

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Iran

Mutually assured destruction. It is a concept very familiar to the United States, United Kingdom, and other “western” nuclear powers. Some of you may not recognize the title’s reference – if you don’t, you should watch *Dr. Strangelove* – but its release date demonstrates that we have struggled with these dangers for more than half of a century. Fear is a powerful motivator when the stakes are this high, so it can be difficult to view the history of nuclear war through an objective lens, but when we do, a surprising and liberating truth reveals itself. Just as the 1964 classic hoped, this “doomsday weapon” turned out to be something quite different from its original purpose: the ultimate peace maker. This is an historical irony that is quantitatively demonstrated. And once the idea is accepted, it will become clear that not only should any nation have the right to develop this technology, it is in all of our best interests for them to do so.

James Morris, Member of Parliament for Halesowen and Rowley Regis in the United Kingdom, argues the opposite in his piece, “History Will Never Forgive Us If We Allow Iran to Get Nuclear Weapons. We Must Not Rule out the Use of Force.” The title of this article gives the gist of Mr. Morris’ argument. His essay specifically refutes another by former Secretary of Foreign Affairs for the United Kingdom Jack Straw, wherein Jack Straw states that war with Iran is not a reasonable option, even if they achieve nuclear status (Straw, 2013).

Morris argues instead, for history’s sake, that our primary concern must be to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons, and to do that we must keep the threat of a military strike on the table. He claims Iran responds more strongly to diplomatic pressure when that threat is clear and present, and explains that the threat must be from a country more powerful than Israel to be effective. He also argues that we must avoid what he thinks will be an expensive and dangerous stand-off in the Middle East should Iran attain nuclear weapons. For these reasons, Mr. Morris believes, “Above all [history] will never forgive those that allowed this most vicious of regimes to arm itself with nuclear weapons (Morris, 2013).” History, however, does not appear to agree with Mr. Morris.

It’s probably true that Iran responds more strongly to diplomatic pressure when threatened by military strikes from major powers such as the United States and United Kingdom. According to Mr. Morris, “One can virtually plot Tehran’s game of dissimulation...over the last 10 years. They only come to the table when they know we are serious (Morris, 2013).” That could well be, but it is largely irrelevant. If we want to address how history will remember these events, as Mr. Morris suggests, we must take a step back from the day-to-day, or even year-to-year, dealings, to predict an outcome based on historical experience. In fact, history shows with cases such as North Korea and Pakistan (and Israel) that when a

state decides to develop (or steal) nuclear weapons, no sanctions or military threats will stop them. If Iran follows the same pattern, and there's no reason to think they won't, no amount of diplomatic strong-arming is going to stop them from developing a nuclear weapon. Our choices reduce to two: Allow Iran to develop its weapon or stop them by force. Everything else is just posturing.

Mr. Morris argues that taking the military option off the table demonstrates "a complacency which has afflicted the British foreign policy establishment for too long (Morris, 2013)." One would expect Mr. Morris to go on to demonstrate how that complacency has led to accelerated nuclear ambitions in Iran, but instead he makes a farcical comparison to "self-flagellating nonsense [which] has led to other historical mistakes...such as the policy of appeasement of the 1930s, which failed to recognise the growing threat of Nazi Germany (Morris, 2013)." However, there are relevant dissimilarities between these situations. For one thing, Nazi Germany grew during a time before nuclear weapons. Their motivations were the last vestiges of an imperialistic era that has been replaced by an era of legally defined borders and United Nations resolutions. Iran is fighting for its voice in the modern arena, not for "breathing room." Interestingly, since the fall of Nazi Germany, many European countries have developed nuclear capabilities. I cannot say nuclear weapons are the reason, but today Europe enjoys the longest period of relative peace and

economic coexistence since the Pax Romana, which indicates that these weapons have not been a detriment to peace. I cannot find any reason, based on Europe's history, to conclude that the development of nuclear weapons leads to unfavorable military outcomes. If anything, Europe's history shows that nuclear weapons lead to peaceful outcomes.

Mr. Morris' argument predicates on a single premise: "the grave danger a nuclear Iran would pose (Morris, 2013)." Mr. Morris doesn't claim that a nuclear-armed Iran would be a threat to the entire world, but he does argue that Iran would pose a greater threat to our ally Israel if they made a nuclear weapon. Historical evidence, on the other hand, indicates a different probable outcome. Robert Rauchhaus, in a quantitative study published by Harvard, "Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis: A Quantitative Approach," concludes, "The probability of major war between two states is indeed found to decrease when both states possess nuclear weapons (Rauchhaus, 2009)." Israel already has nuclear weapons. The study also concludes, "Dyads in which one state has nuclear weapons are associated with an increased chance of war (Rauchhaus, 2009)." The indicators are clear. While nuclear capabilities in the Middle East remain one sided, we face a greater chance of war. Once Iran develops their nuclear weapon, the danger will decrease. Mr. Morris, like many of us, wants to prevent war between Israel and Iran, but the methods he suggests are

shown to be associated with an increased chance for war. How will history remember that?

Mr. Morris would probably refute my last point with his next point: a nuclear stand-off in the Middle East would be both dangerous and expensive. He believes that a nuclear stand-off in the Middle East would be expensive because it would require a “huge deployment of US – and potentially [British] – nuclear firepower (Morris, 2013).” Mr. Morris fails to realize, yet again, that we no longer live in the mid-20th century. The United States and United Kingdom operate dozens of mobile nuclear-armed submarines and bomber jets, and Israel possesses land-based nuclear warheads less than a continent away. Iran already stares down the barrel of the proverbial nuclear gun. He also believes such a stand-off would be dangerous, but as we now know, historical data indicate the level of danger will decrease once the nuclear equilibrium is reached. The idea of a nuclear stand-off may sound ugly, but it requires very little effort on our part and carries with it a probability for increased stability in the region. The alternative is to perpetuate the current unbalanced nuclear proliferation, which is historically shown to increase the chances for war. If our goal is a stable Middle East, as I believe is Mr. Morris’, the choice is clear.

So, let’s ask ourselves: why are so many eager to continue military threats toward Iran? One of the interesting points about the contention between Iran and “the west” is that, compared to our Middle

Eastern allies, Iran is more like us. Contrary to popular belief, in Iran women are able to drive, and are not required to cover their faces. The government is democratically elected. Like us, one of their most valuable assets is their strong middle class. Compare that to Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, allies of the United States, both of which are ruled by royal families who actively disenfranchise their citizens with blatantly oppressive policies. This raises the question, why are we taking the sides that we are in this conflict? More importantly, I think it demonstrates that at the most basic level, Iran’s concerns are not unlike our concerns. They seek the ability to defend their country and to meet other nations on equal ground in the international arena.

Consider Iran’s position. For decades, they have stared down the barrel of Israel’s proverbial nuclear gun. They have engaged the United Nations, where they’ve been met with a coalition of nuclear-armed countries who demand they not develop the same technology for themselves. Iran understands, rightly so, that until they have their own nuclear capabilities, the west will not engage them on equal footing. I’ll probably hang for this, but I think it’s clear that a nuclear-capable Iran is an inevitable and preferable outcome. History, James Morris, will be best served when countries deal with each other as equals, and respect the sovereignty of every nation. Only through respect will we ever approach friendship.

Works Cited

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