Abstract: This article reviews the ascendance of Iran in Middle East politics, the Iranian nuclear program, and the strategic implications of Iranian aspirations, which all increase the likelihood of direct armed conflict between Israel and Iran. It concludes that Iran’s nuclear and hegemonic ambitions remain uncurbed. Whatever efforts at “regime change” were made were unsuccessful, and Iran remains undeterred. Therefore, the likelihood of direct armed conflict between Israel and Iran is great.

1 Introduction

Iran’s drive for Middle East hegemony and its quest for a nuclear bomb fuel extremely high threat perceptions in the region and particularly in Israel. Furthermore, the theology of the Islamic Republic of Iran denies a place for a Jewish state. Its leadership believes that Israel will either wither away under military pressure or be annihilated when it is weak and vulnerable. Iran’s ingrained hostility reinforces Israel’s perception of an existential threat from Iran. As Iran’s nuclear and hegemonic ambitions remain uncurbed, the conditions for a direct armed confrontation between Iran and Israel are nowadays riper than ever.

2 The Rise of Iran in the Middle East

Iran has historically been an important player in the Middle East. It is a large country of more than 80 million people, endowed with energy riches, and has always been a regional power. With an imperial past and newfound revolutionary zeal (ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution), Iran projects power in the region and harbors ambitions to rule the Middle East and beyond. The fulfillment of such ambitions has been facilitated by systemic and regional developments.

The Iranian revolutionary enterprise has benefited from the Middle East policies of the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations. American military intervention in 2003 destroyed the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, a strong rival of Iran. Furthermore, the US failed to establish a stable successor government in Iraq capable of keeping the country united and strong. This undermined the balance of power in the Persian Gulf. The decision by President Donald Trump to withdraw American troops from northeast Syria in the spring of 2019 signaled American intentions to leave the Middle East and improved Iran’s chances to erect a “Shiite corridor” from Iran via Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean Sea.

In addition, much of the Sunni Arab world is in the throes of a deep socio-political crisis since the advent of the “Arab Spring” (clearly a misnomer), which has created dissension and a political vacuum within these states. Several Arab states have since lost their monopoly over use of force and have degenerated into civil wars. Syria, Libya and Yemen are the better-known examples. The central authority in Somalia, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and more recently in Iraq have also been challenged by militias. The sophisticated revolutionary elite in Iran has capitalized upon the weakness of Arab states by funding and training Iranian-supported proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Gaza and Yemen.

The Sunni Arab states are weak and have been terrified by the advances in the Iranian nuclear program and by the successes of its proxies. Saudi Arabia failed to contain Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Egypt survived the domestic turmoil generated by the “Arab Spring” but still faces an Islamic insurgency in the Sinai. Egypt focuses on literally supplying food to its huge population, which is critical for maintaining domestic stability. This leaves little energy to parry the Iranian challenge. Turkey, a strong non-Arab Sunni state, has preferred to act upon its common interests with Iran on curbing Saudi influence and on the Kurdish issue, so far forfeiting its potential to balance

1 For fears already by Prime Minister Rabin in the 1990s, see Inbar 1999, 124, 138–40. Rabin even contemplated to whether officially to designate Iran an “enemy state.” (139); see also Merom 2017.

2 Segall 2015.
Iran. Under Erdogan, Turkey has also capitalized upon Arab weakness in order to carve spheres of influence in former Ottoman territories, such as Iraq, Libya and Syria, while it has gradually distanced itself from the West. Iran’s rise produced an entente between Sunni states in the Gulf with Israel. In the absence of a credible American security umbrella, both the Sunnis and Iran understand that Israel is the main barrier to Iranian hegemony. Therefore, Israel has become for Iran a religious and a strategic anathema.

Initially, Iran has waged war against Israel by proxies to exhaust Israel’s civilian population. Since the 1980s, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has trained and armed the Hizballah, a Shi’ite militia in Lebanon, turning the country into an Iranian satrapy. Hizballah has acquired more than 130,000 missiles of various ranges, covering most of Israel. Iran is engaged in improving their accuracy. Hizballah’s declared goal is “to liberate Jerusalem from Zionist rule.” Similarly, after Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, it became the recipient of large military aid from Iran, intended to enhance its capability to bleed Israel. When Sunni Hamas did not support the Iranian position in Syria, Tehran channeled financial and military aid to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza – an organization subservient to Iran. By having a foothold in Gaza, Iran established an additional front against Israel. Iran has also intervened in the Syrian civil war to help Bashar Assad, hoping to turn Syria into a satellite like Lebanon. Iran wants to complete the land corridor from Iran, via Iraq, to the Mediterranean (Lebanon and Syria). Teheran has therefore demanded a port near Latakia from Assad.

