Weapons of Mass Destruction in West Asia

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Abstract

For most of the 1990s and the early 2000s, the international community was concerned about finding and destroying Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Following the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 the focus has shifted to neighboring Iran. This paper examines the motives of Iran and Iraq for seeking such capabilities regarding the acquisition of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and the missiles that deliver them in both countries. Finally, it analyzes American efforts to prevent, or at least slow, the proliferation of WMD in Iran in the aftermath of the 2003 war.

The 2003 war opened a new chapter in Iraq’s domestic and foreign policies. The question of WMD in post-Saddam Iraq will take some time to be fully addressed. The issue and future of Iraq’s non-conventional capabilities should be viewed in the context of a broader regional security system.

The nature of the political regime in Tehran is not the main reason for any Iranian efforts to acquire WMD. Instead, it is the perception of threats from regional powers (Iraq, Pakistan, and Israel) as well as a global power—the United States. There is no consensus on how to prevent Iran from developing nuclear capability. The Iranians categorically deny any interest in nuclear weapons. Also, it is not clear whether a nuclear Iran will behave in any way different from a non-nuclear Iran.

In the long run, there is no substitute for addressing the underlying reasons for conflict in West Asia, particularly in the Persian Gulf and the Arab-Israeli conflict.
Introduction

Since the early 1980s the Middle Eastern military and strategic environment has been in a state of flux. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the Gulf War (1991), and the war in Iraq (2003) have drastically altered the strategic dynamics of the region. Three developments, with significant strategic implications, can be identified: First, Iran’s conventional military capabilities under the Islamic regime have been severely restrained. The massive destruction of a large proportion of Iranian arms during the war with Iraq combined with a relative lack of available funds to buy new weapons suggest that militarily Tehran is much weaker than it was under the Shah. No more does Iran have the capability, resources, or international backing to play the role of the policeman of the Gulf, which it played in the 1970s.

Second, far worse than Iran, Iraqi military forces have been substantially destroyed. Enjoying high oil prices and revenues, Baghdad was a leading military force in the Middle East in the late 1970s. The three Gulf wars dealt a heavy blow to the Iraqi military capability and as a result of the last conflict Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled and a “new Iraq” has been established. The post-Hussein Iraq will redefine its national interests and its regional and international relations.

Third, subject to this changing military calculus and the subsequent strategic uncertainty, it is worth noting that weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, and the necessary missiles to deliver them—have in the past been introduced and used in the Gulf region. Chemical weapons played a decisive role in the Iraqi attacks on the Iranian troops from 1984 until the end of the war in 1989. In response, Tehran sought to retaliate in kind to the Iraqi attacks and developed its own stockpile of chemical weapons. Furthermore, the two countries launched massive missile attacks against each other’s cities.

For years prior to the 2003 Iraq war, both Iran and Iraq have been interested in developing non-conventional capability, not only to match Israeli power but possibly more importantly to gain military and strategic leverage in their disputes with each other. Regional rivalries and insecurities compel nations-states to undertake efforts to safeguard their core interests. The acquisition of WMD and secure delivery systems would appear logical and even necessary to achieve this goal. Prestige can be seen as another incentive for states to acquire WMD, particularly nuclear capability. Nevertheless, the stockpiling of these non-conventional weapons combined with political rhetoric can substantially increase the odds for catastrophic war in the Middle East, and increase the chances of pre-emptive and preventive strikes.

This essay will review the status of WMD in Iraq and Iran. Particular attention will be given to the motives and history of the efforts to acquire these non-conventional capacities. Furthermore an assessment of the chemical, biological, nuclear, and missile capabilities of each state will be provided as well as their stand on the international non-proliferation norms and agreements. Finally, the future of WMD in the Middle East will be examined.

