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# Iran - Challenge or Opportunity for Regional Security?

Andrea ELLNER\*

## Abstract

*This paper argues that the framing of Iran's policies as "the problem" for regional security and the attempts of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany (P5+1), especially the "Western" allies, to coerce Iran in negotiations over its nuclear program perpetuate not only pre-established tensions, but also the current diplomatic stalemate. The core aim of the paper is to propose an alternative, regionally led approach to Iran and its nuclear program. It argues that this could become an opportunity for regional security-building, if Iran is treated as an equal to its negotiating partners. With this aim it critically examines some core underlying causes of regional tensions and threat perceptions, seeks to identify opportunities for cooperation, and proposes treating Iran as a potential founding member of a regional framework managing and regulating the running, operational safety and proliferation*

*safeguards of its and other emerging regional nuclear energy programs. Such a framework could be tied to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The paper examines the role Turkey together with Brazil, which has experience in negotiating nuclear cooperation agreements under political tensions, could play in initiating the process, which could lead to a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Gulf, and what constraints it is likely to face.*

## Key Words

Mistrust, nuclear co-operation, Turkey, Israel, ABACC, NPT.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade Iran's nuclear policies have attracted much attention and aggravated pre-existing suspicions about its intentions and external policies. In the "West" as well as in parts of the region it has been increasingly portrayed as "the problem" for regional, or even global, security. The following analysis seeks to show that perpetuating this perception of Iran, with a focus on its nuclear program, does not adequately

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\* PhD in Political Science (Free University, Berlin), MA in History (Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich), lectures at the Defence Studies Department, King's College, London. Before this she taught, and led the Graduate Institute for Political and International Studies, at the University of Reading. She edited European Security for four years. Her research includes nuclear non-proliferation, British foreign and defence policy, civil-military relations and European security.

capture the underlying dynamics of regional insecurity and is detrimental to both regional security and progress in the negotiations of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) plus Germany (P5+1) on Iran's nuclear program. It critically examines some of the core causes and symptoms of mistrust and tension in the region in order to demonstrate that Iran is not the principal cause of regional insecurity, although it can be a contributor to it, and that the policies of external actors, and some of their client states, are not conducive to ameliorating existing threat perceptions or promoting regional stability. The analysis furthermore seeks to identify aspects of regional security dynamics which may offer opportunities for an alternative, regional approach to Iran, especially its nuclear program, kernel for a regional security regime based initially on nuclear regulatory cooperation.

Amongst external actors in the region, the US and its transatlantic allies have been the most prominent voices warning that the lack of transparency over Iran's nuclear program- coupled with the development of missile technology- strongly suggested that its intentions were not as peaceful as it claimed. They fear that an Iranian nuclear weapons capability would seriously threaten regional and global security as well as the future of the Nuclear Non-

Proliferation Treaty (NPT), since Iran is a Non-Nuclear Weapons State (NNWS) member of the NPT.

In the region, Israel has long assumed that Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons, and not just a break-out capability, which is the capacity to produce nuclear weapons quickly at a later stage. It already perceived Iran's links with Hamas and Hezbollah, which Israel, the US and the EU classify as terrorist organizations, as a threat, when the provocative rhetoric of Iran's leadership under President Ahmadinejad raised the specter of Iran as an "existential threat". These fears matter to the US and Britain, France and Germany- the EU members

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prominently involved in the negotiations with Iran- as they regard Israel's security as one of their responsibilities.

They are not alone in their perceptions of Iran as a security threat. In recent years others in the region, such as the Gulf States or Turkey, and those further afield, such as Russia, China or India, have expressed more or less openly their desire not to see a nuclear armed Iran. Yet, these countries have been dealing differently with Iran. Turkey, to a degree some Gulf states, China, Russia and India have engaged and maintained, developed or expanded their economic and political ties with Iran. Their approach has been less coercive than that of the "Western" allies and Israel,

although, as members of the P5+1, China and Russia supported the tougher UNSC sanctions in 2010 and India has consented to adhering to the sanctions package.

Apart from increasing pressure on Iran and persuading others to support their coercive approach, the US and its European allies have long insisted that Iran provide verifiable assurances of the peaceful nature of its program. This includes compliance with inspections of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), ratifying the Additional Protocol, which enhances the IAEA's powers, and ceasing uranium enrichment. They expect Iran to fulfill these preconditions before they are prepared to discuss implementing their proposed incentives for Iranian compliance and consider expanding the scope of negotiations. That approach, which has been accompanied by repeated calls for military strikes in the US, Israel and occasionally elsewhere, has produced an uneasy stalemate.

The likelihood of the US using force against Iran may be low. Arguments against such escalation have been carrying the day for years and the Obama Administration indicated its reluctance to be drawn into another war in the Middle East in early 2011, when it took a back seat during the establishment of the no-fly zone over Libya and insisted that NATO command the operations. But the repeated attempts at negotiations coupled with progressively harsher sanctions have not made a peaceful

settlement with Iran more likely. This leaves not only the problem of Iran's nuclear program unsolved, but also uncertainty over the future behavior of Israel, whose sense of insecurity has been growing even greater since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011. Hence the current approach to Iran requires adjustment.