Iran has invested an estimated $15–30 billion in Syria and installed ground-to-ground missiles, anti-aircraft batteries, drones, intelligence gear, and bases to house tens of thousands of Shi’ite militias. Iran aims to establish a third front in the northeast, along Israel’s border on the Golan Heights. Shi’ite militias in Iraq and Syria, under the control of the IRGC, threaten the Hashemite Kingdom. Indeed, King Abdullah fully supports the Saudi Arabia’s anti-Iran foreign policy. The fall of Jordan would complement Iran’s attempt to encircle Israel with Iranian proxies and would also endanger Saudi Arabia, Iran’s arch-rival in the Gulf. Neutralizing Israel’s military power by encircling it with proxies, which have a myriad of missiles directed at Israel’s strategic installations and centers of population, is an important Iranian objective in its quest for hegemony in the Middle East.

Iran’s rise in the Middle East is a result of Iran’s capability to capitalize upon the political changes in the region and by international apathy to its advances. Moreover, Iran has demonstrated great dexterity in building and using proxy forces to attain its goals. Unsurprisingly, Iran’s role is seen as octopus-like across the region.

Under Trump, the US has adopted an anti-Iranian position, particularly on the nuclear issue. Yet, the Trump administration seems unwilling to confront Iran’s regional schemes and instead has “swallowed” Iranian provocations in the Gulf. The elimination of Qassem Soleimani was a powerful show of limited use of force, but the restraint displayed after Iran’s missile counterattacks on American bases in Iraq still conveys the message that the US is reluctant to stop Iranian advances.

In the absence of a clear American determination to confront Iranian encroachment, only Israel has the power to stop it. Indeed, Israel has decided to wage a low-profile limited war, “the campaign between wars,” to obstruct Iranian attempts to transform Syria and Iraq into missile launching pads. Nevertheless, Iran launched several times missiles and armed drones toward Israel. According to PM Benyamin Netanyahu, Iran was successful in also arming the Houthis in Yemen with long-range missiles aimed at Israel. Israeli military efforts have so far produced mixed results. While Iranian proxies face difficulties implementing deployment plans in Syria and Iraq, Tehran seems determined to continue its policies at great cost. Even the harsh impact of Covid-19 on Iran did not limit its imperial and revolutionary project.

3 Iran’s Nuclear Project

Some Ayatollahs view a nuclear-armed Iran as an instrument in Allah’s hand to impose Islam upon the entire world, and that they have been chosen by Allah to carry out His mission. Islam has an imperialist streak, encouraging its believers to bring the true religion to all corners of the world, even by sword. Beyond the theological motivation, a nuclear arsenal has a strategic rationale. It is useful in intimidating neighbors and in projecting power. Moreover, it breaks Israel’s nuclear monopoly in the region, giving Iran a better chance to achieve its hegemonic agenda.

4 Amidror 2018.
5 International Institute for Strategic Studies 2019.
6 “Netanyahu says Iran seeking to fire missiles at Israel from Yemen,” Times of Israel, 20 October 2019.
7 Karsh 2013.
While the atomic bomb is seen as a useful tool for achieving far-reaching imperial and revolutionary goals, its most important functions are defensive. The revolutionary elite is genuinely afraid of Western attempts for regime change or even outright invasion. After all, the US invaded Iran’s neighbors—Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, respectively.

The bomb could provide deterrence against Western aggression and therefore assure regime survival. Destabilizing the regime of a nuclear state, which may lead to chronic domestic instability, civil war, or disintegration, is a riskier enterprise than undermining a non-nuclear regime. North Korea crossed all nuclear thresholds and its regime is still in power. Similarly, the democratic crusade of the George W. Bush administration skipped a nuclear Pakistan, realizing that democracy in such a country could put the atomic button in reach of ultra-radicals. Libya was attacked only after it gave up its nuclear option.

