

# TURKEY, IRAN AND NUCLEAR RISKS

*In his assessment of Turkey's approach to WMD risks the author includes the perceptions and internal dynamics among various regional actors, capabilities of involved players, and the role of evolving strategic alliances. Analyzing possible Turkish responses to the advent of an openly nuclear Iran, Lesser estimates that the extent and character of Turkish security ties –with the US, within NATO, and with European partners– will be key factors, as well as internal political developments. The effects of a nuclear Iran on Turkey's regional and international policies are explored and the influence of Turkey's prospect of EU membership on Turkey's potential responses are analyzed. In this framework Lesser identifies the costs and benefits of Turkey's cooperation with the US and Israel as well as the role of NATO and the EU in determining Turkey's stance regarding WMDs in general, and specifically regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions.*

**Ian O. Lesser\***

---

\* Dr. Ian Lesser is Vice President, Director of Studies, Pacific Council on International Policy, LA, California, US. This article was originally written for the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Washington, DC.

Turkey is among the countries most exposed to proliferation developments in the Middle East. New disclosures regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions, and Tehran's apparent commitment to proceed with more extensive IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) inspections and safeguards, comes at a time of general flux in Turkey's strategic environment, and in the country's foreign and security policy outlook. For some 50 years, Turkey has lived with nuclear weapons on its borders and deployed on its territory. Although not a nuclear state, and unlikely to become one, nuclear forces and doctrines have been part of the security calculus of the modern Turkish republic for the majority of its existence. But only since the Gulf War of 1990-91, and with increasing attention over the past few years, have Turkish planners and policymakers begun to view the combination of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the means for their delivery at longer ranges as a proximate threat to the security of the country.

In the context of a foreign and security policy that is, at base, conservative and multilateral, the Middle East is one region where Ankara has been prepared to think and act more assertively. The prospect of one or more nuclear or near-nuclear states on Turkey's Middle Eastern borders is now a significant factor in Turkish strategic thought. But in the nuclear realm, Turkey retains a strong preference for multilateral approaches, imbedded in NATO –and to an increasing extent European– policies. The NATO (really the U.S.) nuclear guarantee has been the cornerstone of an approach that still owes much to Cold War patterns. Only very recently have Turkish strategists begun to contemplate a capacity for deterrence and response that goes beyond Alliance arrangements.

Turks worry about the reliability of both NATO and U.S. commitments to Turkish defense in Middle Eastern contingencies, and Turkey will be strongly affected by changes in Alliance strategy, missions, and cohesion, all of which are in flux. If the European Union does open formal accession talks with Ankara, as most Turks hope, the European part of this equation is set to grow in importance. While the defense dimension of Turkey's relations with Europe has been less prominent (and sometime strained), this too is set to grow in prominence as the EU focuses more heavily on extra-European challenges, including proliferation.

Could Turkey act more radically, outside multilateral arrangements, to meet risks posed by a nuclear-ready Iran? The short answer is yes, but it is not very likely. Could Turkey “go nuclear”? Again, the answer is yes, but it is most unlikely. The key in both cases would be a sharp deterioration in the quality of Turkish defense cooperation with the West, and a sense that Turkey was being left to go it alone in a dangerous geo-strategic setting. Overall, the existence of a nuclear-ready Iran poses some direct risks to Turkish security –and many indirect but highly consequential ones. Implications for U.S. and Western policy abound.

This paper explores the contours of Turkey's perceptions and potential responses to a nuclear-ready Iran. Section Two discusses the Turkish strategic context, both regional and functional. Section Three assesses relations with Iran in the context of proliferation challenges, including the effect on wider regional dynamics. Section Four treats the range

of possible Turkish responses to a nuclear or near-nuclear Iran, and external influences on Turkish choices. Section Five offers conclusions and policy implications.

### *The Turkish Strategic Context*

Turkey is a security-conscious society in which territorial defense and internal security remain priorities for the political class, the military, and the public. Broadly, the Turkish strategic culture displays several key characteristics that shape Ankara's approach to the challenge of a nuclear Iran, and relations with allies on proliferation matters. These characteristics include a pronounced sensitivity to questions of national sovereignty (far higher than the modern norm in Europe), a low threshold of tolerance for national insecurity and threats to the "homeland," a high threshold for intervention outside the country, and a willingness to act massively and decisively when this threshold is crossed (e.g., Cyprus in 1974 and more recent cross border actions in northern Iraq). Foreign policy debates in Ankara are also characterized by an historic tension between the Atatürkist tradition of non-intervention, even isolation, and demands for more active regional engagement. Turkey shares many of these characteristics with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

#### *A Conservative Approach*

Turkish perceptions regarding Iran and proliferation issues are affected by a deep tradition of conservatism in foreign and security policy.<sup>2</sup> As a former imperial power, Turkey takes its regional role seriously, and Turkish strategists like to take the long view. Often, this puts them somewhat out of step with their western counterparts. As an example, despite the transformation of western relations with Russia since the end of the Cold War, Turks have retained a very wary approach to Russian power and geopolitical aims. They have remained highly sensitive to the nuclear aspects of Russian doctrine, and Russia's role in places like the Balkans and Cyprus –at a time when it has become fashionable to down-grade or dismiss the Russian factor in Europe and even Eurasia. In historical terms, Turkey has seen Russia as its primary geo-strategic competitor. Turkey's relations with Arab neighbors in the Middle East have been colored by the experience of empire, including its collapse, leaving a legacy of mutual diffidence and mistrust. Iran, by contrast, has been a relatively stable and predictable neighbor, with no history of conflict with Ottoman Turkey or the Turkish republic.