The following analysis proposes that, while the initial aim of an alternative approach might be to break the current stalemate, there is the potential to turn Iran's nuclear policies from a challenge into an opportunity for regional security building. In order to explain the underlying rationale for this proposal and identify some of the key challenges for its implementation, this analysis discusses a number of relevant aspects of the regional context. Is not possible within the confines of this article to examine the regional security challenges, of which many have a more immediate impact on human security than the perceived threat from Iran, as comprehensively as they deserve. The analysis focuses on the dispute with Iran, because, if unresolved, it will foil the establishment of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFFZ) in the Middle East that was agreed at the 2010 "NPT Review Conference" and may trigger a much worse security crisis in the medium term or, should Iran indeed acquire nuclear weapons, a nuclear arms race in the long term. It briefly discusses the problem of Israeli nuclear policy, but focuses on the Iranian nuclear program because there is greater scope for cooperation and

confidence-building with a chance for more immediate success which may in the long term benefit negotiations with Israel.

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Scope for cooperation lies in the fact that a range of regional countries are planning or implementing nuclear energy infrastructures.<sup>2</sup> Especially in the Middle East, where mistrust continues to be so pervasive, it is primarily in their and their neighbors' interest that they can assure each other credibly of the peaceful purposes of these facilities and their governments' efforts to keep nuclear materials secure from illicit access by individuals, including non-state actors. Regional cooperative non-proliferation arrangements could have several desirable side-effects, especially if they ultimately become tied into the IAEA framework. They would assure the international community of the proliferation security of the nuclear energy programs and could include cooperation on regulating their operational safety. They could begin to reverse the spiral of mistrust by initiating cooperation on comparatively technical matters and open up opportunities for gradually widening the scope of cooperation.

De-politicizing initial cooperative efforts would be important because anxieties in the region are often expressed in terms that do not openly address the underlying actual causes of the tensions, which have originated from a complex set of intra-regional frictions that have often been exacerbated by the policies of external actors, especially patron states such as the US. As this analysis will show, the case of Iran illustrates this well. Regional actors publicly emphasize the presumed nuclear threat, but their reasons for fearing Iran or portraying it as a pre-eminent threat often lie elsewhere. Clients of the US may frame threat perceptions in a way that their patron perceives them as common concerns. A US response may seek to promote these presumed shared interests, but may be neither conducive to regional security, let alone the development of trust, nor in the client's long-term security interest. Not all regional states treat Iran exclusively as a negative force or pariah, but this can generate distrust on the part of their patron or Western allies. The potential merits for regional security of regional involvement, such as that of Turkey, and a less confrontational approach to Iran are thus not recognized. This analysis seeks to identify some avenues for tapping into the potential for a more constructive approach.

## Trust and Regional Insecurity

It is not a particularly novel observation that trust has long been

exceedingly scarce in the Middle East. Depending on the perspective of regional actors, this lack of trust has either been the cause or consequence of tensions and conflicts, which have repeatedly escalated into violence, feeding more mistrust. Some of the roots of intra-regional tensions, such as frictions between Iran and its Arab neighbors, have a long history. After World War II more causes of tension and mistrust in the region and between regional and external actors were added during the de-colonization process and with the establishment of Israel as a sovereign state by the UN. These processes resulted in a range of territorial disputes and have strong ideational aspects. External powers, such as the US, the EU and some of its members, as well as the Soviet Union, now Russia, further added to these tensions. Their relations with regional countries have been driven by self-interest and shaped by competition with each other for influence. Over the past six decades these material and ideational conflicts have evolved into apparently irreconcilable and embedded underlying assumptions about roles, aims and behavior of state and non-state actors in the region. Overlaying these tensions today are the effects of the 2003 Iraq War, which are discussed below. Assumptions can change. They are perceptions, not fixed facts; but change will require concerted and sustained efforts by all actors involved. The modern history of the Middle East is littered with failed attempts to build confidence, trust and security. Current

conditions, exacerbated by the policies of key actors, seem markedly unfavorable to positive change. Two particularly intractable examples, which are linked and highly relevant today, are attempts to re-start the Arab-Israeli peace process and establish a WMDFZ.

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The Israeli government has consistently refused to both change its policy of nuclear ambiguity, which maintains that it will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the region coupled with a stance of neither confirming nor denying its possession of such weapons, and contemplate negotiating a WMDFZ until it has arrived at a peace settlement with its Arab neighbors.<sup>3</sup> However, as a former head of Israel's Atomic Energy Agency, the late Shelveth Freier, has argued, associated with this has been Israel's assumption that the Arab states were not seeking peace with Israel.<sup>4</sup> Today, the prospects for an Arab-Israeli peace settlement are possibly more remote than they have been for decades, partly because current Israeli policy reinforces Arab preconceptions that Israel is not seeking a mutually agreeable peace

settlement. Even Israeli diplomats have criticized their government's foreign policy; its declaration that peace with Palestinians was impossible was one reason for Ambassador Ilan Baruch's resignation in March 2011.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity has been tacitly accepted not only by its allies, but also in the region. Its possession of nuclear weapons is quietly assumed. When in 2006 Ehud Olmert informally called Israel a Nuclear Weapons State (NWS), he caused outrage at home.<sup>6</sup> And in 2008 the members of the Arab League threatened to withdraw from the NPT should Israel announce its possession of nuclear weapons and not subsequently disarm and accede to the NPT as a NNWS.<sup>7</sup> Openly admitting to its nuclear weapons status is thus only likely if Israel is prepared to relinquish its nuclear weapons or receives assurances that it will be treated like India and Pakistan, which suffered sanctions only relatively briefly before gaining US acceptance as NWS outside the NPT. From here Reuven Pedatzur developed the suggestion that Israel should consider linking concessions on peace with Palestinians to demands that the US recognize its NWS status.<sup>8</sup>

However, should Iran be seeking to produce nuclear weapons, it could then argue it was not the first regional nuclear proliferator. Considering Israeli threats of conventional attacks on Iran to prevent this outcome, Iran could make the deterrence argument and become more committed to acquiring

actual nuclear weapons, thus reinforcing Israel's insistence on a NWS status. The Arab League's warning suggests the latter could turn into a major regional crisis for the NPT. Should nuclear disarmament then be forced upon Israel, it would see its position *vis-a-vis* Iran weakened, insist on a NWS status and the vicious cycle would enter another round.

