and to regional adversaries, that the United States is prepared to defend its regional allies with nuclear forces, what role will Air Force platforms play in this strategy? Where will these platforms be based and what type of presence or demonstration of these platforms will be required?
- If the United States goes to lower numbers of nuclear forces, will this affect the credibility (in the eyes of friendly states) of the US ability to extend a nuclear umbrella over regional allies?
- What will be the Air Force role if Middle Eastern allies raise questions about the future “credibility” of the United States in stabilizing the region and defending them from aggression by a possible nuclear-armed Iran?



**INSS and AF/A5XP Extended Deterrence and the Middle East Workshop Agenda
SAIC Conference Center, McLean, VA (18-19 April, 2012)**

18 Apr 12

1200-1205 **Welcome** (*Mr Richard Benson, AF/A5XP*)

1205-1220 **Workshop Introduction and Overview** (*Dr Jeff Larsen, SAIC/INSS*)

1220-1320 **Middle East Strategic Landscape**

Speaker: Dr Colin Kahl, CNAS

What are the current and near-term issues revolving around United States defense commitments to the region in general, and specifically what extended deterrence assurances do we have to the Middle East region? How can the United States (and particularly the US military) help shape our assurances into the long term?

1330-1445 **Extended Deterrence and the Middle East** (*Moderator: Dr Brent Talbot, USAFA*)

Panelists: Mr Greg Giles, SAIC and Dr Avner Cohen, CNS

What are the central trends in and drivers of Iran's nuclear weapons program? What strategic policy, strategy, or posture might we anticipate should they go nuclear? What can and should the United States and our regional partners do to ensure a stable strategic relationship with Iran? What is Israel's strategy and what role can it play?

1500-1700 **Regional Assurance Perspectives** (*Moderator: Mr Paul Bernstein, NDU*)

Panelists: Mr Michael Eisenstadt, WINEP and Dr James Russell, NPS

What are regional perspectives on strategic threats, and positions on United States extended deterrence/assurance in the face of those threats? How can the United States assure allies/partners today? How can we enhance perceived deterrence and assurance in the long term?

19 Apr 12

0800-1000 **Military Theater Perspectives** (*Moderator: Dr Justin Anderson, SAIC*)

Panelists: Col Robert Campbell, AF/A5XM, Lt Col Duane Hiebsch, AFGSC and Ms Michelle Black, STRATCOM J-56

What are the central theater operational dynamics, issues, and partnership characteristics that affect our defense assurance/extended deterrence posture toward the Middle East today and into the near-term future? How do ongoing capabilities, programs, and plans address/fail to address these issues?

1015-1200 **Breakout Groups** (*Facilitators: Dr Larsen and Lt Col Craig Hansen, AF/A5XP*)

1300-1345 **Working Group Reports**

1345-1400 **Outbrief**

Synthesize major issues, findings, and key questions from workshop

Workshop Participants

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