Turks –like many others– have been relatively slow to adapt their security thinking to new risks, although this dimension of Turkey's conservatism in external policy is changing under pressure of new regional realities, and a new constellation of actors in the policymaking process. Turkey's very significant conventional military strength, with the second largest military establishment in NATO, an increasingly modern force structure, and a growing capacity for power projection beyond its borders, is an important element

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive discussion, see F. Stephen Larrabee and Ian O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in An Age of Uncertainty* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> On Turkey's strategic culture, see Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy Since the Cold War* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), pp. 161-181.

in the country's perception of regional risks.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, Turkey's overwhelming conventional superiority vis-à-vis its Middle Eastern neighbors, and its NATO membership, are obvious and very potent deterrents to aggression in relations with Iran, Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, like their counterparts in Israel and the U.S., Turkish strategists worry that their conventional superiority compels regional adversaries to adopt unconventional, asymmetric strategies. This can take the form of support for terrorism and insurgency, as with Syria's past support for the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), or the threat to use chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons against Turkish population centers or bases.<sup>4</sup>

Like other NATO allies, much Turkish thinking about nuclear forces and doctrine derives from Cold War experience. For fifty years, Turkey was a key forward location for intelligence and early warning on Soviet strategic forces, and a base for potential nuclear operations against the Soviet Union. Nuclear-armed Jupiter missiles based in Turkey were traded away during the Cuban missile crisis, but Turkey continued to host tactical nuclear forces deployed in a NATO context. Turkish strategists remain attuned to shifts in Russian nuclear forces and doctrine. Even as Turkish-Russian political and economic relations have expanded dramatically over the past decade, security relations have remained tenuous, and Turks have been among the most sensitive of NATO members on the question of the re-nuclearization of Russian military doctrine.

#### *Changing Perceptions of WMD Exposure*

Given the extraordinary extent of Turkey's exposure to WMD and missile risks emanating from the Middle East –easily the most pronounced in NATO– some analysts express surprise that Turkey did not signal its concern about proliferation issues earlier and more forcefully.<sup>5</sup> As general concern about WMD in the Middle East grew among western and Israeli strategists, even prior to the Gulf War, Ankara remained relatively unconcerned, adopting a “surprisingly nonchalant attitude” toward the threat.<sup>6</sup> Several explanations can be offered for this stance. First, a perception of substantial strategic depth, with the main Turkish population and economic centers at some remove from Middle Eastern borders.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, as the range of missiles deployed in the region has increased, this perception has waned. Second, in line with Cold War thinking, and prior to the troubling experience of the Gulf War in 1990, Turkey assumed that the NATO security guarantee was relevant and more than sufficient to deter regional,

---

<sup>3</sup> In the mid 1990s, Turkey initiated a sweeping and very costly plan for defense modernization, possibly totaling 150 billion dollars or more in new acquisitions and up-grades over 25 years. The financial crisis of 2000 and onward has cast considerable doubt on the extent and pace of this program, but key aspects continue to move ahead as planned. Annual procurement spending is now in the region of \$3 billion per year, with an overall defense budget (narrowly defined) of roughly \$7.5 billion in 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The ability of Turkey's adversaries to play an internal security card was central to the much-debated argument set out by Amb. Şükrü Elekdağ in 1994 regarding the need for a “two and a half war” strategy, with Greece, Syria, and the PKK insurgency as key contingencies for planning.

<sup>5</sup> Until quite recently, the author would have described Turkish policymakers as being “in denial” regarding the nature of proliferation risks on the country's borders, and the implications for security cooperation with allies. See Ian O. Lesser and Ashley J. Tellis, *Strategic Exposure: Proliferation Around the Mediterranean* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Efraim Inbar, “The Turkish-Israeli Entente”, unpublished paper.

<sup>7</sup> Robins (2003), p. 202.

unconventional threats. Third, the Turkish security elite, like the Turkish elite in general, has preferred to focus on European and transatlantic issues, holding Middle Eastern problems at arms length wherever possible.

Turkish military planners noted with concern the exchange of missile strikes during the so-called “war of the cities” during the Iran-Iraq war. But the Gulf War of 1990 was the real watershed in Turkish strategic perceptions regarding WMD and missile risks.<sup>8</sup> The war also had a negative effect on Turkey’s assumptions about the predictability of the NATO security guarantee in “out-of-area” contingencies. Despite threats from Baghdad, Turkey was not targeted by Iraq in its Scud missile campaign. Nonetheless, the Özal government’s active role in the Gulf War coalition, and the extensive air operations conducted from Incirlik air base, could well have made Turkey a target for retaliatory attack. During the run-up to the war, Turks were dismayed by the slow and contentious allied response to Ankara’s request for NATO air defense reinforcements (an experience repeated in the months before the 2003 Iraq war). The Scud attacks on Israel and in the Gulf made a strong impression on the Turkish military, who took away the lesson that Turkey’s large but rather out-dated military establishment required substantial modernization, including the ability to address WMD and missile risks from Iraq, Iran and, above all, Syria.

From the early 1990s, Turkey’s small cadre of strategic analysts outside the government, including academic observers and journalists, began to pay increased attention to WMD and missile risks. At the official level, the response remained largely rhetorical. Turkey was never a particularly enthusiastic supporter of UNSCOM’s work in Iraq, although Ankara clearly benefited from the military containment of Baghdad. With proximate reasons for conflict, Syrian chemical and improved-Scud programs remained the leading concern. Iran’s nuclear and missile ambitions were seen as a more distant risk –linked more closely to American interests and behavior than to Turkish-Iranian dynamics.

