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The Middle East: Bracing for a New Wave of Nuclear Proliferation?

by Norman Cigar, MCU Minerva Research Initiative Chair

Against the background of the recent turmoil and changing environment in the Middle East, the issue of nuclear weapons has received renewed attention which may signal the possibility of a new phase of proliferation. Although this may be a long-term process, decisions and initial steps in that direction could occur soon, and even the current public discussions may lead to increased tensions in the region.

The Gulf Countries

A growing consensus that neither the United States nor Israel is likely to derail Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, and increasing questions about the United States' ability to support regional friends in difficulty have engendered anxiety in the Gulf. In March 2011, at a conference held by a high-profile research center in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Prince Turki al-Faysal, former Director General of Saudi Arabia's Intelligence Agency, openly asked: "What would be wrong with acquiring a nuclear force to confront the Iranian force ... and the Israeli nuclear force?"[1] The UAE's Foreign Minister Prince Abd Allah also agreed that "the Gulf countries must acquire a nuclear force." [2] Prince Turki's suggestion, presented in the context of closer Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) military coordination, suggested a collective nuclear effort to allay local concerns and as a show of regional solidarity, although realistically Saudi Arabia, as the largest GCC country, would probably take the lead on nuclear weapons.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION... (CONTINUED ON PG 2)

Into the Arab Summer

by Amin Tarzi

It has been raining dictators in the Middle East of late. The Arab Spring, as the current wave of unrest in the Middle East is known, began in December 2010 and, to date, is responsible for the downfall of two long-standing dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. With very few exceptions, most states with Arab majorities have experienced the vagaries of "Spring," challenging the status quo and seeking to change the order in these states. In a couple of cases, the resulting "storms" are supported by outside forces, such as in the cases of Libya where NATO is providing military support to the opponents of the Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi, and of Bahrain where Iran is seen as the opposition's spiritual guide; but in most, the main engine behind the upheaval has been the disenfranchised Arab youth, seeking more than slogans and promises of the past and demanding a better life and brighter future. The Arab Spring has now entered its summer season, and there are more questions than answers.

ARAB SUMMER... (CONTINUED ON PG 3)

MES Notes

MCU Emerald Express Strategic Symposium

Marine Corps University, in partnership with the Defense Intelligence Agency Afghanistan-Pakistan Regional Expertise Training Program and the Marine Corps University Foundation, is pleased to announce its 30-31 August 2011 Emerald Express Strategic Symposium, entitled "Shaping for Successful Transition in Afghanistan".

More information is forthcoming and will be available at the MCU website at www.mcu.usmc.mil. POC for this event is Mr. Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or seitzac@grc.usmcm.edu.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

It is unlikely that Prince Turki's proposal was a slip of the tongue, as it occurred in the presence of numerous high-ranking regional officials, and was reported widely in the tightly-controlled Saudi media, where it was accompanied by positive readers' comments. Not surprisingly, Bahrain, as the GCC country which feels the most threatened by Iran, also seems receptive, with one apparently high-level press editorial calling on fellow-GCC countries to "Work toward nuclear arms and acquire a Gulf atom bomb, since that bomb will create a deterrent against anyone thinking of aggression against the GCC countries." [3]

The utility of nuclear weapons has long been a subject of analysis in the Saudi media, albeit often in abstract terms or in relation to other countries. Late last year, Prince Turki bin Muhammad, Saudi Arabia's Deputy Foreign Minister for Multilateral Relations, was more circumspect when he repeated his country's calls for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East, but nevertheless hinted at the same time that Iran's quest for nuclear weapons "will lead to a slide toward a nuclear arms race in the region." [4] The open allusions to nuclear weapons not only signal Saudi Arabia's concern to Iran and to Riyadh's allies, but also prepare a case for regional and international acceptance when and if Saudi Arabia proceeds as it suggests it may. Focusing on the Iranian threat, rather than on Israel, may be seen as making nuclear proliferation more palatable to international opinion, although the Israeli nuclear arsenal remains a concern in the Gulf, if for now overshadowed by that of Iran.

