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Revisiting Waltz's Theory of Nuclear Peace: The Iranian Nuclear Controversy

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ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines Kenneth Waltz's "nuclear peace" theory in the context of Iran's controversial nuclear program. Waltz's theory posits that the spread of nuclear weapons can induce stability by deterring major wars, as the prospect of mutual annihilation forces rational restraint (Waltz, 2012; Mearsheimer, 2001). The Iranian case provides a critical test: advocates of Waltz's view argue that an Iranian bomb could balance Israel's longstanding regional nuclear monopoly and thus enhance deterrence-based stability in the Middle East (Waltz, 2012). However, opponents—including Scott Sagan and other proliferation pessimists—contend that more nuclear states increase risks of accidents, miscalculations, or aggressive behavior under the cover of a nuclear umbrella (Sagan, 1994; Kahl, 2012). This study reviews the theoretical debate and Iran's nuclear trajectory, from its origins under the Shah through secret facilities revealed in 2002, international sanctions, and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), up to recent developments (IAEA, 2023). It applies Waltz's arguments to Iran, analyzing whether a nuclear-armed Iran would act as a rational deterrent power or spur a regional arms race and instability. The paper finds that while nuclear deterrence theory suggests a cautious optimism that mutual deterrence can maintain peace, significant uncertainties—such as regime ideology, proxy conflicts, and multipolar dynamics—limit the applicability of Waltz's thesis to Iran. We conclude that Waltz's

optimism must be balanced with prudent nonproliferation efforts, as the Iranian case underscores both the potential stabilizing effects of nuclear deterrence and its grave limitations in a volatile regional context.

Introduction

The prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran has sparked intense debate in international security circles. At the heart of this debate is Waltz's theory of "nuclear peace," which suggests that the spread of nuclear weapons can actually promote stability by deterring large-scale wars (Waltz, 2012). According to this view, when states possess nuclear arsenals, the catastrophic consequences of nuclear exchange make war unthinkably costly, thereby imposing caution on even hostile adversaries (Mearsheimer, 2001; Jervis, 1989). Proponents often point to the absence of direct great-power conflict during the Cold War as evidence that mutual nuclear deterrence can keep the peace. This optimistic stance has particular significance for the Middle East, where Israel's undeclared possession of nuclear weapons has given it a regional nuclear monopoly for decades. Some argue that this imbalance fuels insecurity and arms pressures; by extension, a nuclear capability for Iran might restore a form of strategic balance that deters open conflict between Tehran and its adversaries (Waltz, 2012).

Critics, however, view the Iranian nuclear controversy through a more alarmist lens. They worry that Iran's acquisition of the bomb could trigger dangerous dynamics contrary to Waltz's optimism. Skeptics emphasize the Islamic Republic's history of tension with neighbors and the West, its support for militant proxies, and ideological rhetoric, all of which, they argue, cast doubt on the notion that Iranian leaders would always behave with the extreme caution nuclear deterrence requires. From this perspective, more nuclear weapons in the Middle East could increase the chance of accidents, escalation through miscalculation, or deliberate aggression under a nuclear shield (Sagan, 1994; Kroenig, 2012). The Iranian case thus stands at the intersection of theoretical arguments about nuclear proliferation and real-world security challenges. Resolving whether Waltz's theory of nuclear peace holds true for Iran is not just an academic exercise but a question with profound policy implications for nonproliferation and regional stability.

This paper revisits Waltz's theory in light of the Iranian nuclear controversy. It begins by outlining the theoretical framework, contrasting the realist and deterrence-based optimism of Waltz and like-minded scholars with the pessimistic counterarguments of Sagan and others. Next, it examines Iran's nuclear trajectory—its historical development, motivations for pursuing nuclear technology, and the international

responses it has provoked. We then apply Waltz's argument to the specifics of Iran: Would an Iranian bomb create a stable deterrent relationship (for example, with Israel), assuming rational actors, or would it introduce new instabilities in a multipolar regional context? The subsequent section discusses counterarguments and limitations, exploring what could go wrong—ranging from the possibility of deterrence failure and nuclear accidents to the risks of proxy warfare and a regional arms race if Iran were to obtain nuclear weapons. Finally, the conclusion weighs the merits and risks of Waltz's thesis in this case and considers implications for policy, such as the importance of reinforcing nonproliferation regimes and diplomatic efforts. Through this comprehensive analysis, we seek to "revisit" Waltz's nuclear peace theory and assess its validity and limits when applied to one of today's most contentious nuclear dilemmas.