Growing attention to the WMD problem was reflected in changes to Turkey’s air defense strategy, which for the first time (1993) included the concept of countering medium-range missiles and potential nuclear arsenals deployed in countries to the south and east, with “countering” a matter of forward planning for enhanced early warning and missile defense procurement. The Turkish mix of active and passive defense against WMD envisioned reliance on NATO assets for deterrence, hardening of military targets and command and control, and bolstering the ability to locate and attack mobile targets (a tough problem, even for far more capable allies). The informed public debate noted the importance of the issue, largely as reflected through American and Israeli analyses, but was generally dismissive of Turkey’s own missile defense strategy.<sup>9</sup>

As noted above, the general perception of threat from Iran and Iraq has been low. Turks in general have not shared the American concern regarding nuclear and missile risks

---

<sup>8</sup> See Anthony H. Cordesman, *Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East* (London: Brassey’s, 1991), pp.40-42.; and Duygu Sezer, *Turkey’s New Security Environment, Nuclear Weapons and Proliferation* (Los Alamos: Center for National Security Studies, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Turkish Daily News*, 11 August 1992. Cited in Robins (2003), p. 203.

emanating from either country, largely because Turkish observers find it difficult to imagine circumstances under which Iran or Iraq would employ such weapons against Turkey –except in retaliation for American intervention launched from Turkish bases. Turkey does have pronounced stakes in the future of Iran and Iraq, but these turn on questions of instability, consequences for Kurdish separatism affecting Turkey, the role of the region’s Islamists in Turkish politics, and access to energy. The question of direct, state-to-state conflict has not loomed large in Turkish perceptions, in stark contrast to a far more unstable relationship with Syria.

### *The Israeli Factor*

Arguably, a leading factor in elevating Turkish attention to WMD risks, and Iranian WMD risks in particular, has been the development of a broad-based strategic relationship with Israel. Israel is an active participant in Turkey’s defense modernization program, and there is an impressive degree of collaboration on training and intelligence sharing, including surveillance and possible responses to nuclear and missile threats. More broadly, there has been a substantial convergence in strategic perception and regional risk assessment, driven by increased dialogue and objective factors. This strategic relationship has been encouraged by Washington, but has its origins in Turkish and Israeli interests. In some cases, Turkey sees Israel as an alternative and perhaps more reliable supplier of defense goods and services. Iran’s nuclear and missile capabilities are central to Israel’s strategic outlook, and this has certainly reinforced the issue in Turkish thinking (the potential for Turkish-Israeli cooperation in strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities are discussed in Section IV, below). Neither the Islamist Erbakan government of the mid 1990s, nor the current government led by Prime Minister Erdoğan, with its “recessed” Islamic roots, has significantly interfered with Turkish-Israeli relations –a portfolio in which the Turkish military continues to play a leading role.

### *The Iraq War –and a More Diverse Security Debate*

The recent experience of the War in Iraq has focused Turkish attention firmly on the problem of northern Iraq, where Turks across the political spectrum perceive substantial stakes. The key variable here is the potential emergence of an independent Kurdish state out of the chaos in Iraq, and the effect this might have on Turkey’s own Kurdish separatists. A secondary factor is Turkish affinity for Iraq’s Turcomen, although this too is seen through the lens of the ethnic power balance in northern Iraq. Turks have been, and remain, less interested in the issue of WMD in Iraq, and tend to share European skepticism regarding the accuracy of pre-war intelligence (despite the fact that Turkish sources contributed to this intelligence and Turkish analysts were no less convinced of Iraq’s WMD capabilities than their opposite numbers in Europe and the U.S.).

That said, the risk of chemical or missile attacks on Turkish territory certainly figured in the public debate about cooperation with the U.S. prior to the war. The net effect was to reinforce the sense that Turkey had a stronger stake in regional stability than in regime change with an unpredictable neighbor. The failure of bilateral negotiations over access to Turkish facilities in the spring of 2003 –a close run thing– had multiple sources.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> See Ian Lesser, “Playing Turkey,” *Aspenalia*, 21/22 (2003), pp. 166-174.

Turkish concerns about WMD exposure, and lackluster backing from NATO, played a small but measurable role in this calculus of cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

Today, Turkey's perception of nuclear and missile risks is shaped by an increasingly diverse national debate on security questions. The outlook of the Turkish General Staff still counts heavily, of course. But independent analysts and a vigorous private media now play a key role –and public opinion counts. The new elites, from cosmopolitan business circles, to more traditional elements associated with the current AKP government, tend to be less security conscious and more heavily focused on domestic reform. Their views on external issues, including proliferation, are heavily influenced by international debates and, to an ever-increasing extent, by attitudes in Europe. Absent a direct threat to Turkish security, Turks across the political spectrum are now as likely – perhaps more likely– to frame policy toward Iran and its WMD capabilities in European rather than American terms. Barring a sharp deterioration in relations with the EU, the desire to stay in the European mainstream will be a key factor in Turkey's approach to a nuclear-ready Iran in the years to come. The result may be pronounced tension between an Israeli and American-inspired hard line on proliferation matters, and a softer, “diplomacy first” approach flowing from Brussels. These disparate approaches could be brought into line if the EU begins to take proliferation risks more seriously.