With regard to Iran's Arab neighbors, their suspicions of Iran's nuclear program have to be seen in a wider context. They, and Arab states amongst themselves, have long been competing over territory, political influence and regional pre-eminence; these conflicts have strong ideational elements, too. Territorial disputes have caused tensions, such as over the Abu Musa and Tunb islands between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran or over Bahrain, and war, for example Iraq's invasion of Kuwait followed by the Gulf War in 1990/1. The ideational aspects of the context are often explained through the historical divide between Shia and Sunni communities. Iraq's war against Iran in the 1980s had after all been fought, and supported by regional countries, especially Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and Western powers, in order to stem the assumed threat of Iran seeking to export its revolution into the region.<sup>9</sup>

Perceived to be especially vulnerable were countries such as Iraq and smaller Gulf states where Shia-majority populations were ruled by Sunni-minority governments. Such suspicions resulted in the stable assumption of Iran's

“hidden hand” threatening the internal stability of these countries and hold on power of their rulers or governments. These pre-existing thought patterns have since been reinforced. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein and the arrival of a Shia-led coalition government in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the King of Jordan have warned of the rise of a Shia crescent, a framing of the threat posed by Iran which many in the US share.<sup>10</sup> President Ahmadinejad’s alleged appeal to the “Arab street” has been much discussed and Iran has been held responsible for the popular uprisings that began in early 2011.<sup>11</sup> The analysis will return to these issues below.

From Iran’s perspective, the support for Iraq in the 1980s, even when it used chemical weapons against Iran, reinforced both Iran’s alienation from, and distrust towards, its Arab neighbors and Western powers and the conviction that it ultimately had to fend for itself.<sup>12</sup> It enhanced its sense of “strategic loneliness”.<sup>13</sup> Even before the revolution Iran shared this sense of isolation with Israel. It had led to both forming a clandestine strategic relationship, especially with Iran under the Shah, which lasted nearly until the 2003 Iraq War changed Iran’s strategic context; it is worth noting that Iran is home to the largest Jewish community outside Israel in the region, there are well over 200,000 Persian or Iranian-Jewish Israeli citizens, some of whom are members of the political elite.<sup>14</sup> Thus, seemingly irreconcilable tensions, expressed also in aggressive rhetoric which in turn serves

as evidence for perceptions of hostile intent, can be and have in the past been temporarily or partially overcome by strategic or material interests. Similar examples are the brief rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the late 1990s<sup>15</sup> and the continuing trade and economic relations between Iran and its smaller Gulf neighbors.<sup>16</sup>

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The dominant regional discourse today, however, frames Iran as a threat, often with a distinct undertone of irreconcilability. In a somewhat ironic twist, among Arab states Iran is again cast in a light similar to Israel. They are again both outsiders or strategically lonely. Both seek recognition and, because they also feel insecure, both pursue policies that are prone to attract attention as a substitute for recognition because they are or are being perceived as threats. There are, however, two salient differences in today’s context. One, any form of strategic alliance between them is out of the question. There are even suggestions that Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, may find common strategic cause with Israel and would support an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities.<sup>17</sup> Two, in contrast to Iran, Israel is afforded the protection

of Western allies. Their policies have exacerbated the causes of insecurity in the Middle East as the next section will show.

## External Actors and Regional Dynamics

Overlaying intra-regional differences has been the perceived immutability of the alliances of the US and other Western powers with Israel and Western interests in access to oil as well as trade and investment relations particularly with the rich Gulf states. The pre-eminent aim of external actors has been a stable Middle East without a dominant state beyond their control which might infringe on their interests. Western actors preferred to co-opt regional governments, but if a dominant power threatened to emerge they chose either containment or confrontation. The principal targets for the pursuit of each approach at different times were Iraq, Iran and arguably Egypt. Co-optation, for example of Saudi Arabia and the small Gulf states, Iran in the 1970s, Iraq in the 1980s, and Egypt after it had made peace with Israel, meant supporting autocratic regimes which served Western material and political interests while condoning their disregard for other declared Western aims, such as the promotion of democracy, human rights and economic development. This policy has been called into question twice recently, once, if briefly and ineffectually, by the Bush Administration, and, possibly more sustainably, since the beginning of

2011 during the so-called Arab Spring, which led to considerable soul-searching in the West.

Before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was in part officially motivated by the aim of destroying Iraq's presumed WMD programs, the US declared its intention to reverse its former approach and create an Iraq that could be a beacon of democracy and trigger a wave of democratization across the region.<sup>18</sup> The declared non-proliferation rationale was proven invalid and the invasion first resulted in a civil war in Iraq followed by continuing instability in the country and the region. Iraq's neighbors have suffered the consequences of its internal instability, which generated refugee flows whose initial partially positive effects on local economies have begun to fade behind the negative impact they have on social, economic and political dynamics.