Theoretical Framework: Realism, Deterrence, and the Waltz–Sagan Debate

Waltz's theory of nuclear peace is grounded in the realist tradition of international relations and in classical deterrence theory. Realism views international politics as an anarchic arena where states must ensure their own security. In Waltz's neorealist formulation, the structure of the international system drives states to balance against threats and seek survival above all else. Nuclear weapons, in this view, are the ultimate guarantor of survival because they massively raise the costs of war. As Waltz and other "nuclear optimists" argue, when two or more adversaries possess secure second-strike capabilities (the ability to retaliate with nuclear force after absorbing a nuclear attack), none can risk initiating a war without suffering unacceptable devastation in return (Waltz, 2012; Waltz, 1981). War between nuclear-armed foes thus becomes irrational. Nuclear weapons, by virtue of their immense destructive power, serve as a powerful deterrent that can induce caution and status-quo behavior among states that might otherwise be tempted into conflict. Indeed, John Mearsheimer, another prominent realist, observes that because the consequences of nuclear war are so catastrophic, even aggressive states are compelled to avoid direct clashes with nuclear rivals (Mearsheimer, 2001). In essence, nuclear proliferation—if managed such that arsenals are secure and command-and-control is reliable—could lead to a more stable balance of power, an idea encapsulated in Waltz's famous phrase "more may be better" (Waltz, 1981; Waltz, 2012).

Deterrence theory underpins this optimism. The logic of deterrence is straightforward: no state will start a war that guarantees its own destruction. With mutual deterrence in place, the likelihood of deliberate war between nuclear states should approach zero (Jervis, 1989). Proponents point to historical evidence that nuclear-armed adversaries have avoided full-scale war with each other since 1945. The oft-cited example

is the Cold War "long peace" between the United States and the Soviet Union, maintained in part by fear of mutual annihilation. Similarly, after nuclear weapons were introduced into rivalries such as India–Pakistan, those states have been careful to prevent conventional skirmishes from escalating into all-out wars once both had the bomb. According to Waltz, this pattern is not accidental: nuclear weapons fundamentally change leaders' calculations by making the cost of war infinite and victory essentially unwinnable (Waltz, 2012). As a result, even hostile regimes tend to behave more prudently once they acquire nuclear deterrents, prioritizing survival and deterrence over offensive adventures.

However, this rosy assessment is fiercely challenged by "nuclear pessimists." The most prominent is Scott Sagan, who, along with Waltz, engaged in a long-running debate about the spread of nuclear weapons. Sagan and others argue that while nuclear weapons *can* deter, the real world is fraught with organizational failures, imperfect information, and irrational elements that undermine the neat rationality assumed by deterrence theory (Sagan, 1994). Sagan's perspective, rooted in organizational theory and political psychology, points out that militaries and governments are not infallibly rational machines. They can misinterpret information, experience accidents, or fall victim to biases and rogue elements. From this viewpoint, the optimism of Waltz's "more is better" claim downplays the risks of nuclear proliferation: more nuclear states mean more chances for something to go wrong. For example, Sagan highlights how new nuclear states may lack the robust safety mechanisms and early-warning systems that the U.S. and USSR developed, increasing the danger of accidental launches or unauthorized use (Sagan, 1994). There is also the risk of miscalculation—if leaders in a crisis falsely believe they are under attack, they might use nuclear weapons first out of fear of losing them. Such scenarios temper the idea that nuclear armed states will always act cautiously.

Furthermore, proliferation pessimists underscore the concept of the "stability–instability paradox." This paradox suggests that while nuclear weapons might deter *all-out* wars, they could actually encourage lower-level aggression. If two states know that a direct war would be suicidal, they may feel emboldened to engage in proxy conflicts, subversion, or limited skirmishes below the nuclear threshold, assuming the other side will self-deter from escalating to the nuclear level. In other words, nuclear weapons might create a form of stability at the highest level (no total war) while allowing more frequent instability at lower levels of conflict. Critics argue this has happened with India and Pakistan – after going nuclear, they avoided full war but Pakistan allegedly increased support for insurgency in Kashmir, calculating that India would be restrained by nuclear deterrence from massive retaliation. Such behavior is precisely what Sagan and others fear could occur if Iran obtained nuclear weapons: Iran might feel shielded by its

nuclear status and thus intensify support for militant proxies or engage in coercive diplomacy, thinking its adversaries (e.g. Israel or Saudi Arabia) would fear to confront it directly (Kahl, 2012).

The Waltz–Sagan debate thus lays out two opposing scenarios for a proliferating world. Waltz's realist-deterrence model expects new nuclear states to act responsibly and cautiously, making the world more secure by deterring war. Sagan's model expects that human and organizational imperfections will lead to dangerous outcomes, and that nuclear weapons might even encourage some forms of aggression under the cover of deterrence. These theoretical lenses will guide our analysis of Iran's case. Before applying them, we first review the empirical background: Iran's nuclear program – its development, aims, and how the world has reacted – as this context is essential for evaluating whether Waltz's optimism can hold in practice.