Any Saudi acquisition of nuclear weapons would very likely consist of a turn-key project (as would be true of any Arab country in the near term), with Pakistan as the most likely potential source, perhaps with some help from North Korea or China, which provided Saudi Arabia with the now aging intermediate range CSS-2 surface-to-surface missiles in 1989.

Egypt

In Egypt--rather than the Iranian threat-- the impetus for considering nuclear weapons stems from a perceived threat from neighboring Israel and from frustration on progress over the Arab-Israeli issue.

Egyptian analysts and opposition figures have expressed support before for a national nuclear program, citing concerns with the regional imbalance of power. Such voices, long subdued, have become more pronounced and frequent after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. Egyptian commentators now openly express fears of the influence of Israel's nuclear monopoly in dire terms for the region, with one seeing in Israel's nuclear arsenal "the decisive tool to subjugate the Arab region." [5] Moreover, elements expressing such views, whether secularist nationalists or supporters of religious blocs, may now have a greater impact on Egypt's new political landscape.

For example, the once repressed but now resurgent and increasingly influential ultraconservative salafi Islamic bloc has come out in favor of nuclear weapons. At a high-profile meeting of leading salafi figures, the consensus expressed was that "There is no objection to developing nuclear weapons, to going into space, and to producing missiles." [6] Sheikh Yusuf al-Badri, a hardline cleric on Egypt's Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, also asserted that the response to a nuclear-armed Israel "must be the development by the Arabs of an Islamic atom bomb," noting that realistically it would have to be acquired from another country. [7]

An editorial in the Egyptian press likewise called for peace by nuclear deterrence, and did not exclude the utility of nuclear weapons even as a warfighting tool. [8] Egypt's past reluctance to focus on nuclear weapons is now often cast as a remnant of the old system to be discarded. According to one nationalist academic, Mubarak's reluctance to support Egypt's nuclear effort while in power is just one more criticism to lay at the ousted leader's doorstep. [9] Even Egypt's long-serving senior diplomat during the Mubarak period, Amr Musa, has now sought to distance himself from his past boss on this issue, insisting that he had clashed with the latter over promoting a nuclear program. [10]

A new Egyptian government may be tempted to anchor its nationalist, religious, and modernist credentials on the nuclear issue, appealing to the military and the domestic and regional publics based on national pride, security, and technology, although this could well lead to chillier relations with Israel. However, any concrete steps may be tempered by the potential reaction of the international community and the negative impact on the significant U.S. aid program.

Unlike storm seasons of old, in this Spring, we see a climatic shift. While the economic environment preceding the Arab Spring was conducive to popular revolts, it is noteworthy that the traditional revolutionaries of decades past who champion an Arab version of socialism were not at the helm. Also, there has been no transfer of responsibility to foreign actors, especially those with colonial or neo-colonial ties. And most interestingly, those risking their safety to protest in streets of Cairo, Damascus or Sana do not seem to have bought into the promise of the social order being propagated by the Islamist organizations. Absent in the Arab Spring have been the slogans or placards supporting the likes of Osama bin Laden or his ideology. This last fact alone, while not in itself an answer to the Arab protesters' calls for economic opportunities and democratic ideals, is nevertheless a major victory for the forces that reject the use of terror and intimidation for political gain. And lastly, with the glaring exception of Iraq, the Arab uprisings have been free of the anti-American sentiment so often associated with political rallies in the Middle East.

While it is too early to discuss the fruits of the Arab Spring, it is encouraging, as we enter the Arab Summer, that the youth in most Arab states, and indeed their societies as a whole, have sown different seeds this Spring, desiring to change their lot for the better. Using trusted implements of the establishment, such as the military and judiciary, these movements are relying on these advocates for the harvest. In the short-term, a bountiful harvest depends upon how these advocates respect the trust the people have bestowed upon them and their ability to resist reverting to old ways. In Tunisia and Egypt—two cases where the Arab Spring can be deemed successful in its initial phase—fairness and transparency in the upcoming elections and of constitutional changes would cement the relationship between those spearheading the revolts and those elements of state power which survived the regime changes. In the long-term, the success of the Arab “storms” will be determined by their fruits: will there be positive change for the average Arab citizen or will the fruits spoil in the fields, hijacked by extremists or dictators? Ahh, the patience of farmers.

