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Countering Iran with Arms Sales to the Gulf Cooperation Council States

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**Countering Iran with Arms Sales to the
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Daniel K. Rosenfield

Executive Summary

U.S. and Gulf Arab leaders are concerned that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, the result will be a significant change in the regional balance of power. For several decades, Iran has used a strategy of *low-level* aggression against its neighbors, relying on terrorism, subversion, and limited military strikes. Careful of the fact that its victims could escalate militarily in response, Iran has developed a range of capabilities and techniques to strengthen its deterrence. In doing so, Iran gains additional freedom to commit low-level aggression and thereby coerce its neighbors. A principal concern is that nuclear deterrence could substantially increase this freedom.

One of the few options available to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states is to augment their holdings of advanced conventional weapons, including major offensive ones like cruise missiles, modern strike aircraft, and precision-guided bombs. By strengthening their military power, these states lessen the risk to themselves in retaliating strongly for Iran's low-level aggression, thereby helping to deter such aggression in the first place. Moreover, this process of strengthening helps signal to Iran that the country's acquisition of nuclear weapons will not greatly enhance its regional influence. In fact, it is conceivable that Iran will become worse off for having acquired nuclear weapons, given significant changes to the conventional military power of its neighbors.

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1. Introduction

The conflict between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states has taken on a heightened military dimension.¹ Iran continues to move forward with its uranium enrichment program, which could sooner or later translate to an ability to produce nuclear weapons. For their part, the GCC states are purchasing large amounts of advanced conventional weapons. In October 2010, for example, Saudi Arabia requested \$60 billion worth of modern aircraft and munitions from the United States, in what could become the largest foreign arms sale in U.S. history.² In addition, other members of the GCC are attempting to buy significant air, naval, and long-range artillery forces. The total value of GCC arms purchases from the United States could exceed \$120 billion over the next several years.³

While Iran may or may not seek to become a nuclear-armed power, today it scarcely qualifies as a serious conventional threat to the GCC states.⁴ Iran has limited means of projecting conventional force abroad. Instead, the principal threat from Iran can be characterized as one of *low-level* aggression, including terrorism, subversion, and limited military strikes. Indeed, there is a long pattern of behavior to support this characterization. Iran began its sponsorship of Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist groups in the early 1980s. From the 1980s to the early 1990s, Iran backed violent Shia activists in the Gulf states. During the latter half of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran used its military forces against key economic targets in the GCC states.⁵ More recently, Iran gave highly effective weapons to insurgents in Iraq, seeking to drive up U.S. casualties there.⁶

¹ The GCC states are Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

² Dana Hedgpeth, "Pentagon plans \$60 billion weapons sale to Saudi Arabia," *Washington Post*, October 21, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/20/AR2010102006518.html>.

³ Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, Report for Congress RL32048 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service [CRS], June 9, 2011), 40.

⁴ The term conventional here excludes asymmetric or irregular forces.

⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, vol. 2, *The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), chap. 9; Fariborz Haghshenass, *Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare*, Policy Focus No. 87 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2008); David B. Crist, *Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea*, Policy Focus No. 95 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009).

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran*, Pursuant to Section 1245 of the Fiscal Year National Defense Authorization Act, April 2010, 2–3; Ann Scott Tyson, "Thousands of Army Humvees Lack Armor Upgrade," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007, Final Edition; John D. Negroponte, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence for the Senate Armed Services Committee* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 28, 2006), 12.

With this history in mind, U.S. and Gulf Arab leaders are concerned that a nuclear-armed Iran would behave much more aggressively. Their logic appears to be as follows: An Iranian nuclear deterrent could strongly discourage other states from retaliating against Iran for its increased low-level aggression. By consequence, Iran would have more freedom to coerce its neighbors, and the result could be an important shift in the regional balance of power.

To counteract that possibility, the United States has either agreed or proposed to sell a significant amount of conventional arms to the GCC states, including major offensive weapons such as advanced strike aircraft and satellite-guided bombs. This policy has been opposed by a number of strategic analysts and U.S. public officials. Within this group, some argue that major offensive weapons are poorly suited to countering a nuclear-armed Iran. Others perceive a significant danger from the potentially negative effects of the weapons on regional stability. This paper will examine some of the arguments in support of these conflicting views.

The paper proceeds in three stages. It first presents an overview of the strategic strengths and weaknesses of Iran and the GCC states, exploring the rationale for Iran's emphasis on low-level aggression. Second, the paper details Iran's capabilities and techniques for deterring retaliation for its low-level aggression. The issue of nuclear weapon development is addressed in this section. Third, the paper analyzes the apparent countervailing strategy of the GCC states and the United States, focusing on the sale of major offensive weapons.

2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council States

Iran's leaders have ambitious goals for the country as a regional and even extra-regional power. According to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the strategic objectives of Iran's leadership, after regime survival, are "making Iran the preeminent regional power" and "attaining a leading role in the Islamic world."⁷ Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, testified before the U.S. Senate in 2009 that "Iran is now something of an imperial power, one that defines its interests broadly and seeks to influence a large number and wide range of regional matters."⁸ Shahram Chubin, an expert on Iran's security policy, has stated that "Iran wants to be the indispensable power in the region, without which no regional problem can be solved."⁹

These aspirations may have far more to do with rational assessment than ideology. When one looks at the balance of strategic strengths and weaknesses of Iran and its neighbors in the Gulf, Iran's position is highly favorable in key respects. Indeed, Iran has a number of important strengths that bolster its drive for regional preeminence. One example is demographics: Iran's population is two and a half times that of Iraq, three times Saudi Arabia's, and twice the population of all the GCC states combined.

Geography has given Iran several strategic strengths. To begin with, the size and shape of Iran's territory provides strategic depth, which most of the Gulf states lack entirely. Strategic depth grants important operational benefits that make Iran a more challenging and dangerous opponent. For example, an enemy seeking to attack areas deep within Iran would have to penetrate multiple successive layers of defenses, perhaps greatly diminishing his chance of success.

Further, Iran's location in the Gulf is ideal for carrying out limited strikes on vital economic targets in the GCC states. These states depend critically on the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz to export oil and gas, and the coastal facilities that support this trade are easily threatened by

⁷ Lt. Gen. Ronald L. Burgess, Jr. (Director, Defense Intelligence Agency [DIA]), "Iran's Military Power," Statement before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, April 14, 2010.