Iran's Nuclear Trajectory: History and Motivations

Timeline of Development: Iran's nuclear program began under the pro-Western Shah in the 1950s and 1960s as part of the U.S. "Atoms for Peace" initiative. With help from the United States and Western Europe, Iran established a nuclear research center and planned multiple power reactors. Notably, in 1967 Iran acquired a small research reactor from the U.S. and signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 as a non-nuclear-weapons state, committing not to pursue nuclear arms. During this early period, the program's purpose was ostensibly peaceful, aimed at energy generation and scientific advancement. However, even under the Shah, there were embryonic discussions of a weapons option should regional rivals obtain nuclear capabilities. The 1979 Islamic Revolution halted Iran's nuclear progress temporarily; the new regime under Ayatollah Khomeini initially disfavored nuclear technology, seeing it as a Shah-era relic and perhaps even un-Islamic. This changed in the 1980s. The brutal Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), in which Iraq used chemical weapons and Iran suffered great losses, convinced Tehran of the need for strategic deterrence. By the late 1980s and 1990s, Iran secretly revived and expanded its nuclear program, seeking technology for uranium enrichment and other fuel-cycle capabilities that could be dual-use (civilian or military).

Iran's covert activities came to light in 2002, when an exiled Iranian opposition group revealed the existence of undeclared nuclear sites at Natanz (a uranium enrichment facility) and Arak (a heavy-water reactor project). These revelations sparked an international crisis. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) launched intense inspections, and evidence emerged that Iran had conducted clandestine nuclear work in violation of its NPT safeguards obligations (IAEA, 2023). Under international pressure, Iran temporarily agreed in 2003–2004 to suspend enrichment and signed an additional protocol for

enhanced inspections. However, negotiations with European powers during that period faltered. By 2005, Iran resumed enrichment on a limited scale, insisting its program was for peaceful purposes and that it had the sovereign right to nuclear technology including enrichment. From 2006 onward, the United Nations Security Council passed a series of resolutions demanding Iran suspend enrichment and cooperate fully with the IAEA. Iran's non-compliance led to escalating sanctions: UN sanctions, as well as separate U.S. and EU sanctions, targeted Iran's nuclear and missile programs, financial system, and oil exports. Despite this pressure, Iran steadily built up its nuclear capacity over the next decade. It installed thousands of gas centrifuges at Natanz and later at Fordow (a fortified underground enrichment site Iran revealed in 2009). The IAEA documented concerns about possible military dimensions of Iran's activities, including experiments and designs relevant to nuclear weapons prior to 2003 (IAEA, 2023). By 2012, Iran had enriched uranium up to 20% U-235 (far above power reactor fuel needs) and accumulated significant stockpiles, shortening the time it would need to further enrich to weapons-grade if it decided to do so. This growing capability intensified fears that Iran was moving toward a nuclear weapons option, even as Iranian leaders repeatedly asserted that they had no intention to build an actual bomb and that Ayatollah Khamenei had issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) against nuclear weapons.

Diplomacy eventually yielded a breakthrough. In 2015, Iran and six world powers (the US, UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany) struck the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This landmark agreement imposed strict limits and monitoring on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. Iran dramatically reduced its number of operating centrifuges, shipped out roughly 97% of its enriched uranium stockpile, and rendered its Arak reactor core inoperable, effectively lengthening the "breakout time" (time to amass enough fissile material for one bomb) to about a year (IAEA, 2016). For several years, the JCPOA successfully constrained Iran's program, and the IAEA repeatedly verified Iran's compliance. However, the nuclear controversy reignited when the United States unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and reimposed sanctions. In response, Iran gradually ceased adhering to the deal's limits from 2019 onward. It expanded uranium enrichment again, including enrichment up to 60% purity (a short technical step from weapons-grade) using advanced centrifuges. By 2023, the IAEA reported that Iran had stockpiled over 400 kg of 60%-enriched uranium (IAEA, 2023)—an amount sufficient, if further enriched to 90%, for several nuclear weapons. This provocative growth of Iran's capabilities has renewed international alarm and put Waltz's hypothesis to an even more urgent test.

Motivations and Objectives: Iran's motivations for its nuclear program have been the subject of extensive analysis. Security is often cited as a primary driver (Chubin, 2006; Sagan, 1997). Surrounded by regional rivals and having endured a devastating war with Iraq, Iran has strong incentive to seek a

deterrent that could prevent future existential threats. U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and the fact that two of Iran's neighbors (Pakistan to the east and Israel indirectly to the west) possess nuclear arsenals have likely reinforced Iran's perception that a nuclear capability could safeguard its regime against foreign aggression or coercion. The U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) further heightened Tehran's threat perceptions, possibly convincing Iranian strategists that only a robust deterrent—including the implicit threat of nuclear retaliation—could dissuade the U.S. or others from attempting regime change in Iran. This "security model" of proliferation fits well with realist theory: states facing severe security threats will seek the most powerful means to secure themselves (Sagan, 1997). From Iran's perspective, developing nuclear technology (even short of actual weapons) provides insurance in a dangerous neighborhood.

Beyond security, Iran's nuclear ambitions are also driven by a quest for regional influence and prestige. Iranian leaders often frame the nuclear program as a symbol of modern scientific achievement and national sovereignty. Mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle demonstrates technological prowess and signals that Iran is a regional power not to be trifled with. In the narrative of the Islamic Republic, resisting Western pressure and achieving nuclear self-sufficiency has become intertwined with national pride. This "prestige and norms" motive is common in nuclear history—France, for example, pursued the bomb in part for the grandeur and global status it conferred (Sagan, 1997). In Iran's case, even though the government insists its aims are peaceful, the determination to enrich uranium indigenously (despite heavy costs to its economy from sanctions) suggests that prestige and the desire for an independent capability are important factors. Iranian officials frequently assert their "right" to nuclear technology and paint their program as a matter of national dignity and technological progress, which helps rally domestic support.