The war is also perceived as the main reason for Iran's new ability to exert influence in Iraq and across a much greater part of the region than previously possible.<sup>19</sup> It is, however, not universally seen as the main reason for the so-called Shia awakening.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, warnings of the rise of a "Shia crescent" veil such underlying causes of tensions as power struggles over regional pre-eminence and interests in preserving the status quo, including alliances with external actors, especially the US. Saudi Arabia's hostility towards Iran has a religious dimension as it involves religious leadership claims of Wahabis and the revolutionary rhetoric of Iran's leadership. However, both



resource rich countries are also motivated by aspirations to political influence and power in the region, especially in the Gulf; to some degree this is tied to the survival of their governments. Furthermore, the Shia community in the Middle East is not as unified a force as portrayed and historically rooted assumptions do not necessarily capture the full picture.

In Iraq Saddam Hussein's minority Sunni regime was replaced with a Shia-majority coalition government, which includes Kurdish parties. Iranian and Iraqi Shia do have long-standing relations, but it is not a given that they will work together for a presumed common aim of regional Shia dominance. It should be remembered that during the war in the 1980s, Iraqi and Iranian Shia fought each other. Today the Iraqi Shia community is divided on the issue of cooperation with Iran, with nationalist Shia objecting to Iran's influence.<sup>21</sup> It has furthermore been argued that the main Iraqi Shia cities of Najaf and Karbala offer nationalist Iraqi Shia fora for opposing Iran's influence.<sup>22</sup> In other words, nationalism- and tribalism- can trump sectarianism.

Likewise, smaller Gulf states hold Iran responsible for the growing Shia assertiveness. The Bahraini government is wary of Iran, because it used to have territorial claims on the island. It has accused Iran of fomenting sectarian unrest for some time.<sup>23</sup> However, the recent popular uprisings have not lent weight to the argument that Iran's hidden hand is solely responsible for

destabilizing the region.<sup>24</sup> Bahraini Shia have long viewed the Sunni-minority government's policies as discriminatory.<sup>25</sup> The uprisings there and elsewhere, especially in Egypt, were triggered by a singular, symbolic event in Tunisia, the self-emolition of a market trader in protest against political and economic injustices, not Iran, which has been quite unsuccessful in its attempt to claim credit for the revolutions.

In the wake of the Iraq War, particularly after the arrival of President Ahmadinejad, Iran may have jumped on the bandwagon of Shia discontent and lent support, allegedly including arms shipments.<sup>26</sup> However, while this behavior is opportunistic and potentially inflammatory in an already fraught context, casting Iran as the sole instigator of internal instability, as if no prior cause for discontent had existed, is disingenuous.<sup>27</sup> In Yemen the Northern Houthi tribe has been engaged in a violent conflict with the government for years. Both have denied that their conflict is sectarian, but interference from outside actors, especially Saudi Arabia and the US, and the conflation of this conflict with the emergence of "al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula"<sup>28</sup> have intensified the problem. Outside actors pursue their own interests, such as counter-terrorism. This can be exploited by the Yemeni government to pursue its interests in maintaining authority at home. It is then less likely to seek a resolution to the original problem, the Houthi's perceptions of discrimination against them.

Over the past decade the US and its allies have continued to view these problems through the lens of traditional balance of power models and responded with a confrontational approach, although in the case of Iraq this has arguably backfired. Isolating Iran and coercing it into complying with UNSC resolutions through sanctions has failed to achieve the desired results. As has the declared aim of establishing a WMDFZ. Rather than exploring the potential for regional actors to become actively engaged in generating security arrangements that benefit the region as a whole, external powers have been seeking to maintain control over their client states or have acted on apparently shared threat perceptions. They thus indulged their and their client's self-interests without addressing the underlying causes of insecurity in the region. Haji-Yusufi has examined these complex dynamics in his critical analysis of the idea of the Shia crescent.<sup>29</sup>

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In essence, Western involvement has perpetuated regional divisions and embedded assumptions, for example about alliances. The idea that the US will always support Israel was reinforced

when Israel successfully rejected the Obama Administration's attempts to revive Arab-Israeli negotiations in 2009 and in February 2011 the US was the only UNSC member to veto the resolution intending to stop Israel's settlement policy.<sup>30</sup> As a patron the US continues to add to regional instability. If approved by Congress, the Obama Administration's consent to a \$60 billion arms sales agreement with Saudi Arabia, the biggest in US history, is likely to exacerbate the confrontational climate in the region, a risk that has not gone unnoticed by some members of Congress.<sup>31</sup> The Administration justifies the deal with a view to Yemen, specifically the dispute with the Houthis, but mainly the perceived threat from Iran.<sup>32</sup> This is not conducive to regional security building.

## **The Need for a Different Approach to Regional Security and Iran**

The contemporary security situation in the Middle East is especially complex because the region is going through significant strategic change while historically rooted animosities persist. This combination of change and negative stability reinforces the causes of regional insecurity. Threat perceptions form the basis of responses of regional and external actors to the changing strategic environment and are based on assumptions about the nature

of relationships within the region and between regional actors and traditional patron states. Yet, the Iraq War has limited the standing and room for maneuver of the US and its major Western allies, undermined the confidence of traditional client states in their patrons, and changed the regional security dynamics for the worse. US clients have been ultimately relying for their security on US military power. The failure to deliver stability in post-Saddam Iraq shook their confidence in the reliability of their patron's security promises; some have interpreted the planned US arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states as one symptom of these developments.<sup>33</sup>

Salient aspects of the approach central Western actors have been pursuing thus have led to or may in future trigger further destabilization. They have framed Iran's influence in the region almost exclusively negatively. This is on the one hand unsurprising. Iran has sought to influence the political environment in Iraq as well as Afghanistan. In both countries the US and its coalition partners have a major stake. Iranian engagement there makes it more difficult for them to implement and pursue their policy preferences. On the other hand it is misguided. Iran also has a stake in a stable regional environment which does not threaten its security. Western powers recognize this. In Afghanistan they have been co-operating with Iran on counter-narcotics efforts.<sup>34</sup> However, in other areas their default position is less to explore where their and Iran's interests

meet, but to assume that Iran's influence will inevitably be destabilizing or run counter to their interests.

