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An Inevitable Persian Gulf Arms Race

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Earlier this month, there was a [flurry](#)^[3] of [major](#)^[4] news [stories](#)^[5] about an impending U.S. arms sale to Saudi Arabia, which could total \$60 billion. Now, [the *Financial Times* reports](#)^[6] that the smaller Gulf states are joining the military feeding frenzy. Ultimately, Saudi Arabia and its neighbors could purchase as much as \$123 billion in new armaments. The focus of the buy is on advanced fighter jets, sophisticated radars, and missile defense systems.

The motive for this rush to upgrade defenses—especially air defenses—is not hard to discern. It is an implicit recognition that, sooner or later, Iran is likely to emerge as a nuclear-weapons power with credible short-and medium-range delivery systems. There has long been pervasive skepticism in the region (and, indeed, in much of the world) that the current U.S.-led strategy of imposing ever-tighter economic sanctions on Tehran will succeed in forcing the clerical government to abandon its nuclear program. The other scenario—Israeli and/or U.S. air strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities—is generally viewed as more likely a bluff rather than a real option. Moreover, even if such a strike took place, [most experts believe that it would merely delay](#)^[7], [not prevent](#)^[8], Iran’s emergence as a member of the global nuclear-weapons club.

Consequently, the Gulf states are preparing for the day when they have to deal with a nuclear-armed neighbor. The robust arms purchase is their primary insurance policy against Iranian adventurism. Leaders in the region do not have to accept the improbable “crazy mullahs” thesis so popular in hawkish circles in the United States and Israel to want to boost their countries’ deterrent capabilities. Even a perfectly rational Iranian regime might be tempted to become more assertive once it possessed a nuclear arsenal. And there are plenty of disputes involving Iran and its various neighbors to generate opportunities for saber rattling by Tehran. From the standpoint of the Gulf states, an extensive arms purchase is a reasonable hedging strategy—however expensive it might prove to be. It’s not as though those regimes lack the money.

Given the prospect of even a conventional arms race, the Iranian government should reconsider the thrust of its current strategy. A nuclear arsenal would probably provide deterrence against any lingering U.S. delusions about mounting a forcible regime-change campaign as Washington did in Iraq. But it may give Tehran less clout with respect to its neighbors than Iranian leaders

might think. Even worse, the current drive for a nuclear capability could trigger a nuclear as well as a conventional arms race in the region. There is certainly no guarantee that Iran and Israel would enjoy a long-term nuclear duopoly.

If Washington had not persisted in its ill-advised policy of trying to isolate Iran for the past three decades, U.S. officials might be able to convey to the clerical regime the reality that its nuclear program was not likely to enhance either Iran's security or the country's overall position in the region. It is more likely to raise tensions while not significantly altering the balance of power. While such a message might not cause Iranian leaders to abandon the nuclear program, it might at least impel them to stop the effort one screwdriver's turn away from deploying an operational arsenal.

That would not be an ideal outcome, but it would be far better than the likely destination of the current course. Unfortunately, given the terrible state of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, there is little chance that such a compromise can be achieved. That means that a major Persian Gulf arms race, and all the potential instability it implies, is just getting underway.

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