Domestic politics and ideology also play roles. Some analysts point to internal factions in Iran—hardline Revolutionary Guard elements, for instance—that favor nuclear advancement to bolster their political power and deterrent posture. Others note that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's ideological worldview is marked by deep distrust of the United States. This mistrust could make Iran's leadership less willing to rely on external security guarantees and more inclined to hedge by developing nuclear capabilities (Chubin, 2006). However, it is worth noting that Iran's leadership has officially disavowed nuclear *weapons* on religious and ethical grounds, citing the Supreme Leader's *fatwa* against weapons of mass destruction. Whether this edict is a genuine moral stance or a political tactic is a matter of debate; regardless, it reflects the complex interplay of ideology in Iran's nuclear decision-making.

International Responses: Iran's nuclear trajectory has elicited strong reactions from the international community. The IAEA has been at the center of monitoring Iran's activities, often reporting Iran's non-compliance with safeguard duties and lack of full transparency (IAEA, 2023). The United Nations Security Council, as noted, imposed sanctions intended to coerce Iran into halting sensitive nuclear work. Meanwhile, the United States and Israel have viewed the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran as a grave threat. U.S. policy for years included the option that "all measures" (implicitly including military action) were on the table to prevent Iran from getting the bomb. Israel, which feels uniquely targeted by Iranian rhetoric and sees a potential Iranian bomb as an existential menace, has reportedly engaged in covert sabotage (such as the Stuxnet cyberattack on Iran's centrifuges in 2010) and even assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists to slow the program. Israel has also repeatedly hinted at the possibility of preemptive airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities if diplomacy fails. These actions and threats underscore the high stakes and volatility surrounding the issue. Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, have likewise been uneasy. They fear that a nuclear Iran would dominate the region and perhaps embolden Tehran's support for militant groups. Saudi Arabia's leadership has even warned that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, Riyadh may feel compelled to follow suit (Kroenig, 2012). This raises the specter of a regional nuclear arms race, with Turkey or Egypt potentially reconsidering their non-nuclear status as well. The JCPOA in 2015 temporarily eased tensions by capping Iran's program, but its unraveling has brought back worries of proliferation and conflict. In sum, Iran's nuclear journey has been shaped by its security calculus and aspirations, and it has generated powerful external responses aimed at stopping it. This real-world context sets the stage for analyzing Waltz's argument: would the outcome of Iran actually obtaining a nuclear arsenal lead to peace-through-deterrence, as nuclear optimists contend, or to greater peril, as pessimists warn?

Table 1 provides a summary of key milestones in Iran's nuclear program and the corresponding international responses. (See Table 1)

Here's **Table 1** formatted for easy copy-and-paste into Word:

Year	Milestone
1967	Tehran Research Reactor (5 MW) supplied by the US goes critical; initial 93% HEU fuel
1970	Iran signs and ratifies the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)
1974	Atomic Energy Organization of Iran founded; plans for 23 power reactors
1979	Islamic Revolution halts nuclear projects; Bushehr reactor unfinished

1987	Secret acquisition of centrifuge designs from A.Q. Khan proliferation network
2002	Natanz enrichment facility and Arak heavy-water reactor sites revealed
2003	Iran agrees to suspend enrichment and sign Additional Protocol; IAEA finds non-compliance
2006	UN Security Council sanctions as Iran resumes enrichment at Natanz
2009	Fordow underground enrichment facility discovered; international alarm
2013	Election of Rouhani leads to interim deal (JPOA) freezing key elements of Iran's program
2015	JCPOA agreed: enrichment capped at 3.67%, stockpile reduced, Arak reactor core rendered inoperable, enhanced IAEA monitoring (breakout time ~12 months)
2018	US withdraws from JCPOA; re-imposes sanctions despite Iran's compliance
2019	Iran breaches JCPOA limits in stages, enriching above 3.67% and installing additional centrifuges
2020–21	Iran enriches uranium to 20% then 60%; faces Stuxnet cyber-sabotage and site attacks
2023	IAEA reports uranium enriched up to 83.7% at Fordow; Iran becomes a "threshold state" with very short breakout times

Analysis: Waltz's Argument Applied to Iran

Kenneth Waltz famously argued that "more may be better" when it comes to nuclear weapons, positing that a nuclear-armed Iran could be a force for stability rather than chaos in the Middle East (Waltz, 2012). Applying this optimistic logic to Iran involves examining several interrelated points: the strategic balance a nuclear Iran would create, the assumption of rational behavior by Iran's leadership, and the implications of deterrence in a regional context that could become multipolar in nuclear terms.

