

Briefing Memo

Future Directions for the Iran Nuclear Agreement (JCPOA) and the Possibility of Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East

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On May 9, 2020, in commemoration of the American withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Agreement (the “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” or JCPOA, agreed to on July 14, 2015, between Iran and the P5+1; the US, the UK, France, China, and Russia plus Germany), Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said that “The United States will exercise all diplomatic options to ensure the UN arms embargo” (<https://www.state.gov/leading-the-world-against-irans-threats/>). The JCPOA was approved by UN Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015) ([http://undocs.org/S/RES/2231\(2015\)](http://undocs.org/S/RES/2231(2015))), and a portion of the resolution is a UN arms embargo that is scheduled to be lifted on October 18, 2020, so the meaning of Secretary of State Pompeo’s diplomatic option to ensure the UN’s embargo on Iran is to extend this deadline. The Trump administration, from the standpoint of being one of the parties to Resolution 2231, pointed out Iran’s JCPOA violations, and on the basis of significant non-performance from the Iranian side as stipulated in the resolution, intends to invoke the so-called “snapback” provision (S/RES/2231, paragraph 12) that does not require a new Security Council resolution if the need to re-impose sanctions arises.

Iran, on the other hand, announced on May 8, 2019, one year after the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the JCPOA, that it would no longer be bound by the JCPOA agreement’s storage limits for enriched uranium and heavy water (Kelsey Davenport and Daryl G. Kimball, “Iran Announces Countermoves on Nuclear Deal: P4+1 and Iran Nuclear Deal Alert, May 10, 2019,” Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2019-05-10/iran-announces-countermoves-nuclear-deal-p41-iran-nuclear-deal-alert-may-10-2019>). The JCPOA imposed a 15 year uranium enrichment plan from the day that the JCPOA was implemented restricting uranium enrichment to 3.67% or lower and restricting storage of enriched uranium to 300kg or less, and since the American withdrawal, Iran has been gauging the progress of support measures for it, such as the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) by the UK, France, and Germany (E3), who insisted on continuing the JCPOA, and has gradually stopped compliance with the JCPOA through a series of five remedial steps. However, on January 5, 2020, the Iranian government finally declared that it would no longer comply with any of the JCPOA-imposed restrictions on uranium enrichment or centrifuge numbers

(<https://en.irna.ir/news/83622509/Iran-takes-final-step-by-abandoning-JCPOA-restrictions>).

Furthermore, on January 20, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif announced that Iran will withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if any European JCPOA party triggers the dispute resolution mechanism over Iran's JCPOA violations and refers resolution of the problem to the UN Security Council (Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran says it will quit global nuclear treaty if case goes to U.N.," *Reuters*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear/iran-says-it-will-quit-global-nuclear-treaty-if-case-goes-to-un-idUSKBN1ZJ0ML>). Behind the Iranian government's hardline posture is strong dissatisfaction on the Iranian side with delays in support measures by the E3, as symbolized by the fact that the first transaction of E3 medical material exports to Iran via INSTEX was finally completed on March 31, 2020.

The JCPOA can be viewed as officially invalid because, as previously mentioned, two of the major JCPOA parties, the United States and Iran, have already withdrawn from it. Perhaps the Trump administration's most pressing concern right now, amongst the multiple deficiencies in the JCPOA, is the expiration deadline for all Security Council Resolution 2231 provisions, also known as the agreement's "sunset," which is set for 10 years from the agreement's date of adoption. What this means is that, as a result of restrictions on Iran's nuclear program being lifted after the JCPOA period expires, while Iran was effectively recognized by the international community for its special status of being a nuclear threshold state, virtually the same as Japan, the US is dissatisfied with Iran's breakout time being set to just one year, that is, the time required for Iran to store enough weapons-grade enriched uranium (90% enrichment level or higher) to manufacture one nuclear weapon ("The Nightmare of 'Middle Eastern Nuclear Proliferation' in the Iran Crisis," *Sentaku*, February 2020 issue, p. 24). Additionally, according to a strategic evaluation released by Israeli military officials in January 2020, Iran is expected to complete the development of nuclear missiles in as little as two years (*Ibid.*, 24-25).

As for American and Israeli perceptions of Iran's threat, Iran has an advantageous position in Middle Eastern security as military facilities such as Parchin, where it is said that the current Iranian government is conducting nuclear detonation research, are not subject to inspection by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, and furthermore, there is no mention in the JCPOA of the ballistic missile program that Iran has been actively developing as a means of transporting warheads. In particular, developing ballistic missiles is at the core of Iran's regional security policy, alongside developing and supporting Shiite militias such as Hezbollah, and is thought to be closely linked to Iran's nuclear development.

The circumstances described above show the uncertain situation of the Iran nuclear agreement after the American withdrawal from the JCPOA and the resumption of sanctions against Iran. Whether or not the JCPOA continues to exist will stimulate Turkey and Saudi Arabia and promote nuclear development in both countries, and going forward, a stronger possibility of nuclear

proliferation in the Middle East will be expected. Therefore, this paper, on the assumption that the continued existence of the JCPOA is at stake, adds an analysis of the possibility of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, mainly focusing on the strategic significance in regional security if Iran becomes nuclear-armed and on how that would stimulate nuclear development in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. For the theory underlying this analysis, see the discussion in the July/August 2012 issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability” by Kenneth Waltz, who passed away in May 2013.