The stakes of the ruling elite in Iran in preserving Iran’s nuclear program are inextricably connected to its political and even physical survival. Therefore, the Mullahs are interested to present to the world a nuclear fait accompli. Achievement of this goal is facilitated by Western reluctance to use force and instead focus on economic sanctions. The belief that stringent economic sanctions could make Teheran reconsider its nuclear ambitions or bring about regime change is widespread. Yet, imposing sanctions on Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein for years yielded no results. Such dictatorial regimes are not very responsive to economic hardship.

Iranian nuclear progress gradually became public knowledge early in the 21st century—particularly after 2003, when the West began to articulate growing concerns regarding Iran’s potential for producing weapon grade fissile material. Despite its formal adherence to the NPT, it violated its obligations with respect to the reporting of nuclear material, and the subsequent processing, storage, and use of that material. In March 2015, IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano reported that Iran did not provide sufficient access or information to resolve a dozen issues related to the possible military dimensions of its nuclear program. The nuclear archive seized and partially publicized by the Israeli Mossad confirms that Iran engaged in a protracted covert effort to develop nuclear weapons whose full extent went undetected for an extended period. There are also indications of research and experiments on weapon design and underground testing.

Iran’s behavior elicited UNSC resolutions to stop enrichment as well as international economic sanctions. President Barrack Obama imposed more stringent economic sanctions to force compliance with the IAEA inspection regime and prevent Iran from shortening its breakout period. Credible Israeli threats to use force served to galvanize the international community and place greater obstacles on Iran’s race toward the bomb. Eventually, Iran decided to come to the negotiating table and eventually reached an agreement with the P5+1. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, was signed in Vienna in July 2015. Despite the serious flaws of the JCPOA, the international community, but not Israel’s government, was under the impression that the JCPOA could delay the security repercussions stemming from the Iranian nuclear enterprise. Yet, President Donald Trump, true to his elections promise, announced on May 8, 2018, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, hoping for a new “better” nuclear deal.

Since the US withdrew from the nuclear deal and imposed tough economic sanctions, Iran has steadily scaled down its commitments. In November 2019, Iran restarted uranium enrichment at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant and installed new advanced centrifuges to increase enrichment capacity. By the end of 2019, Iran removed all limitations on uranium enrichment. In January 2020, the France, Britain and Germany triggered the dispute mechanism in the JCPOA to address widespread Iranian violations. At their initiative, and following March and June reports on the lack of cooperation of Iran with the Agency, the IAEA Board of Governors adopted on June 19, 2020, a resolution calling on Iran to implement its NPT Safeguards Agreement and Additional Protocol and satisfy the IAEA’s requests without further delay.

The IAEA report corroborates Israel’s claims regarding Iran’s continued covert nuclear activities. Indeed,
the Israeli intelligence has released an estimate already in January 2020 that Iran will have enough material for a nuclear bomb within the year and that Iran will have the capability to build nuclear-armed missiles within two years.\textsuperscript{15} Taking into consideration Iranian duplicity in its nuclear behavior, breakout time could be shorter.

4 The Strategic Implications of Iran’s Ambitions

Revolutionary Iran is characterized by far-reaching goals in its foreign policy, a propensity for high risk policies, intensive commitment and determination to implement these policies, and an unconventional diplomatic style.\textsuperscript{16} If Iran becomes nuclear, these foreign policy features will probably become even more pronounced. Iran’s nuclear program coupled with long-range delivery systems threatens regional stability in the Middle East. Iran produces a variety of long-range missiles, including the Shehab-3 (range of 1,300 kilometers) and the Sejjil (range of 2,000 kilometers). It also develops a cruise missile with a range of beyond 2,000 kilometers. States such as Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States are within range, as well as several important U.S. bases. Further improvements in Iranian missiles could put most European capitals, and eventually, the North American continent, within reach of a potential attack. Iran has an ambitious satellite-launching program based on the use of multi-stage, solid propellant launchers, with intercontinental ballistic missile properties to enable the launching of a 300-kilogram satellite. Achieving this goal, will put more states at risk of a future nuclear attack.

A nuclear Iran would also enhance Iranian hegemony in the strategic energy sector, due to its mere location along the oil-rich Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin. These two adjacent regions form the “energy ellipse,” which holds about 70 percent of the world’s proven oil and about 40 percent of natural gas reserves.\textsuperscript{17} Giving Iran a better ability to intimidate the governments controlling parts of this huge energy reservoir would further strengthen Iran’s status. Even a state like Saudi Arabia might decide to bandwagon\textsuperscript{18} under certain circumstances.