⁸ Richard N. Haass (President, Council on Foreign Relations), "U.S. Policy toward Iran," Statement before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, March 3, 2009.

⁹ Shahram Chubin, *Iran's 'Risk-Taking' in Perspective*, Proliferation Papers, no. 21 (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, Security Studies Center, Winter 2008), 11.

Iran. So too are the desalination plants that provide much of the drinking water in these countries. As a result, if Iran should seek to coerce or strongly retaliate against its neighbors, it has several important options.

Iran has a third strategic strength from its geography: the lack of a border with Israel. In contrast to Egypt, for example, Iran has not been in a position of having to lend its territory as a staging ground for terrorist attacks on Israel, with the attendant risk of reprisal or invasion. Furthermore, it is politically and militarily cumbersome for Israel to project significant force against Iran, given the sovereign Muslim states that separate the two countries. By consequence, Iran has been able to play a leading role in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Iran also has significant oil and natural gas wealth that contributes to the country's power. Iran has the world's third-largest proven oil reserves and second-largest natural gas reserves. The country's proven oil reserves amount to 137.6 billion barrels, more than half those of Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, in the past Iran has shown itself to command the allegiance of violent Shia activists in the Gulf states. In the future, Iran could leverage its apparent sway with these groups as a means to project influence across the Gulf. There appears to be a great deal of concern over this in GCC capitals.¹⁰

In short, Iran has a variety of strengths that support its efforts to become the preeminent regional power. At the same time, though, Iran has important weaknesses that act as a profound constraint on the country's influence abroad. Most of these relate to the balance of conventional military power in the Gulf. For instance, a basic problem for Iran is that it has very limited means to invade and subjugate its neighbors.¹¹ In the words of a 2010 report by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), Iran lacks sufficient airpower and logistical ability to project power much beyond its borders.¹² What is more, Iran has essentially no modern armor, artillery, aircraft, or major combat ships, and the country's ground forces are neither organized nor trained for large-scale power projection.¹³

Iran has another strategic weakness in the fact that the United States has vital and opposing interests in its region. According to Anthony Cordesman, a military expert at the Center for

¹⁰ Frederic Wehrey et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Monograph MG-781-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2009), xix–xx; William Butler, “Saudi Arabian intervention in Bahrain driven by visceral Sunni fear of Shias,” *The Observer*, March 19, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/20/bahrain-saudi-arabia-rebellion>; Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, “Interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran Collide, With the U.S. in the Middle,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/18diplomacy.html>.

¹¹ Steven Pifer et al., *U.S. Nuclear and Extended Deterrence: Considerations and Challenges*, Arms Control Series Paper 3 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 2010), 38; Kenneth M. Pollack, *Deterring a Nuclear Iran: The Devil in the Details*, Working Paper (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 2010), 4.

¹² DOD, *Military Power of Iran*, 7.

¹³ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance* 111, no. 1 (2011): 296, 298.

Strategic and International Studies, “the United States could destroy all key elements of Iranian military power in virtually any scenario in a matter of weeks, if Washington had the support of Iran’s neighbors. It could inflict devastating damage in a matter of days.”¹⁴ In 1991, after Iraq sought to use its conventional forces as an instrument of political power by invading Kuwait, the United States not only reversed Iraq’s territorial gains but also caused the loss or destruction of some 60 percent of Iraq’s major land force equipment, 40 percent of its air force, 30–40 percent of its land-based air defenses, and virtually its entire navy.¹⁵ There is little basis for arguing that Iran would escape a similar fate in similar circumstances.

Not only must Iran cope with limited means to success in terms of conventional power projection, but it also has serious vulnerabilities to conventional attack. In particular, Iran faces a significant challenge in protecting its vital economic infrastructure. Four of the country’s six main ports are located in the Persian Gulf, where they handle about 90 percent of all imports by tonnage. In addition, all of Iran’s large-scale oil terminals are located in the Gulf.¹⁶ Iran has practically zero depth when it comes to defending these kinds of targets.

Given this situation, many states would seek to develop strong conventional forces to guard vital facilities against possible air and naval attack. But Iran’s force structure is eminently weak in this respect, the result of decades of Western sanctions.¹⁷ For example, while Iran is reported to have over 300 combat aircraft, 40 to 60 percent of these have limited or no mission capability at any given time, and many cannot sustain a high sortie rate because they are either too old or not effectively supported.¹⁸ As a reflection of this, in 2009 the Commander of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) stated his belief that “the [UAE] Air Force itself could take out the entire Iranian Air Force...”¹⁹

¹⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Conventional Military,” in Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, December 2010), available at <http://iranprimer.usip.org>.

¹⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq’s Military Capabilities: Fighting A Wounded, But Dangerous, Poisonous Snake* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], December 3, 2001), 3.

¹⁶ Michael Eisenstadt (Senior Fellow and Director of Security Studies, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), “Deter and Contain: Dealing with a Nuclear Iran,” Testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, February 1, 2006; Office of Naval Intelligence, *Iran’s Naval Forces: From Guerilla Warfare to a Modern Naval Strategy* (Suitland, MD: ONI, Fall 2009), 3.

¹⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman and Adam C. Seitz, *Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Birth of a Regional Nuclear Arms Race?* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO for CSIS, 2009), 48; Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran’s Developing Military Capabilities* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2005), 1; Anthony H. Cordesman and Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, *Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric Wars*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2007), 7.

¹⁸ Cordesman, “The Conventional Military.”

¹⁹ *Foreign Policy*, “Petraeus: The UAE’s Air Force could take out Iran’s,” IISS, December 17, 2009, <http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/press-coverage-2009/december-2009/petraeus-the-uaes-air-force-could-take-out-irans>.