### ***Views of Iran, Its Nuclear Ambitions and Regional Dynamics***

In a region Turks are inclined to treat as a source of risk rather than opportunity, relations with Iran have been essentially stable, with little of the propensity for assertiveness evident in relations with Syria.<sup>12</sup> Both states have traditionally seen each other as status quo powers, and pre-revolution Iran had much in common with the secular, modernizing, western-oriented society Atatürk had promoted in Turkey. Turks often refer to their “dangerous neighborhood” in the Middle East, but are also quick to note that Turkey and Iran lack a recent history of armed conflict. As a broad generalization, Turks *take Iran seriously* as a society and as a regional power, something that cannot be said for Turkey's approach to Syria, Iraq or the Arab Gulf states. Iran and Israel are treated as peers in the Middle East; Syria, Iraq and the Arab states of the Gulf are not.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Sources of Turkish Concern***

This relatively favorable view of Iran has been slow to change since the Iranian revolution. Only within the last few years have elements of the Turkish security establishment come to see Iran as a serious challenge, and even today there are strong countervailing interests in improved relations. The sources of Turkish concern are straightforward. First, Turkey's secular elites, including the military, have been increasingly concerned about the export of Islamic radicalism from Iran. This concern is

---

<sup>11</sup> For an official Turkish assessment of NATO defense support to Turkey in the run-up to the Iraq War, see *Turkey's Security Perspectives and Its Relations with NATO* (Turkish Foreign Ministry), December 2003, p. 4. [www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/af/secure.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/af/secure.htm).

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Alan Makovsky for this description of Turkish attitudes toward the Middle East.

<sup>13</sup> For an excellent discussion of Turkish strategy in the Middle East generally, see Kemal Kirisci, “Post Cold War Turkish Security and the Middle East,” *MERIA* (Middle East Review of International Affairs), Vol. 1, No.2 (July 1997).

driven by Iranian financial and other support for activists abroad, and the ebb and flow of Iran's support for international terrorism. An Iranian hand is sometimes seen in the construction of Turkish religious schools (where Saudi backing has certainly played a larger role) and the financing of Islamist movements

In reality, these are marginal factors on the Turkish political scene. But those inclined to worry about secularism in Turkey, including harder-line elements in the military and Kemalists of the old school, tend to see Iran as an internal security threat.

Second, Iran is a key player with regard to the Kurdish issue in its regional setting, and relations on Kurdish matters continue to be a leading barometer of Turkish-Iranian relations as a whole. The history here is largely one of cooperation against a common fear of Kurdish separatism, but the vagaries of PKK/KADEK deployments have led to periodic frictions. When the expulsion of the PKK from Syria forced Kurdish insurgents to operate from bases in Iran, Ankara responded forcefully, and the Turkish air force reportedly struck PKK camps inside Iran in July 1999.

Third, as noted earlier, Turkey has been increasingly concerned about the influence of WMD and missile proliferation on the security environment, its own regional freedom of action, and that of its alliance partners. Iraq and Syria have also been part of this equation, and the WMD capabilities of these countries have generally been seen as posing a more proximate risk to Turkey. In the case of Syria, the regime's support for the PKK, against a background of frictions over territory and resources, actually brought the two countries to the brink of a military clash in 1998. Recurring western military intervention in Iraq, and the use of Incirlik air base for Operation Northern Watch, made the possibility of Iraqi retaliation on Turkish soil an ongoing concern. In terms of its WMD capabilities and missile reach, Iran may have posed a more serious threat on paper, but few Turks worried about a clash with Iran in which WMD might become a factor – there was little rationale for conflict on either side. Indeed, Turkish economic interests in Iran, including access to natural gas, have been a strong countervailing factor.

#### *Sources of Iranian Concern... and Improved Ties*

On the Iranian side, there are also some concerns regarding Turkey, although none have risen to a level posing a risk of direct conflict. Under conditions of instability in Iran, Turkey could choose to foment separatism among ethnic Turks in Azerbaijan, although Ankara, with its own concerns about national integrity, has been wary of supporting separatist movements elsewhere, whether in Chechnya or Kosovo –despite some internal pressures to do so. Iran has also been troubled by the presence of Iranian opposition groups in Turkey, including elements of the *Mujahiddin-i Khalq*. Turkish secularism and membership in the Western strategic “club” surely trouble Iranian conservatives. More specifically, Turkey could facilitate American or Israeli intervention in Iran, including the provision of intelligence, bases and over-flight rights for strikes against Iranian nuclear or missile facilities. But on the whole, Iranian decisions regarding strategy and force structure, including nuclear and missile programs, are almost certainly driven by other factors.

Over the past year, Turkish-Iranian relations have actually improved considerably (as have Turkish relations with Syria), with four high-level Turkish visits to Iran, and six from Iran to Turkey. The bilateral dialogue has spanned economic and educational matters, as well as the critical question of policy toward Kurdish groups in northern Iraq. Iranian nuclear and missile programs do not seem to be part of this agenda, although Turkey has been supportive of EU-led efforts to forestall new UN-sponsored sanctions over WMD matters.<sup>14</sup> Observers attribute this improvement in Turkish relations with Tehran (and Damascus) to several factors, from the desire for a concerted approach to northern Iraq, to the more open attitude of the AKP government to engagement with Iran. Not least, Ankara has followed the lead of Europe in its own more active engagement of both states over the past year.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Effect of a Nuclear-Ready Iran on Turkish Interests and Regional Dynamics*

A nuclear-capable or near-nuclear Iran would pose both direct and indirect challenges to Turkish interests. In direct terms, a functioning Iranian nuclear arsenal, coupled with Iranian short and medium-range missiles, would pose a much more dramatic and politically salient threat to Turkish security, going well beyond the current rather amorphous sense of WMD threat. An open Iranian nuclear capability would place immediate pressure on Turkey's slow-moving missile defense plans, and would probably compel Ankara to press for a much more direct NATO (and EU) stance regarding Article V and other commitments in Middle Eastern contingencies. Exposure to a nuclear arsenal on Turkey's borders would not be a new phenomenon for Turkey –Turks have lived with the reality of Soviet and Russian nuclear power for decades– but it would immensely increase the sense of insecurity in an already security-conscious society. In the absence of a predictable Western security guarantee, Ankara might also consider acquiring deterrent capabilities of its own, although the prospect for this is complicated and politically risky for Turkey.

