

BALANCE OF POWER IN ARAB-PERSIAN RIVALRY AND THE PROSPECT OF NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IN MIDDLE-EAST

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***Abstract:** This article attempts to analyze the new cold war in Middle East (ME) between the Arabs and Persians, assuming Iran to be a critical actor and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as its main contender for regional hegemony. Lately, ME conflicts have shown a great tendency towards intense internationalization, eruption of ethnic conflict, use of non-state actor and an alarming usage of prohibited weapons. Meanwhile, Israel's covert nuclear capability and Iran's insistence to acquire nuclear energy gives legitimacy to Arab's attempts at going nuclear or least be tolerated to invest significantly in conventional weapon pile up as well as attaining nuclear energy for peaceful means. These variables may pose interesting challenges to the balance of power quotient in ME. An overindulgence by either Iran and KSA in balancing each other out may eventually result in nuclear proliferation in ME as a final measure to deter an array of threats for the two states. The article uses Regional Security Complex theory and Game theory to analyze the rationality of going nuclear for either of these two ideological hegemons in Contemporary Middle East.*

Keywords: balance of power, proliferation, Middle East, Arab-Persian rivalry

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Introduction

The worsening situation of Middle Eastern (ME) security may be contextualized better in the backdrop of growing Arab-Persian rivalry, apparent particularly across the Levant. The coming analysis attempts to gauge the long-term consequences of attempts at the balance of power between these two strategic rivals in the context of potential nuclear proliferation in the region. The ME security complex's status quo was defined previously by multi polarity prevailing between strong regional power like Iraq, Egypt and Syria. The Arab Israel rivalry defined the patterns of alliances and enmities prevailing in the region as well as identity and nationalism prevalent within the Arab states. This status quo however has long been overcome by American intervention resulting in Arab-Israel Peace process, rise of oil based economic interdependence of Europe and America with Middle East, US going to war with Iraq and use of R2P by NATO to directly intervene in states like Libya and Syria.

The new ME security complex after the catastrophic Arab Spring movements which shook the internal security paradigms and political stability of several ME states, resulted in Iran to intervene closely in ME politics. This however does not seem to sit well with the KSA ambition to lead the Arab dominated ME region. One of the key points of interest in how this enmity is playing out in contemporary Middle East is the use of sectarian ideology by both these contenders to mobilize, organize, and polarize ME populations on ethnic and sectarian solidarity basis. Political instability and protracted conflict zones in ME give ideal grounds to both Iran and KISA to use this strategic depth incentive to be leveraged deep within Arab states by recruiting for and financing proxy wars. Another interesting development is the alignment of these two states with opposite international poles (Russia and USA and allies) as well as a keen interest in acquiring nuclear energy, not to mention their already alarmingly hefty defense budgets.¹ This quite yet obvious belligerence between such influential ideological poles in a Muslim dominated hemisphere if gets out of hand could result in permanent indulgence of these two poles in zero sum game against each other which in extreme case may escalate from deterring each other indirectly to a more straight forward arms race resulting in nuclear proliferation in ME.

¹ Cerioli, Luíza Gimenez. "Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi–Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain's and Yemen's Arab Spring." *Contexto Internacional* 40, no. 2 (2018): 295-316.

Acquisition of great equalizer may thus not only deter either Iran and KSA against each other but also balance the power and security equation with looming threat of Israel's nuclear arsenal.

The perimeter to gauge the growing imbalance in the power equation for ME, which facilitate this growing belligerence between KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) and Iran in this article focuses on:

- Firstly, Sectarian Nationalism as an instrument of strategic depth for both states in contemporary Middle East.
- The growing asymmetry in conventional weapon capability between the Arabs and the Persians. Also, the insistence of both states to balance each other's influence through proxy wars in ME.²
- The critical factor of Israel's covert nuclear capability may also be taken into due account, along with the repeated attempts made by ME states to acquire nuclear capability in recent decades which could be seen as a significant factor in misbalancing the power equation in Middle East's security paradigm.
- Materiality and existential threat perception which these two poles identify with against each other; as this may push either or both states to go nuclear in coming decades to achieve Nash equilibrium in arms race and balance power with each other.