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One reason for this is their perception of Iran's definition of its role at least in part as a revolutionary state which seeks to build alliances that can at a regional and global level act as a counterweight to the US-led highly developed part of the world. The Iranian leadership's and especially President Ahmadinejad's provocative rhetoric adds to this perception. It has also successfully provoked Israel into defining Iran as an "existential threat", a provocation to which, as Avner Cohen has argued, Israel should not have risen. Without minimizing the challenge the Iranian nuclear program poses to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, he regarded it as

a great pity that through our own conduct, and especially the irresponsibly alarmist voices emerging from among us, we have inflated a political problem into an existential threat. And it is an equally great pity that we have granted legitimacy to nuclear bombs being viewed as weapons, instead of helping to delegitimize this useless weapon.<sup>35</sup>

The combination of the sense of responsibility for Israel's security and the insistence on keeping the lead in dealing with Iran has not enabled the US and its Western allies to see that the political challenge Iran poses bears the possibility of an opportunity. This is because they have ignored that Iran does also pursue its self-interests through diplomacy. Iran's alliance policies demonstrate this well. It has extended its influence into Africa and Latin America, but it is unsurprising that the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) have been particularly responsive. The Western allies do not seem to acknowledge sufficiently that one reason for Iran's success in establishing close relations with the BRICs is the shift in global economic, and consequently political, power structures. Long regarded as emerging economies, since the global economic crisis the BRICs, chiefly India and China, have become established global actors. Their agendas are, however, not automatically uniform or compatible with Western interests in the region.

The US and some of its allies view with suspicion China's and Russia's relations with Iran. They accuse them of undermining UNSC sanctions and their impact on Iran due to their trade relations and political engagement, although the US did persuade both to support the UNSC sanctions in 2010. Yet, the BRICS do not have an interest in a nuclear-armed Iran. Their close economic relations with Iran have been predominantly defined as constraints on

their willingness to put pressure on Iran, but they also give them leverage. They may require Iranian fossil fuels for their economic development, but Iran is also dependent on their payments and refined oil imports, for example from India. This has given rise to the proposal that India could facilitate rapprochement between Iran and the US, which do after all share a range of strategic interests.<sup>36</sup>

For the smaller Gulf states, too, it has been difficult to balance their interests in minimizing causes of conflict with their powerful neighbor and trading partner, Iran, and their interests in maintaining good relations with the US, on whose patronage their security has long depended, Britain, with which they have close economic relations, and more recently France. However, the potential of tying them into a regional security arrangement has not been sufficiently explored, although Qatar for example "has increasingly reached out to Iran, even discussing ways to bring Tehran into regional security discussions".<sup>37</sup> With a view to regional and US national security Kinzer has argued that the US should develop a new perception of Iran as a strategic partner and enhance its relationship with Turkey.<sup>38</sup> Yet, the US has found it difficult to accommodate Turkey's and Brazil's engagement with Iran. It is said to welcome Turkey's involvement now,<sup>39</sup> but Turkey was still sidelined during the Istanbul talks in early 2011. The next section will argue that Turkey, and also Brazil, have a great

deal to offer for a solution to the dispute with Iran.

## Turkey and Brazil - The Dream Team?

Greater involvement of regional actors in the negotiations with Iran is more likely to result in credible assurances about the peaceful nature of the nuclear program and can lead to a system of safeguards and Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) that have the potential to contribute to security in the wider region. This is particularly important not only for a sustainable solution to the dispute with Iran, but also for future challenges to safeguarding the emerging nuclear energy industries in the region. The following discussion is somewhat connected to ideas John C. Shenna, a serving European diplomat who wrote under a pseudonym, developed for regional engagement with Iran on the matter of its nuclear program.<sup>40</sup> This article agrees that Turkey can play a leading role, but is a little more cautious about two aspects of Shenna's proposals. One, he suggests that Saudi Arabia might join Turkey in setting up a tri-lateral nuclear safeguards arrangement with Iran, but the above analysis has demonstrated that this may not be an immediately available option.

Two, Shenna argues that concerns over Iran's human rights violations make it particularly difficult for Western actors to negotiate constructively with

Iran. Indeed Iran is under US and EU sanctions for the nuclear program and human rights violations. Shenna thus focuses entirely on regional dispute resolution, but the exclusion of Western actors is unlikely to be acceptable to them and Israel. If Israel did come to feel even more vulnerable and perceive an increasing threat from Iran, it would be more likely to take matters into its own hands and escalate the conflict. Preventing this outcome must be an aim of any new approach. Yet, rather than just averting the worst-case scenario, the approach should and can initiate the evolution of a sustainable solution that can generate trust on nuclear and eventually other security issues in the region.