Given the paucity of proximate flashpoints in Turkish-Iranian relations, the consequences of a nuclear Iran are likely to be felt more heavily across a range of wider geopolitical interests (i.e., interests beyond the defense of Turkish territory *per se*). First, a nuclear Iran would acquire new strategic weight in its relations with Ankara, among others. This could greatly complicate Turkish diplomacy over Kurds, energy, and other issues that have been at the center of the bilateral agenda. In a less easily measured way, it might also affect Turkey's relative regional standing, with implications for relations across the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and even the Balkans.

Second, a nuclear Iran would severely complicate Turkey's security relationships with Washington, Israel and Europe. A new nuclear threat to Turkish territory, however theoretical, might encourage a convergence of strategic perception among those most affected by this development. In practical terms, however, Ankara will confront a series of new security dilemmas. Turkey's sense of regional exposure, and the need to "live"

---

<sup>14</sup> See Amberin Zaman, "Syrian Leader's Visit Highlights Shift in Relations with Turkey," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "A Turkish Rapprochement with Middle East Rogue States?" *Policywatch*, No. 825, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 9 January 2004.

with neighbors, however unpalatable, is already a strong influence on the calculus of defense cooperation, as seen on numerous occasions since 1990, and as shown quite clearly in 2003. The potential for nuclear retaliation on Turkish territory would revive questions of alliance vulnerability, coupling, de-coupling, “singularization,” etc., familiar from the late Cold War.

Given the near-term potential for Western and Israeli intervention in Iran, these would not be theoretical considerations for Ankara. Indeed, the very existence of a nuclear arsenal in Iran would immediately raise the likelihood of and stakes surrounding intervention—at least until Iran acquires a sufficiently credible nuclear capability to deter a conventional first strike. At which point a very different calculus will emerge, with Turkey playing a role analogous to Germany during the Cold War. Under these conditions, Turkish strategists will need to consider whether a nuclear confrontation between Iran and the West is likely to be fought over their heads—possible if Iran develops ballistic missiles of intercontinental range— or on Turkish territory. The prospect would surely reopen doctrinal debates about nuclear strategy within NATO, at a time when the Alliance is contemplating a formal role in security across the “greater Middle East.”

Turkey would not be alone in confronting these new dilemmas. For some time, southern European members of NATO have faced the reality of increasing exposure to retaliation from regimes across the Mediterranean. Southern Europe and the Mediterranean, the least nuclear of theaters during the Cold War, have emerged as leading centers of nuclear and other WMD risks in the current strategic environment. With Libya’s decision to dismantle its WMD and missile inventory, the center of gravity for this “southern exposure” has shifted to the eastern Mediterranean, where Iranian, Syrian, and Egyptian arsenals continue to shape NATO and EU perceptions of WMD risk.

Third, the advent of a nuclear Iran, and the possibility of a regional arms race embracing Turkey, could affect military balances and perceptions beyond the Middle East. Russia might feel compelled to respond, technically or doctrinally, to a nuclear Iran, with negative implications for the security of Turkey (unless the Russian response came as part of a concerted approach with the U.S. and Europe). Similarly, new nuclear and missile capabilities in Iran could have a cascading effect on security balances in the Balkans and the Aegean, where Greece is highly sensitive to changes in Turkish force structure and strategy. This effect has already been seen in the context of Turkish defense modernization (e.g., new air refueling tankers, AWACS, and ATACMS) aimed at Middle Eastern contingencies; it might also influence the Greek and Turkish interest in moving ahead with mutual and balanced force reductions, now being discussed.

Finally, Turkey could become an even more prominent focus of Western concern as a transit route for the “leakage” of nuclear materials and technology. Turkey is already at the center of police and intelligence cooperation regarding the interdiction of nuclear contraband. A nuclear capable Iran would raise the specter of another marketplace for nuclear technology, along the lines of Pakistan. The existence of such a market on Turkey’s borders would make Turkey an even more essential security partner for the U.S.

and Europe, but might also reinforce existing European wariness regarding the security “baggage” Turkey brings to the table. Which raises a larger question of deep interest to Turkey: Will the European Union want to acquire a formal border with Iraq, Syria and a nuclear armed Iran? This is a question Turks would prefer not to have as part of the equation in relations with Europe at a time of critical decisions on Turkey’s EU candidacy.

Under conditions of increased risk from a nuclear Iran, Turkey would have a very strong stake in the development of more active NATO and EU approaches to non-proliferation, counter-proliferation, and missile defense. Ankara has been a leading proponent of multilateral initiatives in this area, especially those oriented toward the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Over the past few years, and with increasing urgency since 2003, NATO and the EU have placed proliferation issues higher on their agendas. The new European Security Strategy (the “Solana” document) identifies proliferation as a leading concern, and the EU now has in place an “action plan” on WMD.<sup>16</sup> The new, tougher EU approach to proliferators can be seen in recent policy toward Iran and especially Syria, in which trade and cooperation negotiations have been clearly linked to progress on the WMD front (another likely rationale for Libya’s recent disarmament moves).<sup>17</sup> As Turkey enters a critical phase in its relations with the EU, looking toward the formal opening of accession negotiations in 2005, it is likely to see a growing and very welcome tendency to take nuclear proliferation more seriously in Brussels.<sup>18</sup>

NATO has had a series of initiatives in this area since the first Iraq war, and has devoted significant resources to improving intelligence sharing and command and control in WMD-related contingencies. But for both organizations, the improvements are largely in the realm of strategic concepts and doctrine, rather than capabilities. Confronted with a specific new nuclear threat from Iran, Turkey, like the U.S. and Israel, will focus on practical, operational responses rather than enhanced debate about the problem. Turkish policymakers will have the opportunity to encourage Alliance attention to nuclear risks and possible responses at the NATO summit in Istanbul in June 2004.

