
THE EVOLVING THREAT FROM WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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“The sub-regional tensions in North Africa, the Gulf, and South Asia, along with the tensions associated with the Arab-Israeli conflict, interact in ways that may well force all of the major powers in the Middle East to continue their efforts to acquire chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons and delivery systems,” says Anthony H. Cordesman, who holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair for Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

In spite of international arms control efforts, and various discussions of weapons of mass destruction-free zones in the Middle East, the major powers in the region clearly see chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons as key instruments of power. The same is true of long-range delivery systems, such as missiles. At this point in time, Yemen seems to be the only country to have voluntarily given up such weapons, and did so only because the deterioration of its small stock of chemical weapons and its inability to obtain continuing foreign support for its FROG and Scud B missiles left few other options.

THE CURRENT STATE OF PROLIFERATION: A COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY SUMMARY

The current state of proliferation in the Middle East, involving countries from North Africa to Central Asia, may be summarized as follows:

Algeria

Some development of chemical and biological weapons technology. Has considered a nuclear weapons program. Has examined options to obtain long-range missiles.

Libya

Has major production facilities for chemical weapons, but only limited actual production. Stockpiles are probably still smaller than 200 metric tons. Has sought to obtain biological weapons

technology with limited success. Has attempted a nuclear weapons program, but continuing efforts have had little success. Has significant stocks of FROGs and Scud B's, and has attempted to buy or produce longer-range missiles. It fired a missile at the Italian island of Lampadusa.

Egypt

Has preserved some chemical warfare capability. Seems to have developed biological weapons, but has not produced, stockpiled, or weaponized them. Its nuclear weapons program is a failure and has long been dormant. Has Scud missiles and is seeking to create extended-range Scud missiles similar to North Korean designs. Has sought to develop longer-range missiles in the past.

Israel

Has developed chemical and biological weapons and the ability to weaponize them, but does not seem to have produced them. Has never publicly announced its possession of nuclear weapons and relies on an “undeclared” deterrent. Israel has an extensive nuclear stockpile, probably including boosted (fission devices with enhanced yields) and fusion weapons, and some low-yield “theater nuclear weapons.” Has satellite capability for long-range nuclear targeting. Can deliver nuclear weapons with long-range ballistic missiles that can hit any target in the Middle East, and with refuelable, long-range, strike aircraft. Probably developing cruise missiles for submarine and possible surface delivery of nuclear weapons.

AN ENDURING HISTORY OF REGIONAL PROLIFERATION

Proliferation is not a new problem in the Middle East. Nations like Egypt and Israel first began to pursue nuclear weapons during the early 1960s. Egypt used chemical weapons when it intervened in the civil war in Yemen in the 1960s, and both Israel and its opponents were heavily equipped for chemical warfare during the October War in 1973. In spite of various denials, U.S. intelligence experts are convinced that the Shah of Iran initiated Iran's nuclear weapons program during the 1970s, and few doubt that Iraq was actively seeking nuclear weapons at the time Israeli jets struck its Osirak reactor in 1981.

The most dramatic use of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East took place during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. Iraq first used mustard gas and then more sophisticated nerve agents. It not only steadily intensified its chemical attacks on Iranian troop concentrations, but sometimes attacked Kurdish towns and civilians. The worst of these attacks took place on Kurdish civilians in Halabjah, but there seem to have been a number of other, more limited uses of such weapons. Iran was much slower than Iraq in its acquisition and use of chemical weapons, but U.S. intelligence experts believe that Iran has either used its own weapons in limited numbers or used captured weapons.

Missile proliferation, too, is a long-standing problem in the region. The former Soviet Union began to sell short-range FROG rockets to its allies in the Middle East in the late 1960s, and those sales were soon followed by sales of early types of cruise missiles, like the SAMLET, and medium-range ballistic missiles, like the Scud. Israel responded by obtaining missile technology from France, and is believed to have had its first Jericho missiles in production by the early 1970s. Syria fired Scud missiles at Israel during the October War of 1973. By the mid-1970s, Israel had deployed its first long-range, nuclear-armed missiles.