Iraq

During the Saddam era, Iraq was an interesting and unique case in the area of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), from the early 1970s the Iraqi experience with WMD featured the following characteristics: First, unlike many other developing countries, Baghdad had the necessary ingredients to manufacture and develop robust non-conventional capabilities. These included massive financial resources due to skyrocketing oil prices and revenues, a progressive technical infrastructure managed by thousands of competent engineers and scientists, relatively good relations with the major global powers (until the invasion of Kuwait), which enabled Baghdad to receive technical assistance from France and other European countries in the 1970s and some degree of tolerance by the United States to its stockpiling and use of chemical weapons (CW) in the 1980s. Interestingly, the Security Council of the United Nations issued a resolution, endorsed by the United States, condemning the Israeli attack on Iraq’s nuclear facilities in 1981. It is little wonder that by the time of the Gulf War (1991) Iraq had assembled an impressive stockpile of WMD, and was very close to manufacturing nuclear devices.

Second, Iraq was not the only country in the Middle East to seek non-conventional capabilities. Many of its neighbors such as Iran,
himself and his country to lead the Arab world. President Nasser’s demise in 1970 left a leadership vacuum in the region. Egypt was growing poorer and weaker and President Sadat needed time to establish himself as a statesman. Furthermore, Sadat’s strategy to make a unilateral peace with Israel further isolated Egypt. Meanwhile, Iraq was a solid candidate to replace Egypt and lead the Middle East. Saddam was able to crush the Kurdish rebellion after signing a treaty with the Shah of Iran, under which the latter agreed to cease all assistance to the Iraqi Kurds. At the same time, Baghdad enjoyed unprecedented economic prosperity due to soaring oil revenues. By utilizing these financial resources to build Iraq’s conventional and non-conventional military power, Saddam Hussein came close to fulfilling his personal ambition to project himself and his country as the absolute leader of the Arab world.

Third, Iraq is the first and only country in the world to experience a pre-emptive strike on its nuclear reactor (the Israeli raid on Osiraq in 1981). Furthermore, the U.S.-led attack on Iraq in March 2003 was justified, at least partly, by the allegations that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD and refused to destroy them. (As discussed below, these allegations were proven questionable). Thus, in the course of two decades Iraq had been subjected to two pre-emptive attacks, one by Israel and the other by the United States, to rid the country of WMD.

Fourth, more than any country in the world, the Iraqi program to acquire and develop non-conventional capabilities was put under strict United Nations scrutiny for most of the 1990s and the early 2000s. Following the Gulf War, two commissions—the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), and the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC)—were created to find and destroy Iraq’s WMD. It is still not clear if these two commissions had completely eliminated all of Iraq’s WMD, but they did find and destroy many of Iraq’s non-conventional capabilities.

Taking into consideration these characteristics of Iraq’s experience with WMD, the analysis here will proceed to examine Baghdad’s motives in acquiring and developing such capabilities, and how and when Iraq started building them. This section provides an assessment of Iraq’s WMD before the 2003 war. Understanding Iraq’s motives to acquire non-conventional capability sheds light on the question of WMD in the post-Saddam Iraq.

Iraq’s efforts to acquire WMD started in the early 1970s and intensified during the war with Iran in the 1980s. This move to build non-conventional capability was driven by at least three reasons. First, the Ba’ath party came to power in 1968, after which Saddam Hussein concentrated all power in his own hands; Saddam had an ambition for Syria, Israel, and Egypt, are believed to have different kinds of WMD. Also, Iraq has not been the only Middle Eastern state to use CW. Egypt used them in its war in Yemen in the early 1960s and Libya used them in the war in Chad several years later. What was different about Iraq is that it used CW extensively on both its enemies (the Iranians) and its own population (the Kurds). Saddam Hussein’s regime’s use of CW is probably more documented than any other CW use since the First World War.

and develop WMD was the deep-rooted hostility and distrust toward Iran, which is bigger and more populated. The two countries have had territorial disputes over the division of the Shatt al-Arab since the 1930s. When the British withdrew from the Persian Gulf region in 1971, Iran invaded and occupied two strategic islands at the mouth of the Gulf, the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, and expanded its control over a third one, Abu Musa. The Iranian occupation was perceived in Baghdad as a major threat to Iraq’s access to the oceans. Furthermore, Iran under the Shah was establishing and expanding its nuclear program. Saddam and his strategic planners probably suspected that Iran had nuclear ambitions. Under these circumstances, WMD could apparently serve as a deterrent and an equalizer. Iraq’s extensive use of WMD during the Iran-Iraq war played a crucial role in demoralizing the Iranian troops and proved the military and psychological impact of these weapon-systems.