### ***Possible Turkish Responses and Policy Influences***

Revelations regarding the status of Iran’s nuclear program, and the apparent Iranian commitment to enhanced IAEA inspections, have not yet produced a measurable response from Ankara, although Turkish policymakers are clearly supportive of pressure on Tehran over nuclear matters, at least in a multilateral context. But how might Turkey respond to the advent of an openly nuclear Iran, or an Iran that declares itself bent on acquiring nuclear weapons regardless of international sanctions? The range of possible

---

<sup>16</sup> See *A Secure Europe in A Better World: European Security Strategy* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, December 2003); and the “Action Plan for the Implementation of the Basic Principles for an EU Strategy against Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction” (2003).

<sup>17</sup> This linkage is also noted in Javier Solana, “The EU Security Strategy: Implications for Europe’s Role in a Changing World,” remarks delivered in Berlin, 12 November 2003.

<sup>18</sup> See Dalia Dassa Kaye, “Europe, Syria and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Policywatch*, No. 824, 8 January 2004, Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Turkish responses is wide, from “denial” –ignoring the threat– to the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent of its own.

The critical context for Turkish decision-making in this sphere will be the extent and character of Turkish security ties –with the U.S., within NATO, and with European partners. Internal political developments may also have a bearing on Turkish choices. But the perceived relevance and predictability of the country’s alliance relations will be the overwhelmingly important influence on Turkey’s response.

### *Denial and De-Coupling*

Turkey could respond to a nuclear-ready Iran by simply denying the significance of the risk. There is some precedent for this approach in terms of Turkey’s relatively unconcerned response to proliferation trends in Iraq and across the Middle East prior to the Gulf War of 1990. A credible nuclear capability in Iran would be more difficult for Turkey to ignore, even if the prospect of a military clash with Iran remains very low. A nuclear-ready Iran threatens American and Israeli strategic interests in ways that Ankara cannot ignore if it is to maintain an effective security relationship with these critical partners. Under conditions of ambiguity or dispute regarding Iranian capabilities, Turkey might well opt for an assessment and response in the European mainstream, which might well lean toward “denial.”

Turks who wish to minimize the nuclear threat from Iran will do so by arguing that Turkey’s exposure comes about largely as a result of American and Israeli policies, and the direct risks to Turkey come via the prospect of American or Israeli intervention in Iran. In this case, many Turks might seek to de-couple the country’s security policies from allies who bring more exposure than reassurance. But, with the range of hard security challenges Turkey faces, in multiple regions, it is unlikely that the current Turkish security establishment, even in light of public opinion, would be willing to jeopardize Turkey’s overall deterrent posture to pursue a strategy of de-coupling in relation to Iranian risks.

### *Reinforced Conventional Deterrence*

The prospect of a nuclear-ready Iran would underscore existing Turkish concerns about defense modernization, and could accelerate plans for improving the country’s early warning and missile defense capabilities. Turkey might also seek to bolster its capacity for locating and striking mobile targets, as well its rudimentary missile capability, currently limited to ATACMs and an exploratory short-range missile program. Turkey might decide to develop and press forward with an indigenous medium-range ballistic missile program, bringing it into line with several of its Middle Eastern neighbors. These efforts could be strengthened if Turkey proceeds with reported plans to develop its own space launch vehicle for military reconnaissance and commercial purposes by 2010.<sup>19</sup> Turkey’s alliance partners, especially Greece, might regard this with concern. Russia, a reconstituted Iraq, and above all, Syria, would regard this with alarm.

---

<sup>19</sup> “Report on Turkey’s Plans to Launch its Own Missile into Space by 2010 at Earliest,” *Milliyet*, 1 February 2004 (FBIS text).

Rapid expansion of Turkey's missile defenses would be a less controversial and probably more useful approach. Turkey has already gone some distance in this direction with plans to acquire Patriot (PAC-3), and to participate in the Israeli Arrow and perhaps the U.S.-led MEADS (medium-range extended air defense) program with other European allies. Turkey is also a likely site for sensors and boost-phase interceptors deployed as part of American strategic missile defense architecture.<sup>20</sup>

The scale of Turkey's conventional forces, and their increasing capacity for regional power projection, coupled with new missile and missile defense capabilities, would surely cause even a nuclear-armed regional adversary to think twice about confronting Turkey. That said, Turkish analysts are probably correct in their judgment that the real source of nuclear risk to Turkey flows from the strategic decisions of others –the U.S. and Israel– regarding Iran. Under these conditions, Turkey's own capacity for conventional preemption or response may not weigh heavily.

### *The Nuclear Option*

Could Turkey go nuclear? This question has been raised from time to time over the past two decades by Turks, and others. The short answer is probably “yes.” Given sufficient time, Turkey probably would have the technical wherewithal to develop a limited nuclear arsenal and the means for delivering nuclear weapons in regional contingencies. That said, the costs –material, and above all political– of pursuing the nuclear option are almost certainly prohibitive for Turkey. The calculus surrounding the nuclear option could become more favorable only under drastically changed conditions, both internal and external.