Strategic Balance and Deterrence with Israel: A core element of Waltz's theory is that nuclear weapons serve as great equalizers. In the Middle East, Israel has for decades maintained an undeclared nuclear arsenal, estimated at dozens (if not a couple hundred) of warheads, without any regional peer to balance it. This nuclear asymmetry, Waltz argues, has been inherently destabilizing. Israel's monopoly on nuclear capabilities may have emboldened it at times to act aggressively or preemptively, while leaving its adversaries feeling insecure. If Iran were to acquire a nuclear deterrent, the immediate effect would be the establishment of mutual deterrence between Israel and Iran. Each would then possess the capability to inflict unacceptable damage on the other, theoretically restraining both from direct conflict.

From a Waltzian perspective, this would likely introduce a caution previously absent in the Israel–Iran hostility. For instance, Israeli leaders, knowing Iran has a secure second-strike, would be deterred from contemplating military strikes on Iran or attempts at regime change, and Iranian leaders would conversely know that using a nuclear weapon or overt aggression against Israel would invite devastating retaliation. In this view, a kind of *Cold War*-like stability could emerge, similar to how the U.S. and USSR, or India and Pakistan, moved to more restrained confrontations after both sides obtained nuclear weapons. The fear of mutual destruction forces adversaries to deal with conflicts through cautious proxy maneuvers or diplomacy rather than open war.

Waltz specifically suggested that Iran having the bomb might "restore stability" in the region by ending Israel's nuclear hegemony (Waltz, 2012). He pointed out that dire predictions accompanied each new country that went nuclear (for example, alarm over China's first test in 1964, or Pakistan's in 1998), yet in those cases the sky did not fall – instead, those rivalries (China vs. USSR/US, and India vs. Pakistan) settled into tense but stable deterrence relationships. By that analogy, Waltz implies the Middle East would be no different: Iran, once nuclear-armed, would behave like other nuclear powers – with extreme prudence in direct confrontations – and Israel, stripped of its monopoly, would have to coexist under mutual deterrence (Waltz, 2012). The result could be a more balanced regional order.

There is some empirical support for the notion that even revolutionary regimes become cautious once they "go nuclear." For example, Maoist China was seen as fanatical in the 1960s, yet after getting nuclear weapons, China largely avoided military provocations against nuclear-armed adversaries. Similarly, nuclear North Korea, while unpredictable in rhetoric, has not started any full-scale war. Waltz would likely argue that the Iranian regime, despite its Islamist ideology and hostile slogans, would be no exception to the rule that nuclear weapons profoundly sober a state's foreign policy. Iranian leaders are fundamentally concerned with regime survival, and acquiring nuclear capability would not be a license to commit suicide through reckless attack—it would be a shield to deter enemies. In fact, from the standpoint of Iran's security, merely having a nuclear deterrent (even if never openly acknowledged) could achieve Tehran's aims of preventing foreign invasion or coercion, without ever having to be used or even brandished. The deterrent effect, in theory, would operate quietly in the background of all interactions.

Rational Actors – Does Iran Meet the Assumption? Waltz's optimism hinges on the assumption that states are led by rational actors who value self-preservation above all else. Detractors often question whether this holds true for the Islamic Republic, sometimes portraying Iran's clerical leadership as

irrational or driven by messianic zeal. However, an objective look at Iran's behavior over the past four decades suggests that its decision-makers, while certainly ideological, have been acutely mindful of regime survival and have not embarked on suicidal ventures. Iran has consistently avoided direct conventional wars with far superior foes. Even at the height of tensions, Iranian officials have usually calibrated their actions to avoid crossing thresholds that would trigger overwhelming retaliation (for example, they largely refrained from overtly attacking U.S. forces in the region, even when rhetorically threatening to do so). This track record indicates a form of strategic rationality. As Colin Kahl notes, Iran's leaders can be expected to fear nuclear retaliation just as any others would; thus, even a nuclear-armed Iran is unlikely to deliberately use a nuclear weapon or transfer one to terrorists, knowing it would invite its own destruction (Kahl, 2012). Kahl agrees with Waltz on this narrow point: Iran's clerics are not seeking national martyrdom, and the logic of deterrence would not be lost on them.

Indeed, Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability itself can be seen as rational from a security standpoint, given its perceived threats. If and when Iran obtained a nuclear weapon, it would presumably treat it as a deterrent tool – a last resort guarantee of regime survival – rather than a usable battlefield option. Waltz would argue that like other nuclear states, Iran would likely adopt a posture of opaque deterrence (perhaps not openly testing or declaring itself nuclear, but making its adversaries suspect it has the capacity). That alone could achieve Tehran's aims of warding off attacks without radically altering its day-to-day foreign policy conduct. Moreover, a nuclear arsenal in Iran's hands would most likely be tightly controlled by the top leadership (the Supreme Leader and senior Revolutionary Guard commanders), who have every incentive to avoid unauthorized use. The fear of Israeli or American retaliation would impose discipline. In sum, if we grant the assumption that Iran's leadership is rational in the deterrence sense, then Waltz's model predicts that a stable deterrent relationship—however tense—could emerge between Israel and Iran, and possibly vis-à-vis the United States as well, similar to how Soviet nukes deterred the U.S. and vice versa during the Cold War.