Arab and Persian as potential regional hegemon have been observed to extend influence across the contemporary Middle-east in the form of ideological, military and political instruments of strategic rivalry. After the ensuing of Arab spring in particular, the two states seem to maintain a polarity via intervention in conflict zones, a phenomena which further facilitated the re-emergence of powerful non-state actors in the region, eruption of ethnic violence in conflict zones,³ and an intense regional and international intervention inside battle fronts like Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.⁴ Following is an analysis on the gravity of potentials which may unfold as a new cold war thaws in Middle East between KSA and Iran: and whether

² <https://middle-east-online.com/en/saudi-arabia-increase-defence-spending-over-iran-threats-despite-budget-cuts> "Saudi Arabia to increase defence spending over Iran threats, despite budget cuts", Middle East Online. Jareer Ellass. Jan 2019.

³ Kristina Kausch, "Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (2015): 1-15.

⁴ Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (2012): 84-97.

their attempts to balance each other out via un-conventional warfare and buildup of military capability would increase the probability of attainment of the great equalizer by either, as a final deterrent.

Contextualizing Balance of Power, Security, and Identity as Instrument of Strategic depth across the New Middle East

The meaning of security needs to be broadened from its normative understanding in international relations to understand the nature of common threat perception inside the New Middle East. Constructivists assume the perceptions of threat to security to be as consequential to the resulting securitization of the referent to secure as the objective materiality of the threat. This impels: the world view of actors in international relations and even states, is largely dependent on their perceptions of threat rather than the actual or material reality of the threat from: a certain state, narrative or even a non-state actor. These perceptions seem quite decisive in the resulting course of actions in terms of military, political or strategic patterns of enmity and amity between states, groups, and communities in general. The nature of socialization, pattern in history and larger the polarity present amongst regional states are key determinants of these perceptions of enmity and amity between actors. In case of Middle Eastern security Complex the current alliances of UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar led by KSA are quite decisively aligned against Iran which has secured a significant state as well as street sentiment to its side across the Levant.⁵

Shift in Complex Regionalism and Threat Perceptions in Middle East

The US (United States) led regional order in ME in the 90s which had Israel's security and US economic stakes in the region at its center: resulted in a slow departure of pan Arabism from the focal point in Middle Eastern politics. This revealed the rise of powerful individual States in the ME recognized by Oil-based economies and authoritarian regimes.⁶ Not only the greater ME security that was previously defined by the defense of Arab lands from further Jewish annexation, was thus put backstage but was replaced by the projection of influence and

⁵ Barry Buzan, and Lene Hansen, *The evolution of international security studies*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁶ Yezid Sayigh, "The Gulf crisis: why the Arab regional order failed," *International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (1991): 487-507.

balance of power amongst regional players like Iraq, KSA, and Egypt.⁷ Another arena enmity observed in this decade between these two strategic rivals is in the oil market where KSA had aggressively tried to choke Iran by lowering Saudi oil prices and leading an oil money based coalition against Iran.⁸

Parallel to this reality, however, a critical development was observed across the ME in the form of active investment by Iran in Arab causes being fought in ME against the Israeli state. Iran must have seen this as an opportunity to extend its sphere of influence across ME by seeming more Arab for the Pan-Arab causes than the Arab states leading the ME region.⁹ This was around the same time when the use of non-state actors in international politics and use of unconventional warfare to project influence to gain strategic depth offshore was becoming a new norm. Iran was also intervening in Palestinian and Lebanese fronts Against Israel through Hezbollah and Hamas, while the Arab states actively endorsed Pax Americana throughout the 1990s. A credible incentive for Iran to project influence offshore in this case, was the presence of a considerable Shia community in Sunni led States particularly in Iraq, KSA and the Gulf States which it saw as an opportunity to challenge the rival regimes via enticing movements based on ideological means of sectarian nationalism.¹⁰