As explained below, the core point is to refrain from singling out Iran as "the problem" and to view its nuclear program as one of the many nuclear energy programs emerging in the region. Notwithstanding the interests of external actors, regional countries have an even more immediate interest in ensuring that their neighbors perceive their nuclear programs as peaceful. Herein lies the opportunity for a regional nuclear control regime, which Turkey and Brazil are well placed to promote. In a nutshell, Turkey brings cultural sensitivity, understanding and the experience of long-standing political and economic relations with Iran. It has already demonstrated that these factors and its status as a NNWS-Iran rejects the legitimacy of the

negotiating position of the NWS- make it an acceptable negotiating partner for Iran. Although lessons are not entirely transferable, Brazil has experience in negotiating under tense political conditions CBM and a bilateral nuclear security regime with Argentina.

Turkey and Iran have in some ways parallel histories. At times Iran even sought to emulate Turkey's approach to modernization.<sup>41</sup> Turkey has also demonstrated a great deal more sensitivity to the underlying aspirations of Iran than the P5+1, especially the Western allies, that is, Iran's desire to be recognized as an influential and potentially constructive regional actor. In other words, at the public political level it has afforded Iran what it seeks: recognition. In private, Turkey has, however, also been able to persuade Iran to agree to concessions, as the fuel-swap deal demonstrated, and it has made plain its objections to nuclear weapons in the region.

Barkey has described Turkey's role in dealing with Iran as a mediator whose core interest is in a stable Iranian regime, but who is also in competition with Iran for regional influence. He suggested that Iran would not be prepared to accept Turkish mediation because it also "perceives itself as a rising power of great significance, which ought not to need a mediator, especially by a mid-level power or neighbor".<sup>42</sup> Finally, he has argued that Turkey would be able to eclipse Iran with its increasing economic and diplomatic influence in

the region, especially its burgeoning ties with Syria. Yet, seeking to eclipse Iran would not be compatible with Turkey's current foreign policy of "zero problems with neighbors", which precludes open attempts at outmaneuvering Iran as a regional power.

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Furthermore, Turkey's role should not be confined to that of a mediator. It can play a leading role in initiating regional cooperation on nuclear safeguards and regulating the emerging nuclear energy industries. In principle Turkey is well placed to initiate negotiations between Iran and other regional actors aimed at establishing a nuclear safeguards regime, or in the first instance a joint regulatory framework for operational safety and multilateral cooperation on fuel supply, which may be less sensitive and thus easier to negotiate. Among regional countries Turkey is least tied into the long-standing rivalries and frictions discussed above, although Saudi Arabia is skeptical of Turkish influence.<sup>43</sup> Notwithstanding the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, this lack of more recent historical baggage can work as an asset.

While Iran may be the first country to enter into negotiations, it would be important to state from the outset that the aim is ultimately to tie all regional countries with an existing or planned nuclear energy infrastructure into a future framework for managing and regulating these nuclear programs. The purpose here is to indicate to Iran that it is not being victimized, that Turkey is acting neither as an agent of, nor a mediator for, “the West”, and that Iran is being encouraged to become a founding member of a regional nuclear regulatory regime. Turkey and Iran wish to be perceived as trustworthy actors. Acknowledging their responsibility towards each other could be a basis for cooperation on running and regulating their nuclear energy sectors. They would treat each other as equals. If the aim of such cooperation were to create the kernel of a regional nuclear safeguards and operational safety regime, they would enjoy the status of founding members. Iran would not be treated as a subordinate requiring mediation in order to settle its dispute with the P5+1.

Some regional governments and the West might reject such an approach. Highlighting that the US and the international community would seek assurances and transparency, Lorenz and Kidd for example have argued that Turkish efforts at initiating multilateral cooperation on nuclear matters in the Middle East would have to fulfill three core criteria: (1) gradual thematic build-up, lest such cooperation be

perceived as proliferation sensitive; (2) involvement of the IAEA in an oversight role; and (3) full transparency of any plans for cooperation to the outside world.<sup>44</sup> These are important aspects of confidence-building between the region and international community and, the analysis will return to this issue later, but preconditions can be counterproductive, especially if they are expected to be formalized.

In the fraught political environment in the region and particularly within Iran these preconditions risk making the initiation of nuclear cooperation vulnerable to spoilers who are interested in maintaining friction between Iran and “the West” or invoking regional objections on grounds of discrimination by NWS against NNWS and within the NPT. Lorenz and Kidd after all emphasized that Turkey is especially concerned that multilateral nuclear fuel supply arrangements should not be perceived as discriminatory.<sup>45</sup> Turkey shares this conviction with others in the region who have long objected that the efforts of NWS to restrict their use of the full fuel cycle contravene NPT regulations. The same concerns had led to Brazil and Argentina rejecting IAEA safeguards and membership of the NPT before their long journey towards joining these international regimes in the late 1990s.<sup>46</sup>

Iran’s neighbors have an even greater interest in assurances of the peaceful nature of its nuclear program than the more remote “Western” allies. They

would be more vulnerable to Iran's enhanced ability to exert political pressure, if it retained its policy of ambiguity. Furthermore, as argued above, they have an interest in communicating credibly that their own nuclear energy programs are peaceful and safe. Hence, they need to accept responsibility for their own policies and security, which includes a reputation for trustworthiness, but their Western allies need to afford them the space to do so. Considering regional suspicions of discrimination at the international level, a regional regime could fulfill these functions in the first instance. As Brazilian-Argentine cooperation has shown, this does not preclude an eventual link to the IAEA, especially as the potential cooperation partners in the Middle East are already NPT members.