Baghdad’s interest in non-conventional capabilities started as early as 1959, one year after the monarchy was overthrown, when it established an Atomic Energy Commission and contracted for a research reactor from the former Soviet Union. The reactor was completed in 1968. The Soviet Union, however, was slow in providing the nuclear assistance Iraq demanded and the Iraqi leaders were not completely satisfied with the Soviet technology. Accordingly, Iraq turned to other sources. In 1976, Iraq bought from France a 40-megawatt materials test reactor called the Tammuz-1, or Osiraq, that ran on weapons-grade uranium fuel. In 1979, Iraq established a radiochemical laboratory, equipped through a contract with an Italian company suitable for laboratory research on reprocessing. It also acquired a fuel fabrication plant from Italy that was suitable for making natural uranium targets for secret irradiation in the Osiraq reactor. Iraq also bought uranium from Brazil, Portugal, and Niger.

The Israeli preemptive strike on Osiraq in June 1981 ended the first stage of the Iraqi nuclear program. The Iraqi leadership, however, was determined to challenge the Israeli nuclear monopoly in the Middle East and to revive and rebuild its nuclear program. The war with Iran in the 1980s helped Iraq initiate and expand efforts to build non-conventional capabilities. Baghdad skillfully played on the fears in the West and the Persian Gulf of Iranian fundamentalism and presented its secular regime as a bulwark against radical Islam. As a result, many Western governments and companies either directly sold Iraq conventional and non-conventional weaponry or looked the other way. Under these favorable conditions, Iraq intensified its use of CW against the Iranian troops. Iran initially lacked the capability to retaliate. Indeed, during all the eight-year war, Iran’s chemical and missile capabilities were no match for Iraq’s. Iran’s inability to respond in kind to Iraq’s WMD attacks prompted Saddam Hussein further to escalate Iraq’s use of these weapons. In contrast, Saddam Hussein opted not to use chemical or biological weapons against the Allied troops or Israel during the Gulf War (1991) because of fear of in-kind, or worse, nuclear retaliation.

In addition to the massive build-up of Iraq’s chemical, biological, and missile capabilities in the 1980s, Baghdad invested substantial resources in reviving its nuclear program. It is unknown how advanced the Iraqi nuclear program was, but the consensus is that on the eve of the Gulf War in 1991 Iraq was very close to possessing a nuclear explosive. Confident of his expanding WMD arsenal, Saddam Hussein started making threats to Israel. In a famous speech in April 1990, the Iraqi president vowed to burn half of Israel if it attacked Iraq. Furthermore, he promised to retaliate against Israel if it attacked any Arab country. In other words, the possession of WMD provided Saddam Hussein with the means to claim a leadership position in the Arab world. These threats, however, proved premature.

Iraq’s growing WMD arsenal represented a major challenge to Israel and other regional and international powers. Indeed, the destruction of Iraq’s WMD infrastructure was high on the coalition’s motives for going to war with Iraq following the latter’s invasion and annexation of Kuwait in August in 1990. A pre-emptive attack on Iraq nuclear facilities similar to the Israeli raid in 1981 was not an option. Baghdad had learned how to hide and protect its nuclear reactors. The Osiraq attack was a one-time affair against a positively identified target. Instead, following the Gulf War, the Security Council of the United

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Nations issued Resolution 687, which mandated that Iraq eliminate its entire biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons programs as well as all of its ballistic missiles capable of traveling more than 150 kilometers. The resolution required that the United Nations establish a special commission, UNSCOM, to verify that Iraq’s biological, chemical, and proscribed missile programs were eliminated, and the International Energy Agency (IAEA) was charged with doing the same for Iraq’s nuclear weapons program.

These two organizations started immediately their search for Iraq’s WMD. Despite enormous obstacles, they found and destroyed tons of these weapons, prohibited missiles and the main infrastructure to manufacture them. After serious problems related to inspection of presidential sites and charges that some inspectors who worked for UNSCOM were spying on Iraq for the United States, the whole inspection process came to a complete halt and both the IAEA and UNSCOM withdrew their personnel from Iraq in December 1998. This was followed by three-day air strikes against specific targets by the United States and the United Kingdom. This military operation, known as Desert Fox, did not change Iraq’s determination to ban inspectors working for UNSCOM from entering the country again and resuming their work. In an apparent attempt to break the stalemate, the Security Council passed Resolution 1284 in December 1999, creating a successor to UNSCOM—the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC).