A nuclear Iran will result in the loss of the Central Asian states to the West. These former Soviet republics have adopted a pro-Western foreign policy orientation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following the emergence of a nuclear Iran, they will either bandwagon toward Iran, or will try to secure a nuclear security guarantee from Russia or China, countries much closer to the region than the US.

In further pushback towards the West, Tehran encourages radical Shiite elements in Iraq in order to force an American withdrawal. It also foments trouble via the Shiite communities in the Gulf states. Iran is further allied with Syria, a radical state with an anti-American predisposition. Moreover, Tehran lends critical support to terrorist organizations such as Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. According to the US State Department, Iran is the most active state sponsor of terrorism. Iranian successes would embolden Islamic radicals everywhere.

A nuclear Iran might try to destabilize Turkey – a country with strategic weight. Secular Turkey has been an anathema for revolutionary Iran. Tehran already tried in the 1990s to meddle in Turkish affairs and strengthen the extreme Islamist forces. Nowadays, revolutionary Iran may capitalize on the ongoing identity crisis in Turkey in order to increase the power of the radical Ismailists. The loss of Turkey to the West would be a strategic blow.

As Pakistan has to consider a nuclear state on its western border, changes in its nuclear posture are likely, affecting the nuclear equation in the subcontinent. The nuclear chain effect might reach China. A nuclear Iran might further erode the international nuclear non-proliferation regime (NPT) and hinder American attempts to curb proliferation. A nuclear-armed Iran would have a chain-effect, generating nuclear proliferation in the immediate region. Middle Eastern states, who invariably display high threat perceptions, are unlikely to look nonchalantly on a nuclear Iran. American extended deterrence, particularly these days, is not credible in the Middle East. Therefore, these states would not resist the temptation to counter Iranian influence by adopting similar nuclear postures.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} Anna Ahronheim, “Iran will have enough material for a nuclear bomb within the year,” Jerusalem Post, January 14, 2020, for an evaluation of a shorter breakout time see Ofek 2020.

\textsuperscript{16} This largely conforms to what Yehezkel Dror termed a “crazy state,” See Dror 1973, see also Lake 1994.

\textsuperscript{17} The term “energy ellipse” was coined by Kemp/Harkavy 1997, 113.

\textsuperscript{18} Bandwagoning occurs when a state seeks security by aligning with a stronger, adversarial power.

\textsuperscript{19} See declaration by Ahmed Aboul Gheit, the Secretary General of the Arab League, December 13, 2019, http://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/item?170_h; See also the 2018 statement by Prince Mohammed Ben Salman, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-
A multi-polar nuclear Middle East would be a recipe for disaster. This strategic prognosis is the result of two main factors: a) the inadequacy of a defensive posture against nuclear weapons, and b) the difficulties surrounding the establishment of stable nuclear deterrence in the region. The belief in the stabilizing effects of nuclear proliferation is wishful thinking on part of irresponsible armchair strategists.

Unfortunately, diplomacy and economic sanctions has thus far had only a limited effect on Iran's nuclear project. Whatever efforts at “regime change” were made were unsuccessful, and Iran remains undeterred, raising the military option. While it is the responsibility of the US, a global power, to take care of the problem, Washington seems to shy away from a military confrontation. If left alone, Jerusalem would seriously consider taking preventive measures.

5 Is a Larger Confrontation Inevitable?

Israel has had military confrontations with Iran’s proxies, Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Jerusalem has been determined not to allow the emergence of a Lebanese situation in Syria, where missiles threaten the Jewish state. Therefore, as early as 2013, Israel has begun to attack Iranian-linked targets in Syria to prevent the entrenchment of Iran and its proxy militias in Syria. These attacks also serve to destroy Iranian-made missiles shipped to Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as components aimed at improving their accuracy.

The IDF has mostly kept a low-profile approach, choosing not to publicize its operations. By January 2019, thousands of targets were hit, according to then Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot. Israel was successful in partly removing the Iranian supported militias from its immediate border, although Iran continues to deploy its forces and weapons in Syria as well as at the Iraqi-Syrian border crossings. It also retaliates from time to time, even in small measure, just to make a point. Despite relentless Israeli attacks, Iran has shown determination to continue with its projects, even though it faces domestic problems as a result of US sanctions, dwindling oil revenues, street protests a harsh economic reality and recently a Covid-19 crisis.