In his paper, Waltz points out that, when looking at historical records, it is rarely possible to stop a nation once it has decided to obtain nuclear weapons, and states that if Iran has already decided to rely on nuclear weapons for its security, then sanctions will not be able to change that decision (Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,” p. 2). In fact, Waltz points out that adding sanctions to Iran now could make it feel more vulnerable regarding its own security and could give it a reason to seek protection via the ultimate deterrent of nuclear weapons. Additionally, he also states that Iran may try to develop a breakout capability of just below a nuclear test as a second-best option even if it cannot reach the level of fully developing nuclear weapons (Ibid., p.2). Waltz’s analysis seems to have been fairly accurate in predicting the current Iranian situation since the JCPOA.

Waltz’s view is that Israel’s nuclear monopoly in the Middle East over the last 40 years was the cause of intensifying regional instability; forces must eventually reach an equilibrium, and only Iran’s restoration of the military balance with Israel will put an end to the nuclear crisis in the Middle East that has continued for more than a decade (Ibid., p.3). Therefore, if Iran proceeds with obtaining nuclear weapons, then a mutual deterrence system between Israel and Iran will be established. Waltz’s conclusion in the paper is that, ultimately, Iran’s nuclear arsenal will contribute to Middle Eastern stability because there will never be total war between these two nuclear powers in the future, even if Iran’s nuclear armaments are small-scale and even assuming that Saudi Arabia and Turkey follow Iran’s nuclear development that they will progress slowly (Ibid., p.5).

If looked at theoretically, the logic of defensive realism, as represented by Waltz, results in an anarchy-like international system without a central government, wherein states focus on their own defenses, and the international relations formed by such states tend to maintain the status quo. Therefore, Waltz’s theory says that the probability of warfare between two states is not necessarily high. In other words, according to his theory of defensive realism, as a result of nations trying to maintain a balance of power with each other to ensure their own security, it is not anticipated that a nation will increase its power, especially its military power, to such an extent that it will change the relative position in the prior status quo. This is because if a nation takes that kind of action to change the status quo, then other nations will emerge and try to balance their power against the nation making the change, which may undermine the security of the nation making the change (security dilemma). Therefore, Waltz is relatively optimistic that the various nations will not increase their military power to an unnecessary extent. That is, in the logic of defensive realism that Waltz relies

upon, that although the possibility of a war between Israel and Iran cannot necessarily be ruled out if a balance of power that includes nuclear weapons is established between Israel and Iran, the probability of war is not necessarily high, and international relations in the Middle East would tend to stabilize. According to defensive realism, as represented by Waltz, a nation will expand its military power to protect itself from a threat only when that threat emerges, and unless the balance of power is upset, then the nation will exclusively focus on its own security and defense.

However, in the author's opinion, Iran's nuclear armaments, or at least its transition into a nuclear threshold country that possesses breakout capability, has a quite high risk of giving rise to a domino phenomenon of nuclear development competition in the Middle East. Moreover, the acceleration of nuclear proliferation in the region has not necessarily been as slow as Waltz presumed, and immediate nuclear development in at least both Saudi Arabia and Turkey is expected to progress. In fact, leaders from both Saudi Arabia and Turkey have already announced that they will promote nuclear development following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA after May 2018 and Iran's gradual removal of JCPOA performance measures. For example, Saudi Arabia's de facto supreme leader, Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud, announced last year that Saudi Arabia would soon follow if Iran obtained nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia is said to have shared more than 60% of Pakistan's nuclear development costs as a so-called "Islamic nuclear bomb," and in return, a secret agreement was reached in which Saudi Arabia can use Pakistan's nuclear weapons when Saudi Arabia is in crisis, which has been discussed since the late 2000s by experts in the Middle East and in nuclear proliferation issues ("The Nightmare of 'Middle Eastern Nuclear Proliferation' in the Iran Crisis," p. 25). In addition, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also announced in September 2019 that he would not accept indications from Europe, and America would not approve of Turkey's possession of nuclear weapons. The time frame is undecided, but he clearly expressed his intention to obtain nuclear weapons (Ibid., p. 26). Furthermore, Turkey is currently constructing its first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, in southern Mersin Province, with the goal of starting operations in 2023, the 100th anniversary of Turkey's founding, and Russia's state-owned nuclear power company, Rosatom, is expanding its business in Turkey through winning the order for constructing the nuclear power plant.

The author's personal concern about nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is that it is possible for successive US administrations, not just the Trump administration, to misunderstand the character and power balance of the Middle East's system of allies and adversaries. For example, the current Iranian regime, which has been the most hostile towards the US since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, is one of the most modernized and secularized states in the Middle East, along with Israel and Turkey, and when compared to Saudi Arabia, a rentier state (a non-tax yields state) that is premised on the economic management of the oil monoculture and a dictatorship that is directly controlled by the Saud royal family, Iran has far more political and economic diversity. Israel, similar to Saudi Arabia, is a pro-US state in fierce conflict with Iran, and is a small country with a population

of 8.88 million people (June 2018) with Jewish immigrants from Russia. In other words, it can be said that America's current allies in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Israel, both have some sources of instability in their domestic systems when looked at from the American point of view. Compared with that, Turkey and Iran, which both have populations in excess of 80 million people and diversified, modern economic structures, are currently approaching Russia's Putin administration in opposition to American supremacy, but for the US, which is aiming for long-term stabilization of the Middle East, they cannot necessarily be said to be hostile opponents.

In addition, America's society and economy have been hit hard by the slump in crude oil futures prices (35-38 US dollars per barrel as of the end of May 2020) that shook the world economy earlier in 2020, and by the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. These two factors have caused more than 100,000 Americans' deaths, management difficulties for shale companies, the largest drop in US GDP since the Great Depression in 1929, and a rise in the unemployment rate. However, in the Middle East, the economies and societies of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey have also been hard hit, and there is no denying the fact that all of these stakeholder nations have, since the beginning of this year, entered a critical situation that will result in strengthening the possibility of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

(Textual References / Sites)

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