Turkey has been a party to the NPT (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons) since 1980, and an additional safeguards agreement with the IAEA is also in force. The country's nuclear research facilities consist of the Çekmece Nuclear Research and Training Center, and a 250KW TRR research reactor at Istanbul Technical University, supplied by General Atomics in the late 1970s.<sup>21</sup> Since the mid-1960s, Turkey has explored the idea of building one or more nuclear power plants –even soliciting tenders for a 1,200MW plant at Akkuyu Bay near Mersin. But for a variety of financial and environmental reasons, little progress has been made.<sup>22</sup> Over the last two-decades, Turkey's growing energy demands have driven a variety of new arrangements for importing oil and natural gas, from Iran, Central Asia and Russia. These demands could well have justified a nuclear power program, but the financial instability of recent years slowed the growth in energy demand and put an expensive nuclear program out of reach. Apart from cost, the leading internal impediment to nuclear power development in Turkey is now environmental politics, as elsewhere in Europe (critics charge that the proposed plant at Akkuyu is prone to seismic risks).

---

<sup>20</sup> See Guray Al, “Turkey's Response to Threats of Weapons of Mass Destruction,” unpublished thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, December 2001, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> Ephraim Kam and Yiftah Shapir (eds.), *The Middle East Strategic Balance 2002-2003* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2003), p. 259.

<sup>22</sup> See Robins (2003), p.205. For an extensive discussion of Turkey's civil nuclear program, see Mustafa Kibaroglu, “Turkey's Quest for Peaceful Nuclear Power,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring/Summer 1997.

Concern about Turkish nuclear intentions has surfaced on a number of occasions, notably in 1981, when Turkey was alleged to have facilitated transfers of nuclear-related technology to Pakistan, and again in 1992, when Senators Glenn and Symington led an effort to halt aid to Turkey in light of allegations about Turkish-Pakistani nuclear cooperation.<sup>23</sup> Recent revelations regarding Pakistani nuclear technology transfers to Iran, North Korea and Libya raise the question of whether Pakistani scientists might have tried to sell nuclear designs and equipment to Ankara. Greek analysts have produced several studies exploring Turkish interests and capabilities in the nuclear realm.<sup>24</sup> Most of these pre-date the current détente between Athens and Ankara, and most allege a Turkish interest in acquiring nuclear material and technology from the Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union. Ankara has been quick to deny these allegations. For the most part, however, Greece and other neighbors with a stake in Turkish nuclear developments have been at least as focused on the environmental risks associated with civil nuclear power projects in Turkey. Few regional analysts have taken seriously the prospects for Turkey becoming a nuclear weapons state.

Pursuit of an independent nuclear capability would be a costly long-term project for Turkey given the lack of a substantial civil nuclear infrastructure on which to build.<sup>25</sup> Western partners would not transfer the required technology outside the context of a civil program (they have been reluctant to do so even in the context of power projects), and all such transfers are now under intense scrutiny. As an open, democratic society, it would be extraordinarily difficult for Turkey to pursue a clandestine weapons program. To do so openly, to “break out” from NPT and technology transfer agreements would mean estrangement from key western allies –or worse. A nuclear-armed Turkey would raise many of the same concerns associated with a nuclear Germany, or a nuclear Japan. It would probably mean the end of Turkey’s EU ambitions, and could render the country a pariah in NATO circles. In short, it is an inconceivable path under current conditions.

Under what conditions might Turkey consider running these very considerable risks to acquire a nuclear deterrent? Internal politics could influence the attractiveness of a nuclear option, but it would probably require a complete reversal of Turkey’s secular, western-oriented path –in short, an anti-western revolution. This is extraordinary unlikely. Externally, some combination of highly disruptive developments could make a nuclear option attractive, if no more practical. A short list of such developments would include: the collapse of NATO and its nuclear-backed security guarantee; a dead-end in Turkey’s EU candidacy; a formal collapse of the international nonproliferation regime, and the rise of multiple new nuclear weapons states; and the emergence of real, proximate flashpoints in Turkish-Iranian relations outside the nuclear realm –taken together, regional and international anarchy as seen from Ankara.

---

<sup>23</sup> Kibaroglu (1997), pp. 38-39.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Thanos Dokos, “Greece,” in Harald Muller (ed.), *Nuclear Export Controls in Europe* (Brussels: European Interuniversity Press, 1995); and Spyros Traiforos, “Nuclear Policy in Turkey: Is Turkey on Its way to Become a Nuclear Weapons State?,” *Defensor Pacis*, 1 January 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Robins (2003), p. 205.

### *Bilateral and Multilateral Responses*

Without question, Turkey's preferred response to a nuclear Iran will be multilateral. If there is a transatlantic consensus to act, either to constrain or sanction Iranian nuclear plans, or to prevent the production and deployment of nuclear weapons in a nuclear-ready Iran, Ankara will most likely be supportive, diplomatically and militarily. In the absence of a transatlantic consensus, the Turkish calculus will be more complex and uncertain. With decisions regarding EU accession talks looming on the horizon (and with other obstacles such as Cyprus on the way to resolution), Ankara will be wary of getting out of step with mainstream European policies, even under pressure from the U.S. or Israel. The ideal approach from the Turkish perspective would be a multilateral, UN-backed action aimed at the nuclear disarmament of Iran, leaving in place or even expanding the economic engagement of Tehran—essentially the Libyan model.