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**The Argentine-Brazilian Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC) could work as a model for a regional safeguards regime in the Middle East.**

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Brazil and Iran established relations soon after the Islamic Revolution. They have expanded to such an extent since 2000 that Brazil is now Iran's principal trading partner in Latin America.<sup>47</sup> Brazil has modeled its role in support of nuclear non-proliferation worldwide, and specifically with a view to Iran, on the idea

of acting as a mediator.<sup>48</sup> If Turkey took the lead in negotiations, Brazil would be well placed to play this role using its expertise in negotiating and running a bi-lateral regime. The Argentine-Brazilian Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC) could work as a model for a regional safeguards regime in the Middle East, as the Agency's Secretary Antonio Oliveira has suggested. He emphasized that before the creation of the Agency both countries, which are the only two in South America to have mastered the full fuel cycle and the only neighbors in the world to have established an agency like ABACC, had conducted their nuclear research in "a climate of distrust and rivalry".<sup>49</sup> Not only the two countries, but also major international actors distrusted their nuclear intentions.<sup>50</sup>

A number of other characteristics of their nuclear cooperation are relevant here. It emerged without outside interference. Their interest in addressing outside pressures on their nuclear programs together was greater than pursuing parallel, potentially confrontational, approaches.<sup>51</sup> The negotiating process followed its own logic, described as "roughly cooperation, transparency, confidence-building, verification, in contrast to the approach advocated in international forums [sic] ... by northern countries: verification, transparency, confidence-building, cooperation".<sup>52</sup> Counter-intuitively, the nuclear field was the highly symbolic starting point for cooperation whose



scope expanded quickly into other areas. This has been explained with the absence of “public and private economic and commercial interests” impeding progress in negotiating agreements.<sup>53</sup> Finally, ABACC was modeled on Euratom, the European Atomic Energy Community.<sup>54</sup> Mallard has argued that Euratom could, with some improvements to the original treaty, constitute a model for the Middle East in three areas: nuclear safeguards against illicit diversion by state and non-state actors, CBM, especially in the area of nuclear R&D, and fuel supply guarantees for state actors.<sup>55</sup> Euratom and its associated organizations also adopted roles in the promotion of cooperation on operational safety and regulation of nuclear facilities. There is thus no shortage of models or technical solutions, but Turkey and Brazil cannot quite be the dream team, at least not alone.

## A Few Caveats

The aim of this paper is not to examine in detail how models from other regions might be applied in the Middle East. It thus does not seek to propose a plan in which negotiating steps or themes are laid out in sequence. It is, however, concerned with the political context in which solutions would be negotiated. It is thus necessary to address some caveats. Some have argued that only after transition to democratic governments in both countries was progress on Brazilian-Argentinean cooperation in

the nuclear field possible.<sup>56</sup> This could be cause for pessimism about the model’s transferability. However, when in 1980 Brazil and Argentina arrived at the initial agreement to cooperate on peaceful nuclear issues, which did not produce results, both had military governments. This is not the case in Iran or any other potential cooperation partner in the region. Furthermore, by the time they made progress they were not mature democracies.

Cooperation on nuclear regulation is a government-to-government matter. Regional governments have an interest in mutual assurances of the peaceful nature of their nuclear industries. This can include Iran, if it is afforded the recognition it seeks and does not feel threatened by its neighbors and external actors. Finally, in Iran a peaceful program has wide public support, but there is opposition to nuclear weapons even within the structures of government. There is thus at least a possibility that cooperation on the basis of shared concerns is feasible.

The core challenge for Turkey and other regional actors will be that, in order to set off a spiral of trust-building, it will be necessary for all concerned to “forward invest”. In other words, they will have to take a leap of faith and act as if trust already existed between them, which is not the same as trusting but can be sufficient for starting the iterative process which will ultimately build trust. One could argue that this is a tall order, especially in the Middle East, but Turkey

and Brazil have already built a degree of trust with Iran. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's public statement in 2010 that he believed the Iranian government's claims that its nuclear program was peaceful is an example of forward investment in trust.<sup>57</sup>

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**Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's public statement in 2010 that he believed the Iranian government's claims that its nuclear program was peaceful is an example of forward investment in trust.**

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The smaller Gulf states are concerned about Iran's regional policies and nuclear program, but they are also keen not to spoil their relations with Iran. Maintaining trade relations requires a modicum of trust. No deal can be made without it. It is not unrealistic to assume that this kernel of trust constitutes a basis for further cooperation, for example on fuel supplies or operational safety, which is a particular concern for states that are geographically closer to the Bushehr reactor than Tehran. Turkey is expanding its relations with Gulf states, especially Kuwait and Qatar.<sup>58</sup> It would have to translate increasing economic ties into political relations. If it succeeds, there is scope for joining Qatar's outreach to Iran. Qatar is also planning to develop a nuclear energy sector, received approval from the IAEA in 2006, and signed a

deal for peaceful cooperation on nuclear energy with Russia in November 2010.<sup>59</sup> Nuclear cooperation between Turkey, Iran and Qatar is thus not out of the question.

For the process to develop momentum, the putative partners will have to experience that their initial investment in trust has paid off. The so-called Arab Spring has created uncertainty about the sustainability of existing or the nature of future governments. This may slow down negotiations on nuclear cooperation while the current period of change settles. That the Turkish model of government has found favor among protesters<sup>60</sup> may be viewed as fortuitous, but Nuh Yilmaz has argued that adapting its foreign policy to the new, complex dynamics will require considerable reflection on Turkey's position and its foreign policy resources.<sup>61</sup> A leading role in trust-building on nuclear issues means that Turkey has to be able to resource substantial and sustained engagement as well as policies that are responsive to the potential opportunities arising in the rapidly changing regional climate.