Nor can Iran's ground-based air defenses be deemed an effective source of protection.²⁰ According to one analysis, Iran remains over-dependent on seven S-200 firing batteries to provide strategic air defense of its territory.²¹ The S-200 cannot be seen as reliably effective against standoff cruise missiles or attack aircraft with modern electronic countermeasures.²² Meanwhile, as Sean O'Connor points out, the remainder of Iran's surface-to-air missile assets are "primarily situated to provide point or local area defense and as such do not represent a serious threat to a dedicated and sophisticated enemy. Even lesser-equipped nations would be able to exploit the various gaps and vulnerabilities in the coverage zones, provided the S-200s could be neutralized in some fashion..."²³

Iran therefore has several strategic weaknesses that limit its potential for influence abroad. Ultimately, Iran does not pose a serious risk of invasion and conquest to the GCC states. It also has limited means of direct defense should states with modern armaments choose to attack its vital infrastructure. Given these and other considerations, a strategy of low-level aggression makes sense for an Iranian regime in conflict with its neighbors and seeking regional preeminence by means of aggression and coercion.

Iran's low-level aggression makes sense for another reason: it capitalizes on three strategic weaknesses of the GCC states. First of all, these states must cope with their conspicuous failure to reverse Israel's occupation of traditionally Arab-Muslim lands. As RAND Corporation analysts Frederic Wehrey and others argue, Iran's support to Palestinian terrorist groups and Hezbollah buys it "enormous symbolic currency" among Arab publics who are frustrated with the weak, status quo-oriented policies of their authoritarian leaders toward Israel.²⁴ Saudi Arabia in particular is threatened by Iran's ability to outperform it in the Arab-Israeli conflict, thereby attacking the legitimacy of the al-Saud regime.²⁵

Second, the GCC states must cope with large (and in all but Bahrain, minority) Shia populations. Political legitimacy in these states depends on a strong measure of adherence to social and religious tradition, especially the precepts of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy.²⁶ But in the great majority of cases, Sunni jurisprudence does not view the Shia as an equally legitimate faith.

²⁰ Cordesman, "The Conventional Military"; Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), 33.

²¹ Sean O'Connor, "Strategic SAM Deployment in Iran," Technical Report APA-TR-2010-0102, *Air Power Australia*, January 2010, <http://www.ausairpower.net/APA-Iran-SAM-Deployment.html>.

²² Ibid.; Cordesman, "The Conventional Military."

²³ O'Connor, "Strategic SAM Deployment."

²⁴ Wehrey et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 81.

²⁵ Frederic Wehrey et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Monograph MG-840-SRF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2009), ix.

²⁶ F. Gregory Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994), 25–31; John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 98.

The Shia often are defined as “rejectionists” who have “misled” Muslims, and are occasionally branded as heretics.²⁷ For this reason, it appears the conservative monarchs of the GCC states would risk serious challenges to their authority by granting the Shia full rights and status. Yet discrimination against the Shia has left Iran in a stronger position of influence over key segments of the GCC populations.

Third, the GCC states have a strategic weakness in the location of their vital infrastructure. As mentioned above, these states depend critically on export terminals in the Persian Gulf. They also have an extreme vulnerability given their dependence on electric power and desalination facilities located on or near the Gulf coast.²⁸ Iran could use its military forces to attack these targets on a limited scale, as it did during the Iran-Iraq War. The country’s irregular naval forces seem particularly well suited to this mission.²⁹

²⁷ Shmuel Bar, “Sunnis and Shiites: Between Rapprochement and Conflict,” in Hillel Fradkin et al., eds., *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, June 2005), 88; Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi’a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 251–253.

²⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Security Challenges and Threats in the Gulf: A Net Assessment* (Washington, DC: CSIS, September 2008), 7; Anthony H. Cordesman et al., *Iran’s Strategic Competition with the US and Arab States: Conventional, Asymmetric, and Missile Capabilities* (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 28, 2011), 14.

²⁹ Cordesman, “The Conventional Military.”

3. Detering Reprisal for Low-Level Aggression

For a regime hostile to its neighbors, low-level aggression could prove to be an effective way for Iran to strengthen its influence in the region. But Iran's freedom to commit such aggression is not unlimited. Rather, it is constrained by the risk that the GCC states, Israel, or the United States will escalate politically, economically, and militarily in response.³⁰ So to achieve greater freedom to commit low-level aggression, Iran has developed a variety of ways to threaten states that would punish it with military force. In particular, Iran seems to have developed the following capabilities and techniques:

- Ballistic missiles to strike civilians and critical infrastructure
- Capabilities to shut down the Strait of Hormuz as a commercial conduit and damage forces attempting to reopen it
- Air and naval forces to strike critical infrastructure in surrounding states
- Ties to fifth column groups that could be directed to retaliate on its behalf
- The ability to conduct a far-flung terrorist campaign
- Soft power from its involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, winning it popularity in the Arab Street and increasing the political costs of aggression against it
- The ability to wage a formidable insurgency against a force occupying its territory
- Cultivation of an image abroad of being a “fanatical, indefatigable foe, whose soldiers seek martyrdom, and whose society is willing and able to absorb heavy punishment...”³¹
- Military parades and large-scale, highly visible exercises to reinforce deterrence
- Exaggerating numbers and quality of weapons
- Possibly chemical, biological, and radiological weapons capabilities

³⁰ Daniel Byman, “Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 3 (March 2008): 175–176.

³¹ Michael Eisenstadt, “Deter and Contain: Dealing with a Nuclear Iran,” in Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson, eds., *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, October 2005), 226–227.

Today, perhaps the strongest means of deterrence for Iran against a conventional military attack are the country's irregular naval and ballistic missile forces.

Iran has developed a strong capacity for irregular or "asymmetric" naval warfare in the Persian Gulf. According to Anthony Cordesman, Iran now poses a "massive asymmetric naval-air-assault force threat" to the Gulf states.³² This includes several hundred small maritime patrol craft armed with multiple rocket launchers, torpedoes, heavy machine guns, or in some cases guided missiles. In addition, Iran has a number of coastal-defense cruise missiles, some eighty-three armed and attack helicopters, three *Kilo*-class submarines, and an estimated force of 2,000 to 3,000 naval mines.³³ Beyond attacking the Gulf states directly, Iran could attempt to shut down maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, potentially closing the Gulf to seaborne commerce and threatening the health of the global economy.