The political mobilization in populations against authoritarian Sunni Arab regimes in ME, on accounts of elite authoritarianism or subjugation to Western influences, seems to have capitalized upon greatly by Iran as an opportunity to export its Shia revolution offshore. The growing offshore Iranian influence across the Levant thus defied the KSA attempts to lead the Middle East region through integrating GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), Arab League and playing a politics of consensus. KSA has since long attempted to lead the Sunni community in the Middle East, consolidating its ideological dominance along with Egypt across the ME, and this can be construed as a key occurrence that accentuated the Arab Persian rift. The perception

⁷ Henner Fürtig, "Conflict and cooperation in the Persian Gulf: The interregional order and US policy," *The Middle East Journal* 61, no. 4 (2007): 627-640.

⁸ Saeed Mirtorabi, "Saudi Arabia's Aggressive Oil Policy against Iran (2011-2016)," *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019): 199-232.

⁹ Sanam Wakil, "Understanding Tehran's Long Game in the Levant," *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 15, no. 60 (2018): 105-120.

¹⁰ Shadi Hamid, "The rise of the Islamists: How Islamists will change politics, and vice versa," *Foreign Affairs* (2011): 40-47

of threat, in this case, was the long-term strategic challenges which the Arabs and particularly Sunni led states of Arabs were to face from their Shia ideological counterparts.¹¹

Identity Politics and the Relative Redirection of Arab Threat Perception from Israel to Iran

Ultimately, for the ME over the years: there has been a relative redirection of Arab threat perception from Israel towards Iran.¹² This can be understood better by contextualizing it to have happened in conjunction with the relative redirection of the reference point of conflict and cooperation in Middle Eastern politics from Arab Nationalism to Sectarian Nationalism. The term Sectarian Nationalism implies here, the potency which sectarian markers of ethnic identity based solidarities have shown in ME politics, in making people and groups organized, mobilized and politicized on basis of common sectarian beliefs across nation-states, also there is emerging use of radical sectarian ideologies based narrative by trans-national groups like IS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), Hezbollah and Al Qaeda clearly showing a preference to liberate and separate, and redefine or override territories on basis of sectarian nationalism. The nation-states boundaries across ME have shown a permeable quality in front of sectarian-ethnic causes and grouping, which further dis-integrates the already depreciated nationalism, on merely citizenship basis particularly under ME Authoritarian regimes. The slogans of Promised Land of the Levant for the Shiites (Shia Crescent) and the organization of the Sunni majority population against the Alawite regime in Syria are relevant examples here.¹³

The trends of grouping, rebellion and trans-national mobility of belligerent actors in the new ME, thus indicate an evolved marker of identity and common interest basis within the Arab population. The marker of identity and ethnicity for this matter may not be restricted to the primordial definition of ethnicity: which was mainly assumed on the basis of race, kinship, and language. On the contrary, the markers of an ethnic group and common identity, interest basis and threat perception from the 'other' may also depend upon circumstances and even opportunities. When backed by powerful elite and government agenda a redefinition of ethnic

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Joachim O Ronall, "The Arab-Israel Conflict in Perspective," *Jewish Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1967): 3-7.

¹³ Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller, "The Geopolitics of Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2018): 46-65.

markers may happen¹⁴ for example: an ethnic group may align itself against another or define its own identity or membership basis on accounts of a wider religious or ideological brotherhood. Like the congregation of foreign fighters in Syrian war from all across the world on basis of jihadist, and alignment of various ethnic groups as Sunni front against the Alawite (Shiite) Assad regime.