Deterrence in a Multipolar Middle East: A more complex consideration is how deterrence would function beyond the immediate Iran-Israel dyad. The Middle East is a region with multiple rivalries and actors. If Iran were to join Israel as a nuclear-armed state, the deterrence equation might extend to other players: for instance, the United States (which has a nuclear arsenal and security commitments to Israel and Gulf states), and Pakistan (a nearby nuclear state with historical ties to Saudi Arabia). The introduction of a second nuclear power in the region could spur others to seek their own deterrents, as previously mentioned. Waltz's theory does not explicitly limit itself to two-player scenarios; he generally maintained that even if "more" states go nuclear, each additional member of the nuclear club would

further reinforce caution globally. However, strategists like Mearsheimer have observed that multipolar systems (with several great powers) tend to be less stable than bipolar ones, because the web of deterrence becomes more complex and the potential for miscalculation or shifting alliances increases (Mearsheimer, 2001). Translating that to the Middle East: today Israel's nuclear monopoly means only one state wields that absolute deterrent. With Iran in the mix, there would be two. If Saudi Arabia or others followed, it could become three or four. A multipolar nuclear Middle East would be unprecedented and fraught with uncertainties.

One can envision potential deterrence dilemmas: For example, Israel's nuclear posture has been one of ambiguity and last-resort use; a nuclear Iran might adopt a similar stance. If a crisis occurred involving, say, Iran and Saudi Arabia (which might be under a Pakistani nuclear security guarantee, hypothetically), the lines of deterrence could be blurred. Unlike the relatively clear-cut U.S.-Soviet standoff, a multiparty nuclear environment raises questions like: would Israel extend a nuclear deterrent umbrella to Gulf Arab states or vice versa? How would communication and crisis signaling work between multiple adversaries? The more actors, the greater the chance that misperceptions could lead someone to miscalculate. Waltz might respond that even in a multipolar nuclear scenario, the overriding fear of nuclear war would still restrain all parties – essentially a broad balance of terror. Yet, the potential for instability cannot be dismissed. There might be a risk of an action by one party being misattributed to another (for instance, if a nuclear device ever went off, confusion over *who* was responsible could itself trigger dangerous escalation among multiple nuclear-armed rivals).

Nevertheless, if we stay within Waltz's optimistic framing, even a multipolar nuclear Middle East could have a silver lining: the formation of a *mutual deterrence system*. Iran having nuclear weapons could, in theory, deter not only Israel but also discourage any aggressive moves by other regional actors against Iran, and vice versa. It could force a kind of frozen strategic status quo. Advocates of this view sometimes cite how no major wars have occurred between nuclear-armed states; if the Middle East's main powers all had nuclear capabilities, perhaps they would similarly avoid direct wars and be compelled to pursue diplomatic conflict resolution (Waltz, 2012). An ironic corollary is that a nuclear Iran might even stabilize its rivalry with Saudi Arabia — if Riyadh also went nuclear or had guarantees, both sides would be cautious.