Furthermore, in 2010 the DOD assessed that Iran had approximately 1,000 ballistic missiles in the 90 to 1,200-mile range.³⁴ Iran could use its missiles to strike key industrial targets in the GCC states.³⁵ It could also try to inflict mass casualties and terror in enemy populations. During the Iran-Iraq War, for instance, Iraq's use of some 200 ballistic missiles caused nearly a third of Tehran's population to flee the city in panic.³⁶ This was done without the use of chemical, biological, or radiological warheads, any of which might be an option for Iran today.³⁷

Because the Iranian regime wishes to strengthen its influence in the region, it continues to develop many of the capabilities listed earlier. For instance, Iran has been making technical improvements and additions to its air, naval, and ballistic missile forces.³⁸ Iran has also proceeded with uranium enrichment despite international pressure to put an end to this activity. According to a November 8, 2011 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),

³² Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Saudi Arms Sale: Reinforcing a Strategic Partnership in the Gulf* (Washington, DC: CSIS, November 3, 2010).

³³ Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* 27–29; "Navy, Iran," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment: The Gulf States*, October 14, 2011; ONI, *Iran's Naval Forces*, 16; David Ochmanek, "Iran, the United States, and Nuclear Weapons: An Examination of Key Policy Issues," in James Dobbins et al., *Coping with Iran: Confrontation, Containment, or Engagement?* Conference Proceedings CF-237-NSRD (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2007), 15; Haghshenas, *Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare*, 12–13; Alexander Wilner and Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance* (Washington, DC: CSIS, December 1, 2011), 32.

³⁴ DOD, *Military Power of Iran*, 11.

³⁵ Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," in Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer*; Wehrey et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 50–51.

³⁶ Secretary of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, Final Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DOD, April 1992), 53; Thomas L. McNaugher, "Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War," *International Security* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 32; Ray Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 380.

³⁷ Abdullah Toukan and Anthony H. Cordesman, *GCC - Iran: Operational Analysis of Air, SAM and TBM Forces* (Washington, DC: CSIS, August 20, 2009), 8.

³⁸ Burgess, "Iran's Military Power"; "Procurement, Iran," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment: The Gulf States*, January 26, 2012.

Iran has amassed 4,922 kilograms of low-enriched uranium, which is enough to make four nuclear weapons if enriched to weapon grades.³⁹

There is widespread concern that a nuclear-armed Iran will have substantially greater freedom to commit low-level aggression.⁴⁰ This is an understandable concern for at least two reasons. First, in responding to low-level aggression by a nuclear-armed Iran, any state seeking to punish Iran with military force would have to consider the inherent risk of escalation to nuclear war. Even in small numbers, Iran's nuclear weapons would threaten not only hundreds of thousands of lives but also key infrastructure, including the region's vital export capacity.

Second, the costs of a purely conventional war with a nuclear-armed Iran would likely be greater for the GCC and a coalition of Western partners. In post-Cold War conflicts, U.S. military doctrine for conventional war appears to call for severing links between the enemy leadership and enemy forces in the field. This form of strategic attack is an efficiency, with its potential to bring about early collapse or defeat of the adversary at hand. However, against a nuclear-armed adversary such methods could be seen as risk-prohibitive. A nuclear-armed Iran, for instance, might fear the degradation of its ability to command forces at the strategic level, in part because it could mean critical weakness in countering domestic threats to the survival of the Islamic regime. In addition, Iran's leaders might fear for their lives if they saw U.S. attacks on command and control as an effort to kill them. Thus, Iran could be willing to use nuclear weapons to put an early stop to U.S. strikes against the regime's command and control capabilities. And to avoid such an outcome, U.S. forces could be heavily constrained in their targeting of command and control and leadership facilities in Iran.⁴¹ Iran's potential to conduct offensive military operations would have to be dealt with in a slower, more piecemeal fashion, which almost certainly would mean greater costs for the GCC states and their coalition partners. Hence, apart from the risks of nuclear escalation they pose, nuclear weapons can deter conventional conflict by raising its prospective costs. This way, nuclear weapons could provide the Iranian regime with substantially greater freedom to commit low-level aggression.

³⁹ International Atomic Energy Agency, Board of Governors, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Report by the Director General, GOV/2011/65, November 8, 2011, 3; David Albright et al., *ISIS Analysis of IAEA Iran Safeguards Report: Part 1*, Report (Washington, DC: Institute for Science and International Security, November 8, 2011), 1.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," *Survival* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 117; and James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "After Iran Gets the Bomb: Containment and Its Complications," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 20 (March/April 2010): 33–49.

⁴¹ David Ochmanek and Lowell H. Schwartz, *The Challenge of Nuclear-Armed Regional Adversaries*, Monograph MG-671-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2008), 49–50.

4. Countering Iran

The United States has agreed or proposed to sell a significant amount of conventional arms to the GCC states. According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS), in the period from 2007 to 2010 the United States reached agreements to sell \$13.8 billion of conventional arms to Saudi Arabia, \$10.4 billion of conventional arms to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), \$2.4 billion of conventional arms to Kuwait, and smaller amounts of conventional arms to the rest of the GCC states.⁴² These agreed and proposed sales include a variety of major offensive weapons:

- Eighty-four F-15SA fighter/attack aircraft to Saudi Arabia
- Five hundred AIM-120C-7 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) to Saudi Arabia
- One thousand GBU-31B V3 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) (2,000 lb) to Saudi Arabia
- Seventy AH-64D APACHE attack helicopters to Saudi Arabia
- One hundred Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to the UAE
- Sixty AH-64D APACHE attack helicopters to the UAE
- Enhanced guided bomb units to the UAE
- Twenty-five AIM-120C-7 AMRAAMs to Bahrain
- Thirty ATACMS T2K Unitary Missiles to Bahrain
- AIM-120C-7 AMRAAMs to Kuwait
- Eighteen F-16 Block 50/52 aircraft to Oman

Most recently, in November 2011 the DOD announced the possible sale of 4,900 JDAM kits to the UAE, including 600 Hard Target Penetrator Bombs.

The policy of selling major offensive weapons to the GCC states is controversial. On the one hand, there are those who argue that major offensive weapons are poorly suited to countering a nuclear-armed Iran. An example is William Hartung, a Senior Research Fellow at the New America Foundation, who argues the following:

⁴² Richard F. Grimmett, *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2003–2010*, Report for Congress R42017 (Washington, DC: CRS, September 22, 2011), 44.