MES Notes (cont.)

02 April 2011

Dr. Tarzi delivered a paper entitled “Process of Centralization of Afghan Bureaucracy” at the Joint Conference of the Association of Asian Studies and International Convention of Asia Scholars, Honolulu.

05 May 2011

Mr. Seitz contributed the “Yemen” chapter of the American Foreign Policy Council's *World Almanac of Islamism*, online resource available at <http://almanac.afpc.org/>.

17 May 2011

Dr. Tarzi presented a talk entitled “From Cairo to Casablanca: Perspectives on the Jasmine Protests” at an event jointly sponsored by the Asia Society (India Centre) and Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi.

26 May 2011

Mr. Seitz and Dr. Anthony Cordesman (CSIS) co-authored the article “Iran's Continuing Challenge in a Time of Arab Turmoil”, for the 2nd May 2011 issue of *The Montreal Review*.

A Consular Protest

Responding to Amin Tarzi's piece on Libya in MES Insights Volume 2 Issue 2, Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann (ret), President, American Academy of Diplomacy, wrote the following “consular protest”:

Just read your excellent and thoughtful essay “To the Shores of Tripoli” in the Middle East Studies series. In defense of the diplomatic corps, however, I feel bound to raise one tiny, historical quibble. The Marines under Presley O'Bannon who took Derna were, in my recollection, part of a rather rag-tag force that was directed over all by William Eaton, the former consul to Tunis who still held a diplomatic title. So, O'Bannon at least needs to share credit with a diplomat. When I was young, I always thought I'd like to be a diplomat of Eaton's type, leading a military adventure. However, it was pretty much a wasted effort since the diplomacy was duplicitous and came to little in the end.

Libya's Cautionary Example

Yet another dynamic favoring the acquisition of nuclear weapons that has surfaced recently has been that of regime security. That is, nuclear weapons are now often portrayed as useful not only as a deterrent against the nuclear threat from other countries but also as a deterrent to intervention by foreign powers against a regional government. The model -- especially for beleaguered regimes -- for this perspective is Libya, with the lesson learned that had Qadhafi retained his nuclear program the United States and other NATO countries would have been reluctant to become involved on behalf of the opposition seeking to topple his regime. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, pointing to Western intervention in Libya, noted that Qaddafi had made a mistake in relinquishing his nuclear program and concluded that Iran was right in rejecting any curb on its own nuclear development.[11] Likewise press commentary in Bahrain noted that "Had Saddam and likewise Qaddafi not relinquished their nuclear weapons [i.e., programs] ... the West would not have dared to attack them." [12]

Prospects and Implications

Whether any country actually does go beyond discussions to the acquisition of nuclear weapons in the short-term is unclear, especially given the technical and political hurdles. Nevertheless, one can draw several implications. First, if proliferation does begin in earnest, in addition to the GCC and Egypt, one should also watch Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq as potential candidates aspiring to the nuclear club. Second, nuclear deterrence cannot be applied mechanistically, and the spread of nuclear weapons may not lead to stabilizing mutual deterrence. Differences from the situation during the Cold War -- such as the small size of arsenals and their inherent vulnerability, limited intelligence capabilities, inefficient command and control, etc. -- are likely to hinder the establishment of a stable multilateral deterrence regime. Third, an assumption that nuclear weapons would never be used in a warfighting mode may be flawed, given the potential for miscalculation and unfamiliarity with the characteristics of nuclear weapons. Fourth, even a small nuclear arsenal in the wrong hands can be sufficient to cause significant negative consequences for U.S. interests and for regional stability.