Iran and Iraq both made extensive use of Scud missiles against each other's capitals in the so-called "war of the cities" during the Iran-Iraq War. At that time, Iraq developed and used its own longer-range version of the Scud. Iraq later used Scuds against both Israel and Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War in 1991, and deployed chemical and biological warheads for its missiles, as well as chemical and biological bombs for contingency use. While attempting to further advance their missile program, senior Egyptian officials were caught smuggling missile technology from the United States and Canada.

Syria

Has mustard gas and several varieties of nerve agents. These are stockpiled in bombs and missile warheads and possibly in artillery weapons. Has an extensive biological research program. Should be on the edge of weaponizing biological agents, and may already have some weapons. Has an extensive stock of Scud B's and longer-range North Korean missiles. No evidence of a nuclear weapons program.

Iran

Has produced and stockpiled mustard gas and nerve agents and has bombs, missile warheads, and artillery warheads. Has undertaken a significant biological

weapons development effort, but the status of weaponization and deployment of biological agents is unclear. Is in the process of developing nuclear weapons, and should have reached the point where it can manufacture every aspect of fission weapons, except fissionable material. Has large numbers of Scud B's and longer-range North Korean missiles, and is working on a longer-range IRBM (intermediate-range ballistic missile) called the Shahab 3.

Iraq

Had the capability to make extended-range Scud missiles and, at the time of the Persian Gulf War, had

large stocks of them. In addition, Iraq had similar capabilities in terms of advanced chemical and “wet” biological agents. Had advanced nuclear weapons program and all necessary elements except fissile material. Had extensive Calutron and centrifuge programs (systems for enriching uranium to weapons-grade levels) to acquire such material. The Gulf War and eight years of aggressive inspections and weapons destruction by UNSCOM (the U.N. Special Commission) greatly reduced Iraqi capabilities. However, Iraq has retained a major covert CBRN weapons and missiles program. Additionally, it retains some Scud missiles and chemical and biological weapons, and continues to develop the technology for nuclear weapons.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia does not have weapons of mass destruction. It did, however, buy long-range CSS-2 ballistic missiles from China. Very senior Saudi officials have held conversations with officials involved in the Pakistani nuclear program, and possibly with similar officials in other countries.

Pakistan

While Pakistan is not part of the Middle East, Iran uses Pakistan’s nuclear and missile arms race with India as one of its rationales for developing its own long-range missiles; Iranian officials privately refer to tensions with Pakistan as a possible reason for Iranian proliferation.

GIVING THE THREAT POSED BY IRAN AND IRAQ PRIORITY

In looking at this list of activities, there are several points that need to be raised from the issue of both U.S. policy and the overall threat that continued CBRN proliferation poses to the region. President Bush is almost certainly right in singling out Iran and Iraq as the two most dangerous proliferators in the Middle East. Iraq is firmly committed to its proliferation and missile programs, has chemical and biological weapons, as well as some hidden missile stocks, and almost certainly continues to seek nuclear weapons. It is entirely possible that Iraq has advanced to the point where it has dry, storable

biological weapons that are as lethal as fission nuclear weapons, and that it has mastered the ability to configure bombs and warheads in ways that can disseminate these weapons efficiently.

Iran now has significant stocks of various chemical weapons, has developed and may have deployed biological weapons, has large numbers of Scud missiles, and is testing much longer-range missiles that can strike at virtually any target in the Middle East. In spite of denials, Iran almost certainly is developing nuclear weapons. While Iraq has long been far more aggressive than Iran in pursuing further development of its weapons of mass destruction, Iran’s divided regime leaves military power and CBRN weapons in the hands of its hard-liners and extremists.

Both nations pose threats to their neighbors and to the United States, as well as to the entire region, which is home to two-thirds of all the world’s proven oil reserves. These threats, in turn, more than justify U.S. efforts to maintain military sanctions on Iran and to block the transfer of technology and weapons components to Iran and Iraq. They also reinforce the need for strong U.S. military contingency capabilities in the Gulf region, and the effort to develop improved theater missile defenses that can be used to defend U.S. forces, allied nations, and the region’s energy export facilities that are so critical to the global economy.