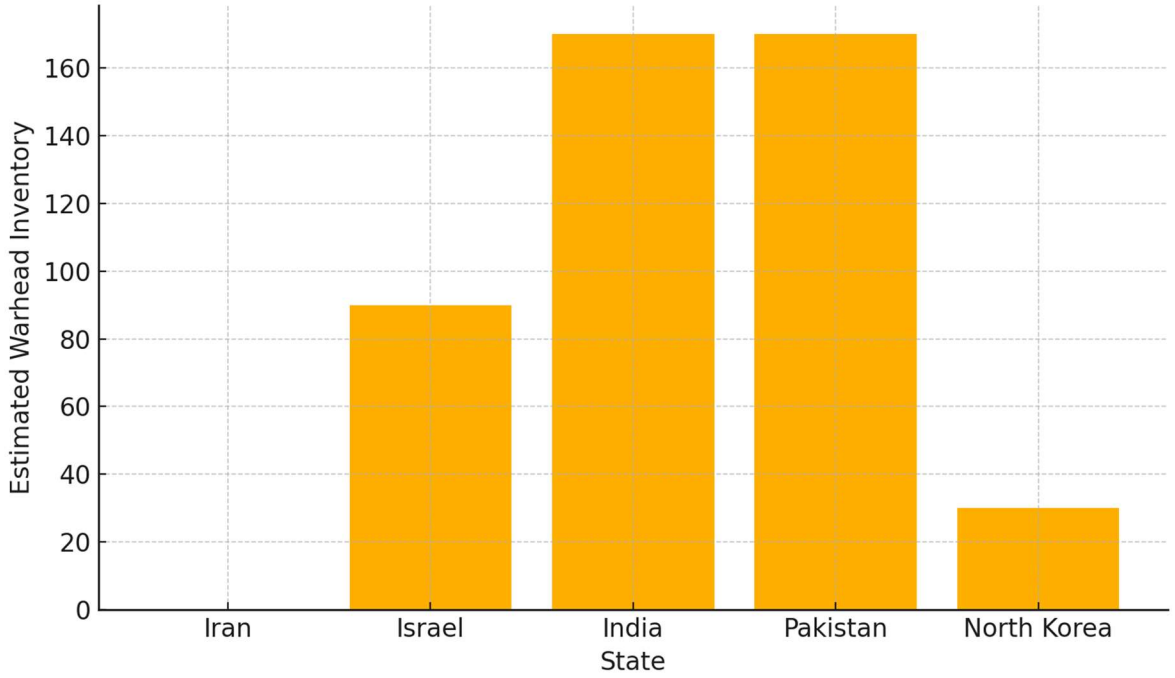

Figure 1 illustrates a hypothetical balance-of-power scenario in the Middle East with two nuclear-armed states (Israel and a potential Iran), highlighting the deterrence relationships and security dilemmas that could emerge.

Counterarguments & Limitations

While Waltz's theory provides a coherent rationale for why a nuclear Iran *could* lead to peace through deterrence, numerous experts have raised counterarguments emphasizing the risks and uncertainties of this outcome. The following are key limitations to Waltz's optimistic scenario when applied to Iran:

1. Risk of Deterrence Failure and Accidents: One major concern is the possibility that nuclear deterrence could fail, whether through accident, miscalculation, or loss of control. New nuclear states typically lack the decades of experience, robust command-and-control systems, and early warning capabilities that established nuclear powers developed. Iran's introduction of nuclear weapons could carry a higher danger of something going wrong in a crisis. Scott Sagan's research into military organizations suggests that complex nuclear systems are prone to errors and accidents (Sagan, 1994). In Iran's case, the armed forces and Revolutionary Guard have limited experience handling such weapons; the chance of a false alarm or an accidental launch might be low, but the consequences would be so catastrophic that even a small chance is alarming. For instance, if Iranian radar falsely indicated an incoming attack (or if Israel's alert systems gave a false warning), either side might feel pressured to consider a "use them or lose them" option in a moment of panic. Unlike the U.S. and USSR, which

established direct hotlines and understandings to manage crises, Iran and Israel have no direct communication channel and very high distrust. This lack of communication could exacerbate misperceptions. Thus, the margin for error in deterrence would be slim. A close call or technical glitch could escalate uncontrollably before leaders even have time to clarify the situation. Such scenarios underline a limitation of Waltz's argument: it assumes a level of rational control and effective communication that may not hold true, especially in the initial years of a nuclear standoff involving Iran.

2. Proxy Warfare and "Stability–Instability" Dynamics: Even if full-scale war is deterred by mutual fear, Iran obtaining nuclear weapons might embolden it in other ways. Critics argue that Tehran could increase support for proxy militias and engage in more aggressive political coercion, calculating that its nuclear deterrent will shield it from severe retaliation (Kahl, 2012; Edelman et al., 2011). This is an example of the stability–instability paradox mentioned earlier. Under a nuclear umbrella, Iran might feel invulnerable to regime-threatening consequences and therefore push harder against rivals in conflicts that fall below the nuclear threshold. We could envision Iran intensifying its involvement in regional proxy wars – for example, providing more advanced missiles or drones to groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Houthis in Yemen – on the assumption that Israel or Saudi Arabia would fear to escalate against a nuclear-armed Iran. Such behavior could increase the frequency and intensity of low-level conflicts, terrorism, or insurgencies, thereby *destabilizing* the region even as direct war is held in check. Indeed, Waltz's opponent in the 2012 debate, Colin Kahl, argued that a nuclear Iran would likely become *more* aggressive in terms of supporting terrorism and insurgency, believing itself safer from direct retribution (Kahl, 2012). The net effect could be a Middle East where conflict becomes more chronic and pervasive, even if major powers avoid fighting each other openly.

3. Regional Arms Race and Proliferation Cascade: Perhaps the most oft-cited counterargument is that an Iranian bomb would spur further nuclear proliferation among its neighbors, making the entire region (and world) far more dangerous. Saudi Arabia has openly signaled that it would feel compelled to acquire its own nuclear capability if Iran goes nuclear (Kroenig, 2012). The Saudi option might involve buying warheads from Pakistan or rapidly developing domestic nuclear infrastructure. Other Sunni Arab states like Egypt or Turkey could reconsider their security strategies as well. A nuclear domino effect would undermine the global nonproliferation regime and increase the number of fingers on nuclear triggers, multiplying the risks discussed above. Waltz acknowledged this possibility but tended to downplay it, arguing historically proliferation has been slow and often one state going nuclear does not automatically mean all its rivals do. However, the Middle East's rivalries and lack of strong alliance guarantees (unlike, say, Japan or South Korea being under the U.S. nuclear umbrella) make a regional arms race plausible.

The emergence of multiple new nuclear states in a short span would be enormously destabilizing. It would also raise the chance that nuclear materials or technology could spread to non-state actors amid the chaos of rapid proliferation. This is a scenario that nonproliferation experts find deeply worrying – more states with nascent, possibly insecure nuclear arsenals create many opportunities for theft or illicit transfer of nuclear components to terrorist groups. Iran, as a revolutionary state with ties to various militias, heightens those fears: even if Iran's government would not intentionally hand a bomb to a proxy, an expanded nuclear program might increase the risk of insider proliferation or secrets leaking to others.