In a last attempt to convince Iraq to comply fully with the disarmament resolutions, the Security Council passed Resolution 1441 unanimously in November 2002. The new resolution called on Iraq to implement all existing Security Council resolutions related to WMD. Iraq accepted the resolution and international inspectors were allowed back into the country. Dissatisfied with the Iraqi compliance, the United States led an international coalition that toppled the Saddam Hussein regime and occupied Iraq in March 2003.

Two conclusions can be drawn from these 12 years (1991-2003) of international efforts to disarm Iraq. First, many observers and govern-

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neighbors had been neutralized, at least in the short term. It is little wonder, then, that more international attention has been focused on the other giant Persian Gulf state—Iran. Under Saddam Hussein’s leadership, Iraq acquired chemical and biological weapons and had an active nuclear program and hundreds of ballistic missiles. In addition, Baghdad used, or threatened to use, these weapons. Iran is a different story. Tehran signed several of the major nonproliferation treaties including the CWC, the BWC, and the NPT, and since the mid-1970s has called for making the whole Middle East a nuclear-free zone. Furthermore, Iran has suffered more from CW at the hands of the Iraqis than any other nation in the world since the end of the First World War. Finally, Iranian strategists are concerned about the proliferation of WMD in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, a large Sunni Muslim country; Israel, an arch-enemy; and of course Iraq (to the extent it ever resumes what it was before the 2003 war).

Despite this dangerous neighborhood, Iranian officials categorically deny any interest in or possession of WMD. Israel, the United States, and other countries believe, however, that Iran has a large stockpile of CW and BW as well as an active program to manufacture nuclear explosives. Iran and its critics agree, though, about the country’s active and ambitious missile program. Iranian officials are not shy about confirming and displaying their growing missile capabilities. Iran is neither party to any international treaty that would limit its capacity to develop missiles.

This section examines Iran’s motives and incentives to acquire WMD. Then, a brief review of Iranian efforts to manufacture these weapons is provided and an assessment is given of the country’s chemical, biological, and nuclear capabilities as well as its missile program. American efforts to stop or slow down Iranian non-conventional capabilities will be analyzed. Finally, the question of the strategic impact of a potential “nuclear Iran” will be addressed.

An examination of Iran’s motivations to acquire and develop WMD reveals a deep concern about national security within a regional and international context that has grown more hostile and dangerous to the Islamic regime since the revolution in 1979. Put differently, Iranian strategists feel threatened by the growing non-conventional capabilities of several of their neighbors, as well as by the deployment of American
Pakistan, a nuclear power, is on the eastern borders of Iran. The great majority of the Iranians are Shiite, and Pakistan is one of the largest Sunni countries. Until the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Iran and Pakistan took opposite sides in the civil war in neighboring Afghanistan. Islamabad supported the Taliban—an extremist Sunni movement—while Tehran supported the Northern Alliance—a group of opposition groups that included the Afghan Shiites. Meanwhile, Pakistan is a close ally to the United States, and Iran established close economic and military cooperation with India, Pakistan’s main rival.

On its southern borders, Iran shares the Persian Gulf with the Arab Gulf monarchies. Since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991, Iran and its Arab neighbors have come closer and have signed several agreements to consolidate their cooperation. Despite this Arab-Iranian rapprochement, there are basic problems beneath the surface. Most of these Arab Gulf states have large Shiite minorities that have not been completely assimilated. Most of the Arab Gulf rulers have forged strong defense links with the United States. They supported Iraq in its war with Iran and they have bought some of the most sophisticated weapons systems in the world. Finally, Iran has a standing territorial dispute with the United Arab Emirates, supported by the other Gulf monarchies, over three islands—the Greater Tunb, the Lesser Tunb and Abu Mussa.