Indeed, Iran is determined to create its Shiite corridor, weaken Saudi Arabia and eventually evict the US from the Middle East. While Iran initially hoped to outlast President Trump, when it felt the pinch of the economic sanctions, Teheran decided to change gear by making use of its nuisance value. Attacks on oil shipping in the Persian and Oman Gulf took place without Iran taking responsibility. Similarly, Iran attacked the Khurais oil field and the Abqaiq oil processing plants with drones and cruise missiles, putting them temporarily out of commission (Saudi Arabia’s oil output was subsequently cut by more than 50%). In June 2019, Iran’s IRGC’s shot down a United States surveillance drone over the Strait of Hormuz and in January 2020 Tehran launched missiles at two American bases in Iraq. Its militias continue to harass the American military presence in that country.

Despite the change in Washington’s policy toward Iran, Trump still prefers restraint. The US still relies on maximum economic pressure in order to get “a better deal,” but so far, Iran seems undeterred and continues its brinkmanship. The US is also distracted by its efforts to meet the Covid-19 challenge. Such a reading of these developments causes growing concern in Jerusalem. As Iran gains growing influence in the Middle East and challenges Israel’s monopoly over nuclear weapons in the region, a larger conflagration between Tehran and Jerusalem looks more likely.

The threat perception in Israel is very high. Israel takes very seriously the Iranian threats to eradicate the Jewish state – a people that has a long history of persecutions, pogroms and a Holocaust will not ignore threats of extinction. Iran’s nuclear aspirations are seen in Israel as an existential threat, lending domestic legitimacy for military action against Iran.

Prime Minister Netanyahu consistently and emphatically reiterates that Israel will not allow Iran to become a nuclear power. An indication of the Israeli mood is the resolute speech given by the IDF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, on December 25, 2019. He singled out Iran and its proxies as the main threat against Israel and made clear that an Israel-Iran collision is almost inevitable. He added that the military has been preparing for such a scenario. Kochavi also hinted at the inaction of the Gulf states and the United States in the face of Iranian strikes on oil installations and ships. “It would be better if we weren’t alone,”


he remarked. Kochavi also established a new directorate to be headed by a Maj.-General to contend with the Iranian threat, recently renamed the “Strategy and Third-Circle Directorate.” The IDF expects the Iranian threat to be a top priority in the coming years. Israel’s new Defense Minister Benny Gantz concurs that a nuclear Iran is a danger to the world and the region, which must be prevented. Similarly, the foreign minister, Gabi Ashkenazi, confirmed that Israel had a long-term policy not to allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons. Both were former chiefs of staff.

During the past decade, Israel made preparations to attack Iranian nuclear infrastructure. Despite the many obstacles to a successful mission, the IDF seems capable of executing it. While the JCPOA undermined international legitimacy for Israeli action, nowadays, for all intents and purposes, the JCPOA is a dead document.

Israel’s policy on nuclear proliferation in the Middle East has thus far been consistent. Obstruction and delaying stratagems have been used to deal with emerging nuclear threats. The June 2020 explosion at Natanz seems to be a recent example of such obstruction. When these tools are no longer effective, surgical air strikes are employed to destroy the nuclear installations in neighboring countries. In 1981, the Iraqi Osiraq reactor was demolished due to its potential to produce plutonium. A similar fate awaited the Syrian reactor in 2007. Preemption of an emerging threat is part of the menu of policy choices in Israeli strategic thinking.

The rationale for destroying the potential military nuclear capability is simple. Israel does not believe that it can achieve stable deterrence with a hostile nuclear-armed Middle Eastern state. Being a state with a small territory and only a short distance away from its regional rivals, Israel feels very vulnerable to a nuclear attack. The likelihood of accidents, unauthorized launchings, miscalculations, or regime collapse in Middle Eastern states is much higher than in other parts of the world. The period before the establishment of credible second-strike capabilities and safeguards, resembling those implemented throughout US-Soviet Union relations, is particularly dangerous. Significantly, securing a second-strike posture is an ongoing process fraught with uncertainties.