Finally, modifying the regional threat environment -- such as a just resolution of the Arab-Israeli issue -- may alleviate the pressures for proliferation by removing or diminishing the sources of perceived insecurity which can magnify threat perceptions and serve as a potent stimulus to fuel proliferation. Likewise, less public emphasis on international calls for regime change might lower the sense of embattlement which some regimes feel and reduce perceptions of outside threats to such regimes' survival.

Middle East Nuclear Proliferation Notes:

- [1] Ali Al-Qahis, "Al-Amir Turki Al-Faysal yutalib bi-tahwil majlis al-taawun ila ittihad ashbah bi'l-urubbi wa-insha' jaysh khaliji muwahhad" [Prince Turki Al-Faysal Calls for a Transformation of the (Gulf) Cooperation Council into a Union Resembling the European Union and for the Establishment of a Combined Gulf Army], Al-Riyadh, 22 March 2011, www.alriyadh.com/2011/03/22/article615880.html.
- [2] *ibid.*
- [3] Muwatin [A Citizen] "Al-Qunbula al-nawawiya al-khalijiya" [The Gulf Atomic Bomb], Al-Ayyam (Manama, Bahrain), 8 May 2011, www.alayam.com/Save.aspx?aid=74151.
- [4] Turki Al-Suhayl, "Al-Saudiya: Lan nadkhul sibaq tasalluh nawawi wa-ala Tihnan taqdim damanat" [Saudi Arabia: We Will Not Enter a Nuclear Arms Race But Tehran Must Provide Assurances], Al-Sharq al-Awsat (London), 12 December 2010, www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=599111&issueno=11702.
- [5] A. Al-Bahri, "Ahlam sahiyuniya" [Zionist Dreams], Al-Masa' (Cairo), 13 May 2011, www.almessa.net.eg.
- [6] "Al-Salfiyun yutalibun bi-tatbiq al-sharia wa-yaqulun man yutliq al-suham sataud alayh" [The Salafis Demand the Application of Islamic Law and Note That If Anyone Shoots an Arrow It Will Fall Back on Him], Al-Yawm al-Sabi (Cairo), 1 April 2011, www.youwm7.com/NewsPrint.asp?NewsID=381923.
- [7] Interview by Girgis Bushra with Yusuf Al-Badri, "La budd min wujud qunbula nawawiya islamiya fi muwajahat 'Isra'il" [It Is Necessary to Have an Islamic Atom Bomb to Confront 'Israel"], Al-Hiwar Al-Mutamaddin (Cairo), 12 April 2011, www.al-7ewar.com/m/showthread.php?t=32887.
- [8] "Silah al-rad al-nawawi" [Weapons of Nuclear Deterrence], Al-Yawm al-Sabi, 18 March 2011, www.youwm7.com/NewsPrint.asp?NewsID=372318.
- [9] Muhammad Al-Sayyid Salim, "Hasibu Mubarak ala ilgha' al-barnamaj al-nawawi al-misri" [Hold Mubarak Accountable for Cancelling the Egyptian Nuclear Program], Al-Arabi (Cairo), 14 March 2001, www.al-3araby.com.
- [10] Interview by Magdi Al-Gallad and Raniya Badawi with Amr Musa, "Lastu mahsuban ala nizham Mubarak wa-ikhtalaf mah bi-sha'n al-alaqa ma Isra'il" [I Am Not a Protege of the Mubarak Regime and I Differed with Him on the Issue of the Relationship with Israel], Al-Misri Al-Yawm (Cairo), 2 March 2011, www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=289289.
- [11] "Don't Bomb Libya, Arm Rebels, Says Iran's Khamenei," Reuters, 21 March 2011, www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USTRE72K50L20110321.
- [12] Ras Zaghlul and Jasim Al-Attawi, "Nashadu Saddam wa-Al-Qadhafi al-takhalli an aslihathim al-nawawiya thumma darabuhuma!" [They Begged Saddam and Qaddafi to Give Up Their Nuclear Weapons and Then They Attacked Them], Al-Ayyam, 19 May 2011, www.alayam.com/Print.aspx?aid=73597.