Since the early 1990s, Iran has had good relations with most of these neighbors—Turkey, Russia, Pakistan, and the Arab Gulf states. A military threat from these countries to the Islamic Republic is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Still deterioration of relations cannot be ruled out. Iranian strategists include these potential adversaries in drawing their national security plans. They saw more realistic threats as coming from the United States, Israel and Iraq, and it was their fear of these three countries that was the main reason for Iran having sought a non-conventional arsenal since the mid-1970s.

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Tehran and Jerusalem have regarded each other as sworn enemies. Iran, even under the Shah, opposed the Israeli nuclear asymmetry in the Middle East and Israel’s refusal to sign the NPT. Accordingly, the Pahlavi regime sought to establish its own nuclear program and, as an alternative, called for the troops next to their borders in almost all directions. The lesson that the Iranians have learned from their own experience and that of other countries is that conventional weapons probably will not suffice to ensure their national security and deter potential attacks. Instead, chemical, biological, and nuclear capabilities and the means to deliver them will prevent the country’s potential and real enemies from threatening core Iranian national interests.

Turkey is located on the northwestern borders of Iran. Despite overall good relations between Ankara and Tehran, there are fundamental differences in their domestic and foreign policy orientations with clear implications for their national security. While Turkey is a staunch believer in secularism and the Turkish army stands firm to prevent religious penetration of Turkish public life and policy, the Iranian regime’s legitimacy is based on its adherence to the Islamic principles and tenets. In addition, Turkey is a traditional ally of the United States and a member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and since the mid-1990s has forged a military and economic alliance with Israel. Both the United States and Israel are Iran’s sworn enemies. Despite these basic differences, these two Muslim, non-Arab Middle Eastern states have established good relations and avoided any serious military confrontation. Still, a Turkish military threat to Iran cannot be ruled out. Ankara features in Tehran’s national security calculus.

Russia is located to the north of Iran. Historically, the Soviet Union/Russia has always posed a threat to the stability and territorial integrity of Iran. In the past two centuries Iran has lost substantial territory to the Soviet Union/Russia. During the Cold War, the Pahlavi regime strongly resisted Soviet attempts to penetrate the Middle East and promote communism. Since the early 1990s, Russia has become one of Iran’s closest allies. Indeed, Russia has helped Iran build its conventional and non-conventional capabilities. Nevertheless, Moscow and Tehran have taken opposite stands on basic issues. Russia is a main trade partner to Israel and has special relations with the Jewish state due to the approximately one million Soviet Jews who immigrated to Israel. Besides, Russia and Iran pursue competing policies in the Caspian Sea. The two nations disagree on the legal status of the Caspian Sea and also disagree on the oil pipeline routes. These disagreements can threaten the current cooperative relations between Moscow and Tehran.
creation of a Mideast Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (MENWFZ). The leaders of the Islamic regime in Tehran perceive Israel as having the most extensive chemical, biological, and nuclear arsenal in the Middle East as well as a formidable conventional force, which has the reputation of being one of the most combat-effective forces in the world. Within this context, an Iranian non-conventional capability can serve as a deterrent against potential Israeli attacks.

In response, senior Israeli military officials and politicians have been explicit about the need to quash Iran’s WMD facilities, particularly the nuclear ones. These Israeli threats are credible for three reasons. a) Israel’s pre-emptive attack on Iraq’s nuclear reactor in 1981 serves as a precedent. In June 1981 Israeli jets attacked and destroyed Iraq’s nuclear reactor, Osirak. The Israeli action represented the first destruction of another nation’s nuclear reactor, preventing by force the proliferation of nuclear weapons and establishing a serious international precedent. b) Israel’s capability to carry out long-range attacks has been substantially enhanced in the last several years. Since the late 1990s, Israel has acquired a number of cruise-missile-capable diesel submarines and further developed its extended-range Jericho missiles. c) As a result of its growing military cooperation with Turkey, Israel effectively has a presence on the Turkish border with Iran; it reportedly operates intelligence-collection facilities there, and Israeli reconnaissance or strike aircraft could overfly Turkey en route to Iran.6