Seemingly thus Across the ME lately this evolved identity and interest placement within Arab or even non-Arab populations inside Middle has redefined the identification of Us vs Them on the basis of sectarian and ideological beliefs. This gives grouping a distinct quality to move past traditional ethnic markers and organize people on basis of common sect and ideological instead.¹⁵ Since Iran and KSA act as patrons of two distinct and separate sectarian blocks for Muslims all over the world; Shia and Sunni, the mobilization and politicization potential for sectarian causes inside middle east gives leverage and strategic depth to both these influencers across nation-state boundaries and inside distinct or even within same ethnic groups. Also, the politicization of Islam in Arab states as a means of governing people, due to the indigenous basis of Islam makes it natural for people to identify it as a means for mobilization on affiliation basis.¹⁶

The use of sectarian identity as an instrument of strategic depth across ME has proven to be a potent tool to balance influence and power against each other and has emerged as a key aspect of both KSA and Iran's strategic behavior in ME.¹⁷ The formation of Jewish State on Arab lands and its continuous territorial and military expansion though quite long remained the source of threat in the region¹⁸ thus seems to have been replaced by the growing enmity between

¹⁴ Paul R Brass, *Ethnicity and nationalism: Theory and comparison*, Sage Publications (CA), 1991.

¹⁵ Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, "The new Arab Cold War: rediscovering the Arab dimension of Middle East regional politics," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 3-24.

¹⁶ Tawfiq Al-Saif, "Political Islam in Saudi Arabia: recent trends and future prospects," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2014): 398-420.

¹⁷ Anna Sunik, "Regional Leadership in Authoritarian Contexts: Saudi Arabia's New Military Interventionism as Part of Its Leadership Bid in the Middle East," *Rising Powers Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2018): 65-85.

¹⁸ Yezid Sayigh, "The Gulf crisis: why the Arab regional order failed," *International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (1991): 487-507.

Arabs and Iran. The ideological intervention apart from its military and political interventions of Iran (1980s) with Arab states thus makes it a direct strategic rival for KSA in the new ME.¹⁹

Potency of Ethnic and Sectarian Instruments of Strategic Depth in the Middle East

It may be useful to analyze the instrumentalization of ethnic markers for strategic preferences by Iran and KSA in projecting influence across ME. This was achieved either through ethnic Diasporas or grievance struck minorities in authoritarian regimes, or by investing in proxy wars through armed non-state actors in ME conflicts. A striking example of this can be Syria and Bahrain the former of which is now being termed as the most complex conflict in the last hundred years.

The overall security of Middle Eastern can be seen to have been impaired significantly with an overall weakening, failure and even collapse of states after experiencing perpetual or protracted conflict leaving power vacuums as an aftermath. These are ideal conditions for trans-national groups to legitimize and mobilize themselves, and as mentioned above the patronage of powerful states makes these actors potent, armed and financed enough to remain strategically relevant to the regional power play.²⁰ The civil war and ethnic nature of post Arab spring unrest in the ME, helps recruitment and organization capability of trans-national and even local armed groups which become instrumentalized by regional and international hegemonies attempting to seek strategic depth in the conflict zones and in the ME region in general.²¹

For the Middle East, presence of natural resources inside war-torn areas and presence of ideological affinity links with ethnic groups spread across several states gives these groups decisive leverage to remain operational, and thus a potent instrument of intervention and asserting balance of power by states.²² Iran and KSA-US hegemon seem not to have shied in the least in arming rebels and groups of trans-national and ethnic origin all across the Middle East

¹⁹ Tawfiq al-Saif (2014) Political Islam in Saudi Arabia: recent trends and future prospects, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 7:3, 398-420.

²⁰ Khalid Rahman, "US Middle East Policies and their Consequences," *Policy Perspectives* (2010): 33-60.

²¹ Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining external support for insurgent groups," *International Organization* 65, no. 4 (2011): 709-744.