The [2010] Saudi [arms] deal will no doubt go through, but it shouldn't. It consists primarily of offensive weapons—fighter planes, attack helicopters, and guided bombs—that serve no constructive purpose. Fighter planes and guided bombs aren't relevant to addressing the potential threat posed by Iranian missiles, nor are they likely to dissuade Iran from developing nuclear weapons.⁴³

Likewise, F. Gregory Gause, an expert on the politics of the Gulf region, states that

the Iranian regional challenge is based on the political and ideological links with important state and sub-state actors in the region: Hezbollah, Hamas, various Iraqi parties, the Syrian regime, and Shia activists in the Gulf monarchies. Better fighter jets and attack helicopters will not help the Saudis to contain or roll back this kind of Iranian ideological influence.⁴⁴

In addition, Max Boot, a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, asks the following:

What significance, if any, should we assign to the [Obama] administration's plan to sell thousands of "smart bombs" known as JDAMs (Joint Direct Attack Munitions) to the United Arab Emirates? ...what do these bombs actually do to counter the Iranian nuclear program? Potentially a lot if you imagine the UAE in concert with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council states launching a preemptive strike on the Iranian program....But that's about as likely as Arabian sand turning into nuggets of gold.⁴⁵

There is further opposition from those worried by the potential effects of major offensive weapons on regional stability and by weakening norms against the proliferation of such weapons. For example, Jeffrey Lewis, Director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, voices concern over the precedent of the United Kingdom's sale of Storm Shadow air-launched cruise missiles to Saudi Arabia and of France's sale of the same weapon to the UAE.⁴⁶ In addition, prior sales of the AMRAAM to the UAE raised questions among U.S. congressmen as to the wisdom of introducing such a powerful weapon into the Gulf region.⁴⁷ Moreover, according to Travis Sharp, now a Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, in 2007 a U.S.-proposed sale of JDAM kits to Saudi Arabia

⁴³ Deborah Jerome, ed., "Is Big Saudi Arms Sale a Good Idea?" *Expert Roundup*, Council on Foreign Relations, September 27, 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/defensehomeland-security/big-saudi-arms-sale-good-idea/p23019>. See also William Hartung, "Rethinking the Saudi Arms Deal," *Huffington Post*, October 27, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-hartung/rethinking-the-saudi-arms_b_774762.html.

⁴⁴ Jerome, ed., "Is Big Saudi Arms Sale a Good Idea?" See also *U.S. Relations with Saudi Arabia: Oil, Anxiety, and Ambivalence*, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, U.S. House of Representatives, 110th Cong., 1st sess., 8–16 (September 18, 2007) (statement of F. Gregory Gause, Associate Professor, University of Vermont).

⁴⁵ Max Boot, "What Will JDAMs Do to Counter Iranian Nuclear Program?" *Contentions*, Commentary Magazine, November 11, 2011, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/11/11/jdams-emirates-iran/#more-774280>.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Lewis, "Storm Shadow, Saudi & the MTCR," *Arms Control Wonk*, May 31, 2011, <http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/4051/saudi-arabia-storm-shadow-the-mtcr>.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy*, Report for Congress RS21852 (Washington, DC: CRS, December 7, 2010), 11.

caused “chagrin” among many defense experts and “immediately ran into opposition on Capitol Hill as lawmakers on both sides of the aisle questioned the wisdom of transferring more powerful weaponry to the volatile Middle East region.”⁴⁸

To be sure, there are compelling arguments that one should resist the proliferation of major offensive weapons in the Persian Gulf region. The stability of national governments there has been a topic of serious and continual concern, all the more so in light of the Arab Spring. The prospect of state collapse, with the risk of major offensive weapons falling into the hands of terrorists or renegade factions, may be especially worrisome. Also worrisome is the risk that revolutionary regimes could inherit major offensive weapons and turn them against U.S. forces, partners, or allies. It should be recalled that Iran began its eight-year war with Iraq (1980–1988) with some of the most advanced weapons technology the United States was capable of providing.⁴⁹

Another concern is that monies spent by the GCC states on acquiring and supporting major offensive weapons will detract from efforts to directly defend against Iranian subversion and state-sponsored terrorism. Iran has shown a clear tendency to act through cut-outs or proxies, and it would have a greater chance of plausibly denying aggression it waged through proxies rather than paramilitary forces of the state, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC-N). From this standpoint, the large-scale transfer of major offensive weapons could be said to increase both the likelihood of state collapse in the Gulf (by diverting resources from internal security missions) and the consequences of state collapse there (by increasing the firepower available to emergent terrorists, warlords, or revolutionary regimes).

Despite these concerns, there are a number of compelling reasons to sell major offensive weapons to the GCC states. First, major offensive weapons permit the GCC states to retaliate strongly against Iran for any instance of low-level aggression, be it terrorism, subversion, or limited military strikes. For example, laser- and global positioning system (GPS)-guided bombs allow for precision strikes on Iran’s vital import and export facilities in the Gulf, while more powerful counter-air and counter-air-defense systems will help pave the way for such attacks.

Second, if Iran chooses to counter-retaliate strongly against the GCC states, major offensive weapons will help these states limit the damage they will incur while also imposing additional costs on Iran for its decision to counter-retaliate, ideally convincing Iran that further escalation would not be in its interest. In other words, major offensive weapons support the *escalation dominance* of the GCC states over Iran. As Michael Knights, a Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a specialist in Gulf military affairs, states,

⁴⁸ Travis Sharp and Katie Mounts, *As Substitute for Diplomacy, \$20 Billion U.S. Arms Deal Falls Short* (Washington, DC: Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, Military Budget and Oversight Program, January 2008), 3.

⁴⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, 40–41.

Fostered by bilateral planning assistance from the United States via the Gulf Security Dialogue, GCC militaries are making rapid advances and may eclipse Iranian capabilities in the Gulf within ten years. By 2015, for instance, the combined forces of the UAE military will likely be able to prevent Iranian naval operations in UAE territorial waters and EEZs [Exclusive Economic Zones], seize and hold Iranian-held islands, and intercept some Iranian missile and air attacks on the UAE in the event of a conflict.⁵⁰

Moreover, “encouraging signs suggest that the GCC states will [by 2015] be able to maintain local air superiority over their national territories and EEZs...”⁵¹ Likewise, Anthony Cordesman has said that major arms sales proposed by the United States “can help create a Saudi Air Force that is more of a threat to Iran than Iran’s conventional missiles are to Saudi Arabia...”⁵² If the GCC states are thought to have escalation dominance over Iran, the effect should be to reduce Iran’s ability to deter retaliation for its low-level aggression, thus limiting its freedom to commit such aggression in the first place.