Iran has had hostile relations with the United States since the monarchy was overthrown in 1979. Since then, the Islamic Republic has held an almost paranoid and conspiratorial view of the U.S. role and action in the Middle East and has seen almost every U.S. initiative as a direct or indirect assault on Iran’s national interests.7 Indeed, confronting the United States is one of the few remaining legitimizing symbols for the Islamic Republic. Iran’s strategic stand on the international system has worsened since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower. In

the post-Cold War environment, there is no other superpower to balance the United States. This unchecked sole superpower has been very suspicious of Iran’s intentions and nuclear program. From an American point of view, Iran’s pursuit of nuclear power in the presence of ample hydrocarbon reserves does not make sense. U.S. officials regard Tehran’s interest in the nuclear field to be a precursor to a sinister weapons program. From Iran’s perspective, access to reliable sources of oil and gas has not dissuaded others from developing nuclear technology. The Iranians confirm their right to enjoy the benefit of developing nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. They also argue that Iran is entitled to establish a peaceful nuclear industry as provided for under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Since the early 2000s, the mutual suspicion between Washington and Tehran has grown. In October 2001, American troops were deployed to Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban regime. Less than two years later, in March 2003, American troops were deployed in Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein’s regime. Despite the fact that both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein were regarded as enemies by Iran, the American military presence on Iran’s eastern and western borders (as well as in the Arab Gulf states on the southern borders and in Central Asia on the northern borders) is a matter of great alarm and concern to the regime in Tehran.

For a long time, Iran and other Arab states have argued that there is a double standard in U.S. policy concerning nonproliferation. Iranian officials accuse the United States of pursuing a policy of “selective proliferation” by saying nothing about Israel’s nuclear capability (Israel is not a signatory to the NPT), while harshly criticizing and imposing sanctions on Iran, which signed the NPT. The American-led war in Iraq in 2003 has reinforced these Iranian accusations. The war sent a mixed signal to Tehran. On one hand, the United States was not provoked to attack Iraq; rather, it was a pre-emptive strike, based on biased and unrealistic intelligence information and assessment. This clearly suggests that Washington is ready to use its overwhelming might to prevent the proliferation of WMD. On the other hand, the United States’ more benign and less confrontational response to North Korea’s nuclear activities suggests that acquiring a nuclear device can serve as a deterrent. Some members in the Iranian political/security establish-

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ment believe that a nuclear capability is the only guarantor of the nation’s independence and the regime’s survival. The aim of acquiring such capability would be to deter the United States before it “bullies” the Islamic Republic.8

Finally, pre-invasion Iraq probably represented the most salient incentive for Iran’s drive to acquire and develop WMD. Most of the Iranian efforts to obtain such capabilities started during the war with Iraq (1980-88). During the war, Iraq launched chemical and ballistic missile attacks on Iranian army and population centers. Then, Iran’s arsenal of these weapons was no match for Iraq’s. The existence of a hostile neighboring state with a known chemical and biological capability was an incentive to develop a deterrent in kind.9 This bloody conflict ended with a ceasefire, which had not been formalized into a peace treaty before the American invasion of Iraq.

Indeed, the underlying reasons for the conflict are deep-rooted and have not been adequately resolved. The two nations still have a territorial dispute over the Shatt al-Arab; and the demographic structure will always be a factor in shaping their relations. The majority of Iraqis (about 60 percent) are Shiite and 40 percent are Sunni, while more than 90 percent of the Iranians are Shiite. This means that Iran will always have the potential to influence Iraqi domestic policy. Given these roots of enmity, Tehran and Baghdad have always been suspicious of each other. This hostility characterized their relations before Saddam Hussein and is likely to continue in post-Saddam Iraq. As one analyst put it, “Scenarios of renewed conflict with Iraq are not far-fetched.10” Iran is wary of the uncertainty regarding post-Saddam Iraq. The Iranians learned an important lesson by comparing their war with Iraq (1980-88) and the Gulf War (1991). Iraq used CW against Iran because the latter could not retaliate in kind. In the Gulf War, Iraq did not utilize its WMD because the international coalition had the capability to retaliate in kind. The lesson is that for deterrence to operate, the threatening state must be confronted with the certainty of an equivalent response. Iran has developed non-conventional capabilities to deter Iraq.

The roots of Iran’s pursuit of WMD lie in the closing years of the Iran-Iraq War, though the Shah had previously laid the groundwork for an indigenous Iranian nuclear capability during the 1970s. Officially, Iranian policy-makers insist that their country does not possess and has no interest in developing such capability. Israel, the United States and other countries do not believe Iran’s proclamations and accuse Tehran of stockpiling these deadly weapons.