Additionally, the threats presented by continued widespread proliferation help explain why President Bush warned the world, in his speech at West Point in early June 2002, that the United States might conduct preemptive attacks against the sources of such threats. The predominance of such threats also helps to explain why the new U.S. military strategy that grew out of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), released on December 31, 2001, emphasizes both nuclear and conventional options to deter and defend against such threats. The NPR also discusses the need for the United States to extend the coverage of its deterrent to protect its allies; gives improved defense the same priority as offense; and makes the improved intelligence and command-and-control

capabilities needed to detect and target CBRN weapons and delivery systems the third part of the new U.S. triad.

THE BROADER ISSUES IN REGIONAL PROLIFERATION

The problem of proliferation in the Middle East does, however, involve a number of issues other than the threats posed by Iran and Iraq. First, it is clear from the al-Qaida documents captured in Afghanistan that terrorist groups are seriously attempting to acquire CBRN weapons. Similarly, the broad political and economic impact of the anthrax attacks in the United States — following the attacks of September 11, 2001 — show how disruptive even the most limited attacks with CBRN weapons can be. They also show that covert or anonymous attacks can succeed, offering the specter that future attacks might involve far more lethal agents.

The motives for proliferation are also complex, and it is dangerous to assume that Iran and Iraq should be the only focus of concern, or that either state would stop proliferating if its leadership changed. The sub-regional tensions in North Africa, the Gulf, and South Asia, along with the tensions associated with the Arab-Israeli conflict, interact in ways that may well force all of the major powers in the Middle East to continue their efforts to acquire CBRN weapons and delivery systems, regardless of the nature of the ruling regime.

THE FOLLOWING MIX OF MOTIVES IS INVOLVED:

- The search for status and prestige, and the fact that CBRN weapons and missiles have a major “glitter factor” in a region that has often rushed to buy the latest weapons, regardless of the ability to absorb them effectively and to provide proper training and maintenance.
- The need to deter other states, coupled with the uncertainty of what needs to be deterred in a region where most proliferators lie about their CBRN and missile efforts and rely on undeclared forces.
- The need to enhance warfighting capabilities and use CBRN weapons as an “equalizer” to deter or defeat enemies with superior conventional forces.
- The lesson of the Iran-Iraq War and Gulf War that missiles and weapons of mass destruction do give nations practical status and power and can be used against both military and civilian targets.
- The need to deter or stop the use of CBRNs by U.S. and other outside power projection forces.
- The momentum of ongoing arms races with neighbors: Algeria-Libya-Morocco, Egypt-Israel-Syria, and Iran-Iraq-Southern Gulf.
- The inability of states to rely on arms control and national restraint, and to predict the future enemy.
- The fact that there is no way to know or predict the scale of the efforts being undertaken by other major regional actors, along with the difficulty in determining their capabilities in given types of weapons, and in characterizing the risk which these weapons present.
- The impact of the broader trends in the “greater Middle East,” including the growing overlap of arms races mentioned previously, plus the impact of North Korean proliferation and the India-Pakistan arms race.
- CBRN weapons and missiles are powerful tools for intimidation, even if they are never used in war.
- Proliferation is an alternative to far more expensive investments in conventional forces.
- The desire to create existential threats that are seen as so great by given enemies that they will not risk any lower levels of military action.
- Reaction to the absence of meaningful arms control regimes.
- The desire to create the capability for devastating covert or asymmetric attacks by states, their proxies, or terrorist groups.

- The perceived ability to exploit an enemy's lack of effective civil and critical facility defense and anti-tactical ballistic missile defense capabilities.

One other grim reality shapes the process of proliferation in the region. Advances in biotechnology — coupled with the broad dissemination in the region of biotechnology and research facilities, food processing capability, and pharmaceutical production — already make it impossible to apply arms control and export control regimes in ways that can prevent the production of biological weapons, some of which could be equivalent in lethality to small nuclear weapons. The region will inevitably acquire the ability to produce even more lethal genetically engineered weapons over the next 5-10 years, and the scale of

effort involved will be small enough that terrorist groups will be able to produce such weapons.

There are no current prospects that arms control and export control regimes can halt the ability of regional states to slowly acquire nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles. It is all too clear, however, that even if such controls could be developed, regional states would simply pursue biological weapons and less obvious methods of delivery. As a result, dealing with CBRN threats is likely to be a permanent aspect of the security problems of the Middle East. ©

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