²² David Sobek, *The causes of war*, John Wiley & Sons, 2013. 176-9.

and the polarity between their proxies is as apparent as the polarity between the states allegedly supporting these groups.²³

Two significant phenomena thus observed in the contemporary conflicts of the new middle-east are firstly ethno-sectarian nature of violence resulting in mass displacement, alarming levels of civilian casualty and an overall violation of international humanitarian law. The later has to be the blatant use of force, bio-chemical weapons, and direct military intervention from several states that can readily be identified in terms of their alliance or enmity towards either Iran or KSA in the larger middle-eastern security complex.²⁴ These elements combined seem to define ME security complex to currently be defined by permanent chaos, protraction of conflict and a dangerous agreement of regional poles to maintain strength by collateral strategic blows in a zero sum game.²⁵ For now this remains manifested mostly in proxy wars and alliances with the other's enemy but may be seen in the future to lead to direct confrontation eventually.

Asymmetric warfare and growing Belligerence between Arabs and Persians

The relevance of NSAs, (Non-state Actors) as a means of asymmetric warfare against rival states and ideologies cannot be overlooked in the contemporary balance of power in the international system. The relevance of identity politics in ME especially due to deeply embedded ethno-cultural and sectarian fault present inside Arab states gives further room for intervention to regional powers to sway population against state or polarize from within. The battle for ideological influence across the Levant between KSA and Iran makes a ready example to understand the post Arab spring and post US withdrawal from Iraq, geopolitical shift in ME since 2011.

The weakening of Sunni led states in this case and helped Iran to regain regional influence by intervening through multiple fronts in ME conflict zones and nuclear agreement of

²³ Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh, "The Costs of Containing Iran-Washington's Misguided New Middle East Policy," *Foreign Aff.* 87 (2008): 85.

²⁴ Nazir Hussain, "The Syrian Crisis and Regional Order in the Middle East," *Pakistan Horizon* 66, no. 4 (2013): 39-51.

²⁵ Atif Ejaz, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and its Regional Effects*, Naval Postgraduate School Monterey United States, 2018.

2015 with Iran further strengthened Tehran's position in regional politics.²⁶ A constant challenge given by Tehran to Riyadh's attempt in strengthening its hegemony in the region via fellow authoritarian states has been in the form of supporting populist movements against these regimes or else support Shia led states which were contested by majority Sunni population for democratic reform. It's convenient to study the patron's behavior or its position in a regional security complex while ascertaining the military or political role of an NSA active in certain regions. But what is interesting in the Middle Eastern case is the presence of numerous trans-national, ethno-separatist, insurgent or terrorist groups due to a perpetual state of turmoil in the region, which helps the patron states to switch and bait between these groups depending upon incentive and situation.²⁷

For volatile regions like ME, the balance of power between states like Iran and KSA can be witnessed via alignment of NSA against each other, which due to significant anarchy inside conflict zone can indulge in relatively open enmity and belligerence unlike states that have to show political restraint and maintain diplomatic cover in international relations.²⁸ The collapse, failing and perpetual weakening of ME state system gives an environment of grievance, power vacuums and greed, which are ideal conditions for NSA to recruit and mobilize, the states backing them how ever are still operating on power and interest basis.²⁹ An interesting power play through proxy is thus visible in the new middle-east where for every proxy NSA by KSA is balanced by an equally potent rival NSA from Iran: in fronts of Syria,³⁰ Yemen³¹ and Bahrain.³²

²⁶ Kristina Kausch, "Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (2015): 1-15.

²⁷ Alireza Nader, "Iran and a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Middle East," *Arms Control Today* 41, no. 7 (2011): 20.

²⁸ Luíza Gimenez Cerioli, "Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi–Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain's and Yemen's Arab Spring," *Contexto Internacional* 40, no. 2 (2018): 295-316.

²⁹ Anthony Vinci, *Armed groups and the balance of power: The international relations of terrorists, warlords and insurgents*, Routledge, 2008. 51-54, 64.

³⁰ Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian civil war," *Survival* 56, no. 6 (2014): 59-86.

³¹ Peter Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian 'Cold War'," *Research Paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 11 (2015).

³² Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (2012): 84-97.