In response to Iraq’s chemical attacks on Iranian targets, Tehran felt the need for in-kind retaliation. Thus, Iran undertook a serious effort to develop its own arsenal of CW. Iranian officials argue with considerable emotion that they, more than any other country, are determined to eliminate this class of weaponry. More than three decades after the war with Iraq, thousands of Iranians still suffer from chronic illnesses and genetic disorders caused by Iraqi chemical attacks. The case of BW is similar to CW. Iran’s biological weapon program was initiated during the war with Iraq. Development of biological capabilities was made easier because of the dual-use nature of many of the components necessary for such weapons. Like everyone else, Iran claims that it is in compliance with the BWC. However, unlike the CWC, the BWC has no verification mechanism in place.

The most controversial issue regarding Iran’s WMD is its nuclear program. Ironically, this program began with the assistance of the United States.11 In addition, Iran’s nuclear program received contributions from France and Germany. They signed several agreements with the Shah to provide Iran with enriched uranium, nuclear reactors and research centers. A significant step in building Iran’s nuclear capability was the signing of an agreement with two German firms to build two

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nuclear reactors in Bushehr. Construction of these reactors was frozen by Ayatollah Khomeini immediately after the 1979 revolution. The Iranian leader considered NW (as well as CW and BW) immoral and decided not to seek them. In 1985, however, Iran decided to restart its nuclear program.

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, Tehran sought to revive its nuclear program and finish the construction of the Bushehr reactors. The opening of Iran’s first nuclear engineering center in 1992 can be seen as a sign of these renewed efforts to obtain nuclear knowledge. Under American pressure, the German firms refused to resume work on the projects. Iran sought assistance from many other sources, including China, India, Brazil, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan.

The threat of U.S. sanctions, however, blocked the participation of these potential partners in Iran’s nuclear program. Finally, in early January 1995, Iran signed a US$800 million deal with Russia to complete the first of the two units at Bushehr. In response to U.S. pressure, Russia later negotiated with Iran a separate agreement stipulating that all spent fuel from the Bushehr reactors would be shipped back to Russia.

In order to ensure that Iran is not trying to develop nuclear weapons and is in compliance with the NPT, the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the IAEA have demanded that Iran sign the IAEA Model Safeguards Protocol. This document was devised after the discovery of Iraq’s clandestine nuclear weapons program and contains measures designed to permit IAEA inspection of undeclared nuclear sites as well as the declared sites that are already the subject of the basic IAEA inspection regime.

The debate about Iran’s nuclear program was intensified in the summer of 2003 with the revelation that traces of bomb-grade uranium had been found at two facilities in Iran. The amount of plutonium at issue is in micrograms—nowhere near what is needed for a warhead. But experts and diplomats said the key point was that the Iranians were developing the techniques to extract much more plutonium. Under heavy international pressure, Iran acknowledged that it has been developing, for 18 years, a uranium centrifuge enrichment program and for 12 years, a laser enrichment program. Following a visit by the foreign ministers of France, Britain, and Germany to Tehran in October 2003, and in an attempt to underline its new cooperation, Iran informed the IAEA that it was ready to sign the additional protocol to the NPT and was suspending its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities. Finally, in late November 2003 the Board of Governors of the IAEA adopted a resolution that emphasized that in order to restore confidence, Iranian cooperation and transparency will need to be complete and sustained so that the Agency can resolve outstanding issues and, over time, provide and maintain the assurances required by the member states. The resolution added that should any further serious Iranian failures come to light, the Board of Governors would meet immediately to consider all options at its disposal, in accordance with the IAEA Statute and Iran’s Safeguards Agreement.

These international efforts, however, have not ended the controversy over Iran’s nuclear program. In June 2004 the IAEA adopted a resolution deploring Iran’s lack of full cooperation in disclosing the extent and details of its nuclear program. The resolution, co-sponsored by France, Britain, and Germany, does not threaten to report Iran to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions, but calls on Iran to amend its behavior. U.S. officials continue to accuse Iran of “stonewalling,” claiming that the Iranians admit to the dimensions of their nuclear activities bit by bit, as they are confronted with individual pieces of evidence. In response, the Iranians confirmed that they had, and will continue to have, operational uranium enrichment plants. Their goal, they say, is to produce nuclear fuel for peaceful purposes.