In evaluating these counterarguments, it becomes clear that Waltz's optimistic prediction rests on several best-case assumptions: perfect or near-perfect rationality, reliable controls, no domino effect of proliferation, and no significant shifts in state intentions under the shield of nukes. The limitations discussed show that each of those assumptions can be contested. History and scholarly research (e.g., Sagan's work on accidents, or Kahl's analysis of state behavior) provide reasons to worry that a Middle East with more nuclear weapons might experience frequent instability, close calls, and heightened chances of disaster, even if outright war is deterred (Kahl, 2012; Sagan, 1994).

Thus, while Waltz's theory of nuclear peace offers an intriguing lens and perhaps some valid insights – for example, the likelihood that Iran could be deterred from *using* a nuclear weapon – it does not guarantee a peaceful outcome. In fact, many argue it underestimates the *qualitative* change nuclearization would bring to the regional security climate. The next section will conclude by synthesizing these findings and reflecting on what they mean for policy: how should the international community approach the Iranian nuclear controversy given both the potential stabilizing aspects of deterrence and the significant perils that proliferation entails?

Conclusion

Revisiting Waltz's theory of nuclear peace in the case of Iran reveals a nuanced picture. On one hand, the logic of deterrence that Waltz champions cannot be dismissed outright. Even many skeptics concede that a nuclear-armed Iran would likely be deterred from launching nuclear attacks by the certainty of devastating retaliation (Kahl, 2012). The fundamental premise that nuclear weapons impose caution has historical support: nuclear deterrence has arguably helped prevent direct great-power wars, and it could similarly restrain Iran and its adversaries from engaging in all-out conflict. If Iran obtained a secure nuclear deterrent, it might feel more secure against external threats, potentially reducing its fears of regime change and possibly making its behavior more predictable in some arenas. The long-running hostility between the U.S./Israel and Iran might settle into a colder but more stable deterrence framework,

where none of the parties would lightly risk a direct military showdown. In that sense, Waltz's optimism highlights an important insight: the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran would not automatically translate into nuclear war or regional apocalypse. Deterrence might indeed "work" in preventing a deliberate nuclear exchange, just as it has elsewhere.

On the other hand, this analysis has underscored that the absence of nuclear war is not the same as true peace or stability. The Iranian nuclear controversy demonstrates all the ways in which proliferation can be dangerous short of nuclear Armageddon. A nuclear Iran could usher in a host of destabilizing consequences: a heightened risk of accidental or unauthorized launches, more aggressive proxy conflicts under a nuclear shadow, and a cascade of proliferation across the Middle East. Waltz's theory, focused on rational states balancing each other, largely overlooks these second-order effects and the complexities of regional dynamics. As a result, his conclusion that a nuclear-armed Iran would "probably be the best possible result" for Middle East stability (Waltz, 2012) appears overly sanguine when weighed against the tangible risks articulated by Sagan, Kahl, and others (Sagan, 1994; Kroenig, 2012). The truth may lie somewhere in between the poles of optimism and pessimism. A nuclear Iran might neither be as calamitous as worst-case scenarios fear (with Iranian leaders behaving recklessly or giving weapons to terrorists, which remains highly unlikely given their desire to survive), nor as pacifying as Waltz suggests (because of the many avenues for conflict and mischief below the nuclear threshold).

For policymakers, this "revisited" understanding implies a dual approach. First, preventing nuclear proliferation remains crucial. The potential downsides of Iran acquiring the bomb—regional arms races, higher war-by-mistake chances, emboldened aggression—are serious enough that the international community is justified in continuing robust nonproliferation efforts. Diplomatic initiatives like the JCPOA, which rolled back and capped Iran's program, and rigorous enforcement of IAEA inspections are vital tools to delay or avert Iran's weaponization. The goal is to avoid putting Waltz's theory to the test in the first place, because the cost of being wrong is immense. In essence, while Waltz might argue that living with a nuclear Iran is feasible, the preferred path for global security is still to dissuade Iran from crossing that threshold at all, thus eliminating the myriad risks that come with a new nuclear state.

Second, the analysis also suggests that if Iran ultimately does become a nuclear-armed state despite preventive measures, a strategy of containment and deterrence—rather than preemptive war—could manage the situation. Waltz's perspective reminds us that Iran, like other states, is deterrable and likely not suicidal. A Cold War-style containment (as unpleasant as that prospect is) might succeed in avoiding catastrophic war, through clear communication of red lines and maintaining overwhelming retaliatory

capabilities by the U.S. and Israel. However, such a strategy would have to be complemented by efforts to mitigate the side effects: strengthening crisis communication channels, bolstering the security of other regional allies to discourage them from proliferating, and continuing to pressure Iran against risky behavior with its proxies. In other words, a world with a nuclear Iran would demand vigilant management to uphold deterrence and prevent the slide into the instabilities identified.

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