Further, deterrence is dependent upon sensitivity to cost. Religious fanaticism, widespread in the Middle East, is reducing sensitivity to cost. Indeed, Iranian leaders have expressed a willingness to lose millions of people in order to eradicate the Jewish state. They boast about their culture of Jihad and martyrdom.

There is a growing urgency to destroy Iran’s burgeoning nuclear capability because of consistent Iranian advances in their nuclear and missile projects. Israel might strike to preempt the return of Iran to the negotiating table. Under additional pressure, Iran may revert to a strategy of “talk and build” to buy time. Such a strategy capitalizes on European and American reluctance to escalate. Deciding that negotiations are useless requires alternative action, which is not an enticing option for many governments. Essentially, inconclusive talks preserve a status quo, a tense standoff in which Iran can go on uninhibited with its nuclear program. Indeed, bargaining, at which Iranians excel, and temporary concessions postpone diplomatic and economic pressures and most importantly preventive military strikes.

Israel might strike earlier rather than later in order to prevent additional improvements in Iran’s defensive measures around its nuclear installations. For example, Russia supplied Iran with an S-300 air defense system in 2016 (after the JCPOA was signed), while the more advanced S-400 system remains on the Iranian shopping list.

After the elimination of Soleimani, the IDF saw a chance to step up attacks against Iran and its allies to further limit Iranian presence in Syria. Such escalation in Syria could be capitalized upon to hit the Iranian nuclear project. Preemptive actions in Iraq and Syria ended the nuclear projects in these states. Moreover, these precedents show that great regional repercussions are not inevitable.

Israel may also escalate its military responses to prevent a bandwagoning effect in the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia. As Iran becomes more powerful in the region and the US security umbrella becomes less reliable, reorienting their foreign policy towards Tehran might become more attractive. Such rapprochement of Sunni states with Iran might then affect Jordan and Egypt (which both have

22 Lilach Shoval: “IDF continues restructuring of general staff to contend with Iran threat,” Israel Hayom, 15 June 2020.
24 See Kfir 2019.
25 See Wohlstetter 1959.
26 In 2001 Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president of Iran, speculated that in a nuclear exchange with Israel his country might lose 15 million people, which would amount to a small “sacrifice” from among the billion Muslims worldwide in exchange for the lives of 5 million Israeli Jews. See Suzanne Fields: “Confronting the New Anti-Semitism,” Washington Times, 25 July 2004.
peace treaties with Israel), further isolating Israel in the region. An Israeli show of force will therefore keep the Sunni states aligned with Israel.

History teaches us that when a rising power challenges the balance of power, in most cases war ensues. This phenomenon has been termed “hegemonic war.” Hegemonic wars are caused by the differential growth of power among the dominant and aspiring states. A hegemonic war cannot arise during a period of relative stability; rather, the uneven growth and decline of power is a necessary factor which eventually leads to bipolarization of the international system, creating an inevitable crisis in the form of a hegemonic war. Such a competition in the Greek city system ended in the Peloponnesian wars. Prussia’s quest for the unification of the German principalities under its helm caused several European wars.

While the Middle East is not a bipolar sub-system, we see an ascendant Iran that is no longer balanced by declining Arab states, and that their security provider, the US, is seemingly leaving the region. While not predetermined, Israel may go to war to prevent a Middle East dominated by a nuclear Islamist Iran. As a matter of fact, it already takes military action to stop its encirclement by an Iranian inspired ring of fire.

6 Conclusion

A nuclear arsenal is Iran’s best insurance for regime survival and for achieving regional hegemony. Thus, it is inconceivable that the mullahs will give up the quest for the bomb. At present, Iran’s imperial and nuclear aspirations remain unchecked. Efforts at “regime change” have never been seriously attempted and the potential for their success remains uncertain. Diplomacy and/or economic sanctions are unlikely to stop Iran from going nuclear. The international community, including the US, has no appetite for military confrontation with Iran.

In contrast, Iran-Israel relations are essentially a zero-sum game, leaving Israel little choice but to act upon its existential instincts. Therefore, escalation in the use of force to reverse the Iranian ascendance in Middle East politics, prevent its nuclearization, and Israel’s encirclement by Iranian proxies, is highly probable, adding a new dimension to the Iran-Israel war already underway. Only military action can prevent the descent of the Middle East into an even more brutish and dangerous region.

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28 Gilpin 1988, see also Allison 2017.