In closing, it is better not to speculate on when and if Iran will possess nuclear devices. Intelligence services around the world are striving to answer such questions. Instead, three broad interrelated conclusions can be drawn from this discussion of Iran’s non-conventional capabilities. First, Iranian efforts to acquire and develop WMD are not tied to the current regime. The country’s nuclear program started when the Shah was in power. The war with Iraq and Saddam Hussein’s chemical and missile attacks on Iranian targets that were not condemned by the international community, left the regime in Tehran with no other option but to develop in-kind retaliation. Any regime in Tehran, Islamic or imperial, most likely would have reacted in a similar way. A regime change in Iran would not necessarily mean that the country would give up its WMD aspirations and programs. Hence, the problem is likely to outlast the current regime.
Second, most analysts agree that Iran possesses CW and BW and has developed indigenous capability to assemble and manufacture different types of missiles. There is also consensus that Iran has not yet developed nuclear capability. Israel and the United States accuse Iran of trying to make nuclear weapons; Russia, the European Union, and the IAEA have expressed serious concerns regarding Iran’s intentions; and Iran categorically denies any interest in making nuclear weapons. There is also disagreement about how a nuclear capability might influence Iran’s international policy. In other words, if and when Iran acquires nuclear explosives, will it act differently? To answer this question, three points should be considered: a) It is impossible to know in advance what impact the acquisition of nuclear weapons will have on Iranian policy. b) Many analysts reject the argument that the Iranian leadership is irrational and undeterred. Irrationality is not the real problem. Rather, it is the fragmentation of the Iranian religious/political leadership. In both domestic and foreign policy, Iran speaks with more than one voice. A nuclear Iran, if and when it exists, is not likely to rush to nuclear war. Concern about retaliation and international reaction would be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the Iranian style is more about acting through surrogates (such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Israel, the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, and the Shites in Iraq) and less about direct confrontation. c) Despite these reservations, a nuclear Iran is not a desirable development. Such a step would contribute to uncertainty and instability in the Middle East and the rest of the world.

Third, there is the question of how to deal with the proliferation of WMD in Iran. Regional and international powers agree that Iran armed with WMD would pose a threat to stability and peace. However, there is no consensus on how to slow or eliminate these capabilities. Washington has relied on economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure without ruling out a military option. Similarly, some Israeli officials have raised the possibility of a pre-emptive strike like the one on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981. Russia and the European Union have sought to change Iranian policy through engagement. The latter is Iran’s main trade partner and is negotiating a comprehensive trade agreement with Tehran. The utilization of economic, political, and military tools suggests that different strategies should, and have been implemented. Traditional tools such as export controls are likely to be insufficient. Iran has already made significant progress in acquiring the materials and indigenous expertise it needs to manufacture WMD. A long-term approach to address the issue of Iran’s WMD will depend on encouraging economic and political reform within the country, and on taking steps to reduce regional tension and to solve the underlying reasons for conflict in both the Persian Gulf and the Arab-Israeli dispute.

**Conclusion**

Three conclusions can be drawn from this discussion of non-conventional military capabilities and motivations of Iraq and Iran: First, the military and strategic environment in West Asia is in the process of deep-rooted changes. The fall of the Saddam Hussein regime has drastically altered the region’s strategic landscape. Post-Saddam Hussein Iraq is unlikely to threaten its neighbors with WMD. Certainly this is a positive development for regional and world peace, and since the 2003 war more attention has been focused on Iran’s WMD. Second, the Arabs and Iranians have not been able to balance the Israeli nuclear program with a similar one of their own. Therefore, they have developed chemical and biological capabilities as the best alternative available to them. They will seek to maintain these weapons as long as Israel keeps its nuclear explosives. Third, in the long run, there is no substitute for addressing the underlying reasons for conflict in West Asia including the Persian Gulf and the Arab-Israeli dispute. A fair political settlement of the latter is bound to be conducive to effective arms control and nonproliferation.