Israel's covert Nuclear Capability as a Catalyst to Volatility in the ME

Apart from the previously mentioned fault lines in the regional security paradigm of the ME: there is the obvious asymmetry in military capability between Arabs and Israel, magnified by the latter's nuclear capability. This makes nuclear proliferation in the region an inevitable as argued by neo-realists. Particularly in the wake of impairment in US power preponderance under which it maintained status quo and deterrence in the region, urging the Middle Eastern States to observe a nuclear restraint. It should be duly noted that ME states have shown an active interest in the acquisition of nuclear energy recently³³: also the ME conflicts have been notorious in use of chemical weapons on civilian populations, hinting at the level of escalation enmities can reach in instances of conflict across ME.³⁴

Carr like many realists assumes the continual risk of armed violence in the international system, to push states in obsessing over balancing military power with other actors and go to hostile measures instead of addressing matters aside from power.³⁵ The means to balance power may though be rational rather than absolute. Considering the recent KSA investment in defense capability, Israel's covert nuclear capabilities, the relative peace which the KSA has maintained with Israelites over the years and the strict policy of non-negotiation and intolerance the International nuclear Regime has shown towards Iran's nuclear projects: it may seem alarming how much valuable the acquisition of great equalizer could be for Iran to deter the risk of war and balance military power with two strategic rivals at the same time as well as redefine larger Arab status quo in the region.

An extremely important aspect of a state's decision to go nuclear is the perception of existential threat it may have from its enemies: Israel's covert nuclear ability is perhaps tolerated to a large extent on the basis of Jewish state's inability to strike durable peace with Gaza and west bank regions. The history of Jewish identity persecution in WWII for example was actively used by Israeli state to justify hoarding to land from Palestinians, and maintain a posture of relative insecurity while remaining nestled in Arab states in ME. Such existential threat

³³ World Nuclear Association, 2019. <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/others/emerging-nuclear-energy-countries.aspx>.

³⁴ Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear proliferation in the Middle East: Iran and Israel," *Contemporary Security Policy* 26, no. 1 (2005): 25-43.

³⁵ David Sobek, *The causes of war*, John Wiley & Sons, 2013.68

placement either actual or perceived was also depicted by India and Pakistan for each other; repeatedly waging several wars, a long-standing Kashmir issue dispute, conflicts on water and ethnic rights till finally both went nuclear to balance weapon capability and deterring the risk of war.

As for the KSA, although the ME states may lack the bureaucratic and political necessities to pursue nuclear ambitions yet as per Sagan another decisive factor in a State's initiative towards ensuring security needs may be shared belief or norms about an action's legitimacy in international relations. In which case both Israel covert nuclear capability, Iran's promiscuous nuclear ambition as well as its increasing asymmetric challenge to Arabs across ME, and the growing tolerance towards collateral damage from unconventional weapons for ME conflicts: seem to be a rightful cause and opportunity for Middle Eastern states to go nuclear. Near east region has shown startling interest in building military capacity in the last two decades.³⁶

The Case of Nuclear Proliferation in the ME and West Asia

Apart from the emerging pattern of rivalries and resulting friction in the region a critical aspect of the Middle Eastern security paradigm thus seems the prospect of nuclear proliferation. Israel's nuclear ambiguity coupled with Iran's infamous attempt to go nuclear puts Arab States in a tricky situation. US policy to turn a blind eye to the former's nuclear ability and containing the ambitions of the latter to go nuclear: seemed to be tolerated by Arab States which themselves entered into various defense pacts with the US while it overlooked the regional order in the Middle East. An overt nuclear ambition would have cost any Arab state a stringent economic, political as well as military retaliation. And covert operations were made difficult due to IAEAs (International Atomic Energy Agency) relentless efforts to keep the region from further proliferation. Meanwhile, Israel maintains a 'deterrence through uncertainty' from Arabs and Iran with its undeclared nuclear status while ironically also believed to be having one of the