A third reason to sell major offensive weapons to the GCC states is that defensive weapons alone will not likely prove adequate to countering more intense low-level aggression by a nuclear-armed Iran. No system of defenses can be perfect, and without some fear of counterattack, an aggressor might have little reason not to repeatedly test the defenses arrayed against him. There is also a matter of cost-effectiveness: deterrence by the threat of punishing an attacker can make it far less costly to secure valuable targets spread over large geographic areas. For the GCC states, trying to defend both simultaneously and effectively all possible coastal and inland targets of low-level attack by Iran could well be cost-prohibitive.

A fourth reason to sell major offensive weapons is that some of the weapons allow for retaliation against Iran in ways that could minimize the risk of further escalation. For instance, the sale of Storm Shadow air-launched cruise missiles to Saudi Arabia and the UAE will allow these states to attack Iran’s vital economic facilities in the Gulf without sending large formations of fighter, attack, and defense-suppression aircraft to potentially do battle with the Iranian air force. In fact, it appears Storm Shadow missiles could be launched from over Saudi or UAE territory and still damage vital facilities in Iran.⁵³

The sale of U.S. ATACMS T2K Unitary missiles to Bahrain and the UAE would offer a similar capacity for limited, standoff attacks. ATACMS is an artillery system with a range of 270 or 300 kilometers, GPS-assisted guidance, and a 550-pound high-explosive blast/fragmentation

⁵⁰ Michael Knights, *Changing Conventional Military Balance in the Gulf*, PolicyWatch No. 1577 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 14, 2009).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Cordesman, *The Saudi Arms Sale*.

⁵³ “Procurement, Saudi Arabia,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: The Gulf States*, July 8, 2011; “APACHE AP (SCALP EG, Storm Shadow, SCALP Naval)–Offensive weapons, International,” *Jane’s Strategic Weapon Systems*, June 22, 2011; “S-200 Angara/Vega (SA-5 ‘Gammon’)–Static and towed surface-to-air missile systems, Russian Federation,” *Jane’s Land-Based Air Defence*, January 18, 2011.

warhead.⁵⁴ If based in the UAE, ATACMS could strike the Iranian port of Bandar-e-Abbas, which handles some 90 percent of all containerized shipping traffic in Iran.⁵⁵ Similarly, ATACMS deployed to the eastern tip of Bahrain would threaten Iran's second-largest oil export terminal, that on Lavan Island. As with Storm Shadow, ATACMS would not require the GCC states to contest Iran for local air superiority, something that would tend to increase the risk of further escalation toward major war. Also, to the extent Iran or the GCC states perceive the risk of further escalation resulting from the use of Storm Shadow or ATACMS to be low, the weapons can be seen as more *usable* and thus can provide stronger deterrence as well as escalation control.

A fifth reason to sell major offensive weapons to the GCC states is that doing so will make it easier for the United States to defend the region's crucial energy suppliers from large-scale attack. Capabilities useful in countering low-level aggression—for instance, major offensive weapons—are of course also relevant to deterrence and defeat of large-scale attack by Iran. The sale of such weapons to the GCC states thereby helps to alleviate U.S. defense planning requirements in the Gulf and the budgets they absorb. This rationale has become especially important in recent years as the United States has sought to rebalance its strategic focus with more weight given to Asia while grappling with serious financial challenges at home.

Sixth, the process of empowering the GCC states could also help to dissuade Iran from developing nuclear weapons and convince it to accept strong international controls on its nuclear program. Iran has to consider that nuclear weapons are not a security panacea. While they are considered very useful in deterring threats to vital interests, their deterrent value is seen to diminish with the importance of the interest at stake. Hence, a key question for Iran is whether a small nuclear force, in the absence of relatively strong nonnuclear military capabilities, would provide enough deterrence to permit low-level aggression on a greater scale than is safely possible today. There is a risk it would not. While there has been no definitive U.S. policy statement on the matter to date, the GCC states are nonetheless understood to enjoy the backing of U.S. nuclear and conventional forces, including missile defenses and preemptive strike capabilities.⁵⁶ If these states build up their conventional power to eclipse Iran's nonnuclear

⁵⁴ "Army Tactical Missile System Block IA Unitary (ATACMS Block IA Unitary)," Lockheed Martin Corporation, accessed December 2, 2011, <http://www.lockheedmartin.com/products/ATACMSBlockIAUnitary/index.html>; "MGM-140/-164/-168 ATACMS (M39)—Offensive weapons, United States," *Jane's Strategic Weapon Systems*, October 27, 2011.

⁵⁵ Written Testimony of Under Secretary David S. Cohen before the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, Hearing on *Addressing Potential Threats from Iran: Administration Perspectives on Implementing New Economic Sanctions One Year Later*, October 13, 2011, U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Center, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1323.aspx>.

⁵⁶ On the basis of this understanding, see James A. Russell, "Extended Deterrence, Security Guarantees, and Nuclear Weapons: U.S. Strategic and Policy Conundrums in the Gulf," *Strategic Insights* 8, no. 5 (Winter 2009): 16, 22; Shahram Chubin, "Extended Deterrence and Iran," *Strategic Insights* 8, no. 5 (Winter 2009): 45–46; Bruno Tertrais, "Security Guarantees and Extended Deterrence in the Gulf Region: A European Perspective," *Strategic Insights* 8, no. 5 (Winter 2009): 29; Barry R. Posen, *A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult but Not Impossible Policy Problem* (New York, NY: Century Foundation, 2006), 13; and Joseph McMillan, "U.S.

military power in the Gulf, Iran's freedom to commit low-level aggression could diminish in net terms even after acquiring nuclear weapons. It is perhaps for this reason that in a September 7, 2009 interview with Al Jazeera, then-U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated the following:

...one of the pathways to get the Iranians to change their approach on the nuclear issue is to persuade them that moving down that path will actually jeopardize their security, not enhance it. So the more that our Arab friends and allies can strengthen their security capabilities, the more they can strengthen their cooperation, both with each other and with us. I think this sends the signal to the Iranians that this path they're on is not going to advance Iranian security but in fact could weaken it.⁵⁷

Granted, precisely how the GCC states will react to more intense low-level aggression by a nuclear-armed Iran cannot be known at this time. Even with superior nonnuclear forces, these states might still prefer to submit to stronger Iranian demands of them, choosing appeasement rather than counterattacking and risking major war with a nuclear-armed power. Nevertheless, Iran's leaders will understand that the GCC states are now spending significant sums on acquiring major offensive weapons. They can draw several lessons from this. First, given their timing, large-scale purchases of major offensive weapons by the GCC states are difficult to explain absent the need to retaliate for Iran's low-level aggression and dominate any ensuing contest in non-nuclear escalation. Therefore, such purchases are a sign that the GCC states have the political will to resist an expansion of Iran's influence in the region. Second, major offensive weapons give GCC states the option of effective resistance, whether or not they choose to exercise that option. This fact alone increases the risk for Iran as it weighs the potential near- and long-term costs and benefits of its nuclear posture. Third, if in the future a nuclear-armed Iran chooses to intensify its low-level aggression, the GCC states will have many billions of dollars of "sunk costs" in the form of strike fighters, missiles, guided bombs and the like, strengthening arguments for the use of these weapons. Taken together, these factors underscore the risk apparently referred to by then-Secretary Gates: that Iran's current nuclear policies will ultimately make the country worse off in terms of its power and security.

A final reason to sell major offensive weapons to the GCC states is that the weapons can substitute for direct U.S. action to counter low-level aggression by a nuclear-armed Iran. Direct U.S. action is undesirable because it is dangerous and risks being ineffective.

Direct U.S. action would have two components: direct defense and deterrence. With direct defense, U.S. forces would intercept and defeat limited attacks by the Iranian armed forces

Interests and Objectives," in Richard D. Sokolsky, ed., *The United States and the Persian Gulf: Reshaping Security Strategy for the Post-Containment Era* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2003), 9.

⁵⁷ Jim Garamone, "Gates Labels Iran as Problem for Middle East, World," American Forces Press Service, September 8, 2009; "Interview: Robert Gates," *Al Jazeera*, September 7, 2009, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2009/09/200995202939732522.html>.

against critical targets in the GCC states. With deterrence, the United States would signal its intention to retaliate against Iran for using low-level aggression against the GCC states.

Direct defense of the GCC states by the United States would be dangerous because it would demand large-scale and highly dispersed U.S. troop deployments in the Gulf. With low-level aggression as its main offensive tool, a nuclear-armed Iran could select from a range of critical targets spread throughout the GCC states. It could choose to attack electric power and desalination plants, oil and gas installations, or major ports, for example. It could also vary its attack plans depending on the strength of defenses opposing it at a given location and at a given point in time. Countering such a diverse threat would be possible only through large-scale and highly dispersed troop deployments.

A large-scale and highly dispersed U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia would endanger the Saudi monarchy and increase the risk of terrorism against the United States. Saudi political legitimacy is based in large part on a commitment by the leadership to safeguard the principles of Islam, and the presence of “Christian” troops in the Saudi kingdom is seen as an affront to those principles. The last time the United States deployed large numbers of troops to Saudi Arabia (in 1990), it prompted Osama bin Laden to declare war against the Saudi monarchy and the United States and thus led indirectly to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.⁵⁸

The nature of security cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia today reflects these continuing dangers. Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia represents about one-fifth of the world’s oil supplies and is basically unable to defend itself against large-scale military threats, there are no more than 300 U.S. military personnel in the Saudi kingdom at any given time, according to estimates by Jane’s Information Group.⁵⁹ Saudi Arabia is spending perhaps tens of billions of dollars building specialized security forces precisely so it can defend itself from low-level aggression by Iran without stationing large numbers of U.S. troops on its territory.⁶⁰ These plans are an admission that more direct U.S. involvement would carry grave risks for either side and should only occur in extremis.

While a direct defense of the GCC states by the United States would be dangerous, U.S. plans to deter low-level aggression by a nuclear-armed Iran would risk being ineffective. The problem is that U.S. threats of retaliation against Iran for low-level aggression against the GCC states would lack credibility where U.S. vital interests are not directly challenged.

⁵⁸ “Profile: Osama bin Laden,” Backgrounder, Council on Foreign Relations, updated September 2007, <http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-leaders/profile-osama-bin-laden/p9951>; Richard Bernstein, *Out of the Blue: The Story of September 11, 2001, from Jihad to Ground Zero* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co., 2002), 79; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2004), 221–223, 270.

⁵⁹ “Security and foreign forces, Saudi Arabia,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: The Gulf States*, May 10, 2012.

⁶⁰ “Office of Program Management Ministry of Interior – Facilities Security Forces (OPM MOI-FSF),” in Christopher M. Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Report for Congress, RL33533 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, June 14, 2010), 26.

Threat credibility is a function of will, among other things, and will is a function of the importance of national interests challenged by an aggressor. When the United States felt its political survival endangered by the prospect of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, it threatened the Soviet Union with the possibility of nuclear annihilation to deter such an invasion. (Soviet conventional-military preponderance made this necessary.) The United States was able to attach some measure of credibility to its nuclear threats despite the Soviet Union's second-strike capacity to wipe out the U.S. homeland in response. Threat credibility in this case flowed from the fact the United States had a clear and vital interest in the Soviet Union's not gaining control over the military-industrial potential of Western Europe, which would have irrevocably altered the balance of power between Eastern and Western camps. Perhaps as a result, the Soviet Union never challenged U.S. vital interests by invading Western Europe.