If diplomatic pressure and new sanctions are ineffective in slowing Iran's nuclear ambitions, and Iran reaches a more advanced "nuclear ready" posture, or actually prepares for the deployment of nuclear weapons, Turkey might back an American or Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear and missile facilities. Incirlik airbase could be put at the disposal of U.S. air expeditionary forces. Intelligence gathered from facilities in Turkey, as well as access to Turkish airspace for transit and refueling, would greatly facilitate Israel's ability to strike Iran's WMD infrastructure.<sup>26</sup> Turkey's increasingly capable air force could also contribute to counter-nuclear operations, or strikes against Iranian missile sites of special concern (e.g., Shahab-3 launchers).

Participation in an Israeli or American strike would imply some risks for Turkey, including the possibility of a preemptive or retaliatory Iranian missile strike, possibly WMD-armed, on Turkish bases or cities. Even Turkish support for stronger nuclear-related sanctions on Iran could jeopardize cooperation with Tehran on issues of concern to Ankara. It could further complicate Turkey's Kurdish policies, and might spur Iranian meddling in Turkey's religious politics, or support for terrorism inside Turkey. On balance, however, Ankara will most likely run some risks to assure that it will not confront a nuclear Iran, with all that this would imply for longer-term Iranian leverage over Ankara across the board. The political dilemmas may be more difficult for Turkey, especially in the absence of European backing for military action against Iran. With European relations in the balance, Ankara might well opt to observe the destruction of Iranian nuclear facilities from the sidelines (perhaps with some very quiet intelligence and logistical support) rather than risk the political—and possibly real—fallout from active participation.

### *Conclusions and Policy Implications*

After years of relative neglect of WMD risks emanating from the Middle East, Turkey has begun to focus more seriously on these risks, above all the prospect of new nuclear powers appearing on the country's borders. A nuclear or near-nuclear Iran would negatively affect Turkish interests. Quite apart from the country's physical vulnerability

---

<sup>26</sup> See Michael Eisenstadt, "Turkish-Israeli Military Cooperation: An Assessment," *Policywatch*, No. 262, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 24 July 1997.

to nuclear attack with missiles of increasing range and accuracy, a nuclear-ready Iran would complicate Turkey's regional policies, many closely tied to internal security concerns. Ankara already takes Iran seriously as a regional actor. A nuclear Iran would acquire far greater strategic weight in its relations with Turkey, and others. It is a development Turkey's security elite and increasingly active and well-informed public would prefer not to confront. This analysis points to a number of conclusions about Turkey's exposure and potential responses, with some important policy implications for the U.S., Europe and NATO.

First, Turkey's relations with Iran lack obvious flashpoints for direct military confrontation. There are certainly sources of friction, and these could worsen. But there is little risk of an overt clash, of the kind imaginable with Syria until quite recently. Few Turks perceive a direct military threat from Iran. A nuclear Iran would reduce Ankara's regional freedom of action, but might not threaten Turkish security directly in the near-term. The real effect on Turkish interests –and it could be substantial– would be of a longer-term, geopolitical nature.

Second, to the extent that Turkey does perceive a threat from Iranian WMD and missile capabilities, it tends to be seen as a product of American and Israeli confrontation with Iran, and possible spillovers affecting Turkey. Turkish bases and population centers would be exposed to the retaliatory consequences of intervention by Turkey's western partners. Turks have had to confront this reality as part of their calculus of cooperation with Washington in Iraq; it operates with equal force in relation to Iran. Turkish exposure, and an inherent ambivalence regarding sovereignty compromises in defense ties, means that Turkish cooperation in preventive action against Iran cannot be taken for granted despite Ankara's clear interest in forestalling the emergence of new nuclear powers in the Middle East.

Third, Turkey will be heavily affected by the strategies of others –the U.S., Europe, Israel, Russia– vis-à-vis a nuclear-ready Iran. The country is not well placed to undertake unilateral responses, and will exhibit a strong preference for multilateral approaches that do not expose Turkey to risks in its overwhelmingly important transatlantic and European relationships. Conventional and unconventional responses to Iranian nuclear proliferation could also have a cascading effect on strategic balances beyond the Middle East, affecting Turkish relations with Russia, Greece and others.

Fourth, the critical external influences on Turkish decision-making toward a nuclear-ready Iran are the perceived predictability of the NATO security guarantee, including a credible nuclear component, and Turkey's continued integration in Europe. To the extent that the NATO tie remains credible, Turkey's leadership is likely to adopt a measured response to Iranian risks. To the extent that the prospect of EU membership remains alive, Ankara will be wary of policy options that might jeopardize relations with Brussels and key European partners. Turkey could well find itself caught between more forward-leaning American and Israeli counter-proliferation policies, on the one hand, and a more relaxed European approach, on the other. This would be a tremendously challenging situation for Turkey, whose security establishment, absent political considerations, might

well prefer a more aggressive stance. The solution would be the development of a more assertive European approach to proliferation risks in Iran and elsewhere –and there is evidence to suggest that this is emerging.

Fifth, the U.S. and Europe have a clear stake in encouraging Turkey to take Iranian proliferation risks seriously, but without pursuing dangerous and de-stabilizing unilateral options in response. Turkey is inclined to pursue a measured path. In doing so, Ankara will rightly seek reassurance regarding NATO's commitment to Turkish defense in Middle Eastern contingencies. Turkish policymakers will look for evidence that NATO allies are addressing the doctrinal and operational challenges implied by the need to confront new, nuclear and non-European risks. Turkey will seek, and should get, arrangements for the more rapid deployment of air and missile defense assets, and accelerated movement in the area of theater missile defense, including joint projects with Israeli participation. The June 2004 Istanbul summit offers an excellent opportunity to place nuclear and missile risks higher on the NATO agenda, and higher on bilateral agendas with Ankara.