³⁶ Nicholas L Miller and Tristan A. Volpe, "Abstinence or Tolerance: Managing Nuclear Ambitions in Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2018): 27-46.

largest nuclear stockpiles in the world. The Arab insecurity arising from close proximity of nukes still becomes two-fold urging them to propose nuclear umbrella from US in 2015.³⁷

Although neo-realists would argue the security dilemma due to nuclear parity between Middle Eastern States would be an excuse enough for them to go nuclear, yet the emerging factors as discussed earlier may compliment the prospect of nuclear proliferation in the region for the coming decade. These happen to contribute to the complex security environment prevalent in the region and could thus impact ME states national security agenda. At one side Iran's notorious alliance with Russia and its sway throughout the Levant, in the form of proxy Islamist militants and KSA and US direct attempts to contain it depict the seriousness with which prospect of parity between Iran and KSA and strategic rivals is taken by Arabs. The second development is in the form of growing investment in the military pile up from Arab states tilting the preponderance of power to their side.³⁸

An alarming investment by Gulf States in defense budget particularly KSA and Qatar coupled by the fact that the ME armed conflicts have been notorious in terms of use of aggression and military power with repeated use of prohibited chemical and tactical weapons along with an alarming human casualty rate, show the volatile situation of power equation in the region. This environment of insecurity and belligerence raises key concern regarding the growing Arab interest (KSA, Egypt, Jordan and UAE in particular) in acquiring nuclear energy which might not translate into going nuclear as it is, yet still demands an active overseeing of IAEA and nuclear regime in order to prevent any covert operations. What makes the future most uncertain is the impairment in US hegemonic stability and the resulting influence over the region, which has been a decisive factor in observance of nuclear restraint from the Arab States.³⁹

Iran's future nuclear prospect may not be seen independent firstly of its overall attempts to extend its sphere of influence offshore and secondly given the prevailing military turbulence in its neighborhood: in this context the nukes may be an obvious necessity to be used as "great

³⁷ Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear proliferation in the Middle East: Iran and Israel," *Contemporary Security Policy* 26, no. 1 (2005): 25-43.

³⁸ James A Russell, "A tipping point realized? Nuclear proliferation in the Persian Gulf and Middle East," *Contemporary Security Policy* 29, no. 3 (2008): 521-537.

³⁹ Lauren Sukin, "Beyond Iran: Containing Nuclear Development in the Middle East," *The Nonproliferation Review* 22, no. 3-4 (2015): 379-400.

equalizer” against all aspiring world powers of the East. Apparently the presence of nukes was deterrent enough to keep US from launching preemptive strike against North Korea while less tolerance was shown to Iraq’s chemical weapons. Iran going nuclear may out maneuver Arabs, Israel, USA while also deterring it against all competing regional hegemon and earn it the desired prestige in Muslim world in particular.⁴⁰

Even a latent nuclear Iran is a threat enough to hold Arab States a hostage to Iranian political conduct in the region and earn legitimacy to its actions in the Levant.⁴¹

The infamous Shia crescent harboring Iran’s political stakes in the region through militants is a potential threat not only to Tel Aviv but also to NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and US bases in Gulf States: all of whom keep raising the concern on the possibility of the nukes being landing in terrorist hands. Tel Aviv has always shown zero tolerance to nuclear proliferation in Middle East targeting Iraqi and Syrian alleged nuclear facilities. The Persian ambition to gain prestige and reflect its influence overseas could be strengthened farther than Syrian alliance over reaching Hezbollah and Hamas: through it going nuclear, giving a checkmate to Saudi influence on Arab population as well as offset Israel’s military supremacy in the region.