Today, the United States has vital interests in the Gulf that Iran is unlikely to challenge, whether through low-level aggression, large-scale conventional aggression, or nuclear attack.⁶¹ If Iran did challenge those interests, it would quickly find the United States willing and able to use military force to defend them.⁶²

A nuclear-armed Iran is much more likely to challenge interests that are *important* to the GCC states and the United States, but not directly vital to either one. U.S. retaliation would not be assured in this case, and so Iran could more reasonably hope to gain tangible political benefits from possessing nuclear weapons. Thus, instead of trying to assert direct control over the GCC states and their oil production levels, a nuclear-armed Iran might seek greater deference in disputes over drilling rights in the Gulf. It might seek some small but discrete movement upward in the price of oil. And it might seek greater deference on any other of the "large number and wide range of regional matters" that it seeks to influence today.⁶³

Assuming that U.S. vital interests were not directly challenged by these efforts, U.S. threats to use major offensive weapons to retaliate against Iran for low-level aggression against the GCC states would lack credibility. One has to consider that during the 2003–2011 Iraq War, Iran gave improvised explosive technology to insurgents that was at times responsible for 70 percent of U.S. casualties, according to the Washington Post in February 2007.⁶⁴ This included the transfer of explosively former penetrators (EFP), infamous for their ability to turn Humvee armor into shrapnel and also to "take out an Abrams tank."⁶⁵ Despite these actions, the United States did not use its overwhelming military power to punish Iran and thereby deter subsequent behavior of this

⁶¹ For example, the United States has a vital interest in maintaining the unhindered flow of oil from the region at stable prices. McMillan, "U.S. Interests and Objectives," 9, citing Department of Defense, Office of International Security Affairs, United States Security Strategy for the Middle East (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, May 1995), 6.

⁶² See footnote 56.

⁶³ Haass, "U.S. Policy toward Iran."

⁶⁴ Tyson, "Thousands of Army Humvees Lack Armor Upgrade."

⁶⁵ Ibid.

kind. In July 2011, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated that weapons supplied by Iran were still a “tremendous concern” for the U.S. forces in Iraq: “We’re seeing more of those weapons going in from Iran, and they’ve really hurt us.”⁶⁶ Iran got away with this extent of low-level aggression against U.S. forces when it had no nuclear weapons capability to deter U.S. reprisal. It is likely that Iran will have more freedom to use low-level aggression when (a) it has a nuclear deterrent; and (b) such aggression is directed against the GCC states and against U.S. interests that are less than vital.

Because U.S. threats of retaliation may not be credible in these circumstances, they may not provide an effective deterrent. Therefore, a policy to withhold major offensive weapons from the GCC states, which would deny those states an independently effective means of deterrence, would risk failure in counteracting a concerted drive for increased regional influence by a nuclear-armed Iran.

Such a failure would be a problem in its own right. But it would also carry several additional risks. The first is that Iran could be encouraged to build nuclear weapons. If Iran’s leaders doubt the sincerity of future U.S. threats to retaliate on the GCC states’ behalf, they may see an opening to be exploited. A logical move in this case would be for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons and attempt to increase its influence at the expense of the GCC states through a campaign of increased low-level aggression.

A second risk for the United States is that future proliferators around the world, seeing that current U.S. policy is to withhold major offensive weapons from the GCC states, may come to believe that the United States will not punish them by substantially raising the conventional military power of their potential adversaries. This could remove an important disincentive to these states’ development of nuclear weapons.

Third, if governments in the Middle East believe that Iran’s future influence will increase significantly at the expense of the GCC states (due to the latter’s inability to obtain major offensive weapons), they could become more accommodating of Iran now for fear of antagonizing a country soon to be armed with nuclear weapons and capable of increased low-level aggression. This would complicate current U.S. policy to isolate Iran, contain it, and dissuade it from developing nuclear weapons in the first place.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Elisabeth Bumiller, “Panetta Says Iranian Arms in Iraq Are a ‘Concern,’” *New York Times*, July 10, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/11/world/middleeast/11military.html>.

5. Conclusion

It is certainly plausible that Iran's strategy for enhanced regional influence has both offensive and defensive components. The offensive component features low-level aggression, including terrorism, subversion, and potentially, limited military strikes. Thus, on the one hand Iran has maintained and developed links with terrorist groups and other subversive actors, while also improving its ability to conduct limited strikes in the Gulf. In addition, Iran has built up a range of capabilities to deter the victims of its aggression from escalating in response. Some analysts believe Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is the foundation for its defensive strategy—guaranteeing regime survival. (Iraq was invaded; North Korea was not.) A principal concern is whether a nuclear deterrent could substantially increase Iran's freedom to expand the offensive component of its strategy, escalating its campaigns of low-level aggression, with the result being a significant change in the regional balance of power.

Possession by the GCC states—along with the capability to employ and sustain operations of—major offensive weapons appears to be an essential deterrent to Iranian aggression and consequent regional influence. These permit carefully calibrated responses that put at risk Iran's vital economic facilities in the Gulf. They also permit the GCC states to defend themselves and impose substantial costs on Iran should it decide to raise the stakes by escalating to more overt uses of military force. By enabling retaliation, and thereby raising the risks to the Iranian regime, GCC offensive capabilities inhibit more intense low-level aggression by a nuclear-armed Iran to a greater extent than would defensive measures alone. Additionally, some major offensive weapons allow for retaliation against Iran in ways that could minimize the risk of further escalation, in other words providing greater escalation control. Examples of such weapons include air-launched cruise missiles and tactical ballistic missiles (ATACMS).

This paper has not examined and offers no conclusions on the contribution of these major weapons sales to other dimensions of regional stability. Similarly, the paper did not examine the costs and benefits of alternative, similar-cost courses of action (for example, investments in GCC police and intelligence capabilities coupled with internal political liberalization and aggressive use of sanctions for Iranian transgressions).

Appendix A

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Appendix B

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|--|
| AMRAAM | Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile |
| ATACMS | Army Tactical Missile System |
| CENTCOM | U.S. Central Command |
| CRS | Congressional Research Service |
| CSIS | Center for Strategic and International Studies |
| DIA | Defense Intelligence Agency |
| DOD | Department of Defense |
| EEZ | Exclusive Economic Zone |
| EFP | Explosively Former Penetrator |
| GCC | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| GPS | Global Positioning System |
| IAEA | International Atomic Energy Agency |
| IISS | International Institute for Strategic Studies |
| IRGC-N | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy |
| JDAM | Joint Direct Attack Munition |
| NASIC | National Air and Space Intelligence Center |
| ONI | Office of Naval Intelligence |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |

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