Cooperation between Turkey, Iran and Qatar with Brazil as a mediator would generate a virtuous cycle and their cooperation could pay dividends for all sides. If it did, they could pave the way towards a NWFZ in the Gulf as proposed in 2004 by the Gulf Cooperation Council.<sup>62</sup> This is likely to be more feasible than a WMDFZ in the entire Middle East and may assure Israel that security dynamics in its environment

are improving. This then leads to the final and most important caveat. Unlike Brazil and Argentina, regional actors in the Middle East cannot expect to negotiate cooperation agreements entirely without outside interference. Western states will seek some form of assurances that cooperation on nuclear issues does not support proliferation. In addition to its anxieties about Iran, Israel's concerns about the ramifications of popular uprisings in Arab countries were only marginally calmed by the Egyptian transition government's public commitment to their peace treaty.<sup>63</sup> It is therefore especially regrettable that Israeli-Turkish relations have deteriorated over the past years.

It is impossible to add more than some considerations about how outside actors might be assured of the peaceful aims of regional nuclear cooperation. As external actors will have to give regional actors space to explore options, they too have to make a leap of faith. However, Iran and the US have repeatedly engaged in informal contacts. The Iranian leadership has also demonstrated that it can use diplomacy in support of its political goals and national economic interests. It is neither a reckless nor an irrational actor. If Iran's core concern is recognition and the dialogue with Turkey and others on nuclear issues provides this, it is not beyond the realms

of possibility that it may tacitly tolerate "off the record" assurances from Turkey to the US. Consent to assurances from Gulf states, such as Qatar, is even more likely as they have close relations with the US.

## Conclusion

This analysis has sought to demonstrate that Iran is not the pre-eminent, let alone the sole, cause for regional tensions and mistrust and that it is not beyond engagement on its nuclear program. Viewing regional hostility towards Iran exclusively through the lens of a Shia-Sunni divide has been shown to offer insufficient explanations.

The analysis has furthermore argued that the specter of Iranian nuclear weapons has been instrumentalized in order to justify perceptions of a threat whose roots lie elsewhere. Particularly important is the tendency of some client states to manipulate their patron, the US, into supporting the pursuit of their perceived self-interests, which are not necessarily beneficial to regional security as a whole or in the long-term security interest of the client. Neither the predominant discourse on Iran nor the approach of external actors have allowed for the possibility that the dispute might be resolved not only with the aim of

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**Viewing regional hostility towards Iran exclusively through the lens of a Shia-Sunni divide has been shown to offer insufficient explanations.**

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overcoming the current stalemate with the P5+1, but with a view to developing a regional regime for running, regulating the operational safety, and safeguarding against weapons or nuclear material proliferation the emerging nuclear energy industries in the region.

Not treating Iran as “the problem” but as a potential founding member of such a regime is a more constructive approach than the coercive line taken by the P5+1, especially by the Western allies and supported by some of their regional allies. It would grant Iran the recognition

it seeks. If the iterative process of trust and regime-building were to succeed, it could be extended to the establishment of a NWFZ in the Gulf, which is more feasible than a

WMDFZ in the Middle East. Turkey is in principle well placed to initiate such a process, particularly if it works with Brazil. It has long-standing relations with, and is an acceptable negotiation partner for, Iran. It is a neighbor and brings with it cultural sensitivity, but is not as entangled in the dynamics of mistrust as other regional actors. It has also begun to establish relations with Qatar, whose outreach to Iran and emerging nuclear industry could make it a suitable partner in an initially limited cooperative framework.

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**Reducing tension over nuclear issues through cooperation can generate the experience of trust and trigger a virtuous cycle leading to more cooperation and trust-building.**

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Brazil also has long-standing relations with Iran and experience in establishing nuclear cooperation with Argentina despite political tensions. This offers lessons that are transferable to negotiations with Iran and other states in the region. At a more technical level, the fact that ABACC has been modeled on Euratom, which has been proposed as a model for a nuclear regime in the Middle East, is significant. Also noteworthy are two other aspects of the cooperation and confidence-building process in Latin America. It began, quite counter-intuitively, in the sensitive nuclear area

and followed its own logic, not that advocated by major international actors. The former suggests that reducing tension over nuclear issues through cooperation can generate the experience of trust

and trigger a virtuous cycle leading to more cooperation and trust-building. The latter suggests that external actors need to allow for the possibility that the process in the Middle East might also follow its own logic.

However, another feature of the engagement between Brazil and Argentina is unlikely to be transferable: no outside interference. The P5+1, particularly the Western powers who regard themselves as partly responsible for Israel’s security and have invested considerable political capital in the dispute with Iran, will

not tolerate a regional process without assurances of its peaceful aims. Should Turkey wish to lead regional initiatives, it would not only have to mobilize considerable resources developing a sustainable foreign policy that is oriented towards conflict prevention and peaceful conflict resolution and can respond constructively to the very dynamic, potentially volatile regional political context. It would also have to ensure that the Western allies receive assurances. Iran would not necessarily object to providing such assurances

to the US as long as they cannot be publicly viewed as evidence of “selling out” to the West. Clearly, venturing to reverse the downward spiral of regional security dynamics and seeking to engage Iran would be a substantial challenge for Turkey and Brazil. History has amply shown that trust-building in the Middle East is an uphill struggle. However, that such endeavors have failed in the past must not foreclose renewed attempts, especially as the worst-case scenarios have become even worse than they have been in the past.

## Endnotes

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