Previously regional regimes balanced power against internal threats by investing heavily in conventional arms and external threats were dealt with by entering into economic and military ties with the west. Instead of balancing power against the hegemon to form regional alliances against offshore American influence in the region, US dictated regional order was actively endorsed by Arab regimes. Developments such as the global tilt towards nuclear rather than fossil fuel energy, the prospect of impairment in US hegemony and revision of regional order in ME after Arab spring are all accountable factors while analyzing the nuclear proliferation possibility in ME. The depreciation in security guarantees from west against regional and domestic rivals and prospect of the proliferation of nukes in West Asia along with the domestic

⁴⁰ Alireza Nader, "Iran and a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Middle East," *Arms Control Today* 41, no. 7 (2011): 20.

⁴¹ Jane Kinninmont, *Iran and the GCC: Unnecessary Insecurity*, Chatham House for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015.

and institutional processes within ME States may all play an important role in nuclear prospect of the region.⁴²

Conclusion

The future of nuclear prospects in ME as argued above, depends on the current dynamics of threat and opportunity in Middle East. Two state solutions for Arab-Israel long term peace, nuclear umbrella negotiated for Gulf States, declaration of ME as nuclear-free zone as advocated by Iran, and hedging against the domino effect which might result in case of Iranian withdrawal from P5+1 deal, are all critical elements to ensure ME nuclear stability. The opportunity associated with the departure of US from its status as dictator of Middle Eastern order shall invite aspiring powers like Russia, China and Iran to invite new pattern of alliances in the region, and correspondingly may be a decisive factor for prospect of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East in the coming decades. The threat of ‘proliferation begetting proliferation’ is fundamental to Middle Eastern security paradigm, and even an ambiguous or aspiring status of a State to go nuclear may encourage a regional cold war and covert nuclear programs. A region marked by its notorious conflicts may see an even higher escalation in intensity and frequency of conflicts provided the ‘stability-instability paradox’: where any possible future nuclear Middle Eastern States might show more aggression in conventional warfare while being protected by their respective nuclear shields.⁴³

The nuclear regime headed by the US is often blamed for its double standards when it comes to Israel and its weapons of mass destruction. Israel, in turn, uses the presence of considerable conventional military capacity of Arab states as an existential threat to Israel and the presence of ‘Great Equalizer’ as its key deterrent. This would require getting rid of biological and chemical weapons by the Arab States in order to move towards MENWFZ (Mideast Nuclear Weapon Free Zone). Besides, any such proposal would require political will and commitment at regional level, based on consensus for such a cause. It may as well be argued that this consensus in absence of two-state solution seems impossible: as there is no way Israel will be integrated into ME by Arabs. The region seems to have ended itself into a zero-sum game

⁴² M. V.Ramana and Zia Mian, "Scrambling to sell a nuclear Middle East," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72, no. 1 (2016): 39-43.

⁴³ Christopher Hobbs, and Matthew Moran, "Looking Beyond a Nuclear-Armed Iran: Is Regional Proliferation Inevitable?" *The International Spectator* 47, no. 4 (2012): 127-148.

here and is unable to move towards a tangible solution for the lingering political unrest. Although Iran's nuclear deal with P5+1 was a significant step yet it is argued by some as to only delay but not rid Iran of its nuclear project. Middle Eastern political scenario remains volatile and prone to international intervention as the regional players failed to integrate into a viable security, economic or political unanimity.

The ME regional security complex is currently imbalanced in its power differentials due to protraction of conflicts and poor political stability within Arab states. This gives rise to an array of destabilizing factors which continuously tip the power scales between the two aspiring regional hegemonies of KSA and Iran. This may as well be better understood by seeing these states trying relentlessly to establish status quo in the region while being backed by strong international and regional allies as well as trans-national ethnic solidarities giving legitimacy and strategic depth to both aspiring powers to balance against each other's influence on ethno-sectarian and ideological basis. If this belligerence and polarity continues it may result in accentuating of threat perception between them to become more existential and material. Any desperate measure to take leverage upon the other may therefore result in either of these states to refuse a well negotiated balance in political and military power in ME; and Nuclear Proliferation may be the ultimate result to mark dominance or at-least hedge and deter themselves in the challenging security environment prevalent in the region.