

**NUCLEAR IRAN AND ITS  
IMPACT ON TÜRKİYE:  
OPTIONS AND  
CONSEQUENCES**

**Hakkı Uygur  
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## **Nuclear Iran and Its Impact on Türkiye: Options and Consequences**

### **Nükleer İnan ve Türkiye'ye Etkileri: Seçenekler ve Sonuçlar**

ایران هسته ای و اثرات آن بر ترکیه: گزینه ها و پیامدها

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He was born in Berlin, Germany in 1975. After being graduated from high school in Istanbul, he went to Iran for higher education. He finished first IKUI in Qazvin and later Tehran University in the History of Islamic Culture and Civilization department, with a master's degree. He returned to Türkiye in 2005 and started to work in the Foundation of Sciences and Arts (Bilim ve Sanat Vakfı) in Istanbul as a researcher and translator. He wrote a lot of articles in Anlayış Magazine and other Turkish newspapers, magazines, and websites about the Middle East, particularly on Iran.

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## SUMMARY

- The Islamic Republic of Iran has invested time, money, and resources in its nuclear program, especially over the last three decades. As numerous foreign technical and intelligence reports point out, Iran is now a nuclear threshold state with full command of domestic fuel cycle technology.
- The possibility of reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, Nuclear Deal), an agreement signed in 2015 to curb Iran's nuclear program that lost its meaning in 2018, has narrowed considerably.
- The parties are seeking informal deals to avoid escalation in the absence of the JCPOA, which limits Iran's nuclear program. It is important to note that any agreement reached at this point will not change the overall picture considering the progress in Iran's nuclear activities.
- If Iran crosses the threshold, Türkiye will face a serious test. This test may pose risks but also opportunities for the country. It is critical for Türkiye to assess its options in such a scenario.
- This article, which is critical in terms of timing given the extent of Iran's nuclear activities, discusses the possible effects of Iran crossing the nuclear threshold and becoming a nuclear power on Türkiye, Türkiye's options in the face of this development, and the consequences arising from those options.

## ÖZET

- İran İslam Cumhuriyeti özellikle son 30 yıldır nükleer programına zaman, para ve kaynak yatırımı yapmaktadır. Çok sayıda yabancı teknik ve istihbarat raporlarının işaret ettiği gibi İran, artık yerli yakıt çevrimi teknolojisine tam anlamıyla hâkim bir nükleer eşik devletidir.
- İran nükleer programını kısıtlamaya yönelik girişim olan 2015 yılında imzalanan fakat 2018 yılı itibarıyla anlamını yitiren Kapsamlı Ortak Eylem Planı'nın (KOEP, Nükleer Anlaşma) yeniden canlandırılması ihtimaliyle gelinen noktada oldukça daralmıştır.
- Taraflar, İran nükleer programının kısıtlanmasını sağlayan KOEP'in yokluğunda, gerilimin tırmanmaması adına gayriresmî mutabakat arayışındadır. Bu noktada varılacak herhangi bir mutabakatın, İran'ın nükleer faaliyetlerindeki ilerleme göz önüne alındığında, genel resmi değiştirmeyeceğini kaydetmek elzemdir.
- Eşiğin aşılması durumunda, Türkiye ciddi bir imtihanla karşı karşıya kalacaktır. Bu imtihan, Türkiye için riskler barındırmakla beraber fırsatlar da doğurabilir. Türkiye'nin bu durum karşısında kendi seçeneklerini değerlendirmesi önem taşımaktadır.
- İran'ın nükleer faaliyetlerinin geldiği boyut göz önüne alındığında, zamanlama açısından kritik olan bu makalede, İran'ın nükleer eşiği aşıp bir nükleer güce dönüşmesinin Türkiye üzerindeki olası etkileri, bu gelişmeyle karşı karşıya kalan Türkiye'nin seçenekleri ve o seçeneklerden doğan sonuçlar tartışılmıştır.

## چکیده

- جمهوری اسلامی ایران در سه دهه اخیر در برنامه هسته ای خود زمان، پول و منابع سرمایه گذاری کرده است. همانطور که بسیاری از گزارش های فنی و اطلاعاتی خارجی اشاره میکنند، ایران اکنون یک کشور در آستانه هسته ای شدن با تسلط کامل بر فناوری چرخه سوخت هسته ای داخلی است.
- امکان احیای برنامه جامع اقدام مشترک (برجام، توافق هسته ای) که تلاشی برای محدود کردن برنامه هسته ای ایران بود که در سال 2015 امضا شد اما از سال 2018 مفهوم خود را از دست داد، به میزان قابل توجهی کاهش یافته است.
- در غیاب برجام که محدودیت برنامه هسته ای ایران را تضمین می کند، طرفین با هدف کاهش تنش به دنبال توافق غیررسمی هستند. با توجه به پیشرفت ایران در فعالیت های هسته ای، هرگونه توافقی که در این مرحله حاصل شود، واقعیت کلی را تغییر نخواهد داد.
- در صورت تبدیل شدن ایران به قدرت هسته ای، ترکیه با یک آزمون جدی روبرو خواهد شد. این آزمون ممکن است فرصت ها و خطراتی را برای ترکیه به بار آورد. ترکیه باید گزینه های خود را در مواجهه با این وضعیت بررسی کند.
- با توجه به پیشرفت فعالیت های هسته ای ایران، در این مقاله که از نظر زمانی حیاتی است، به اثرات احتمالی تبدیل شدن ایران به یک قدرت هسته ای، گزینه های ترکیه با این تحول و پیامدهای ناشی از آن گزینه ها مورد بررسی قرار گرفته است.





# 1. INTRODUCTION: THE CURRENT STATUS OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

## 1.1. A Brief History of Iran's Nuclear Activities

Iran's interest in nuclear technology dates back to the 1950s. Iran signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with the USA in the mid-1950s as part of the Atoms for Peace Initiative. However, Iran's progress in nuclear technology remained slow until the 1970s. In 1973, the Shah of Iran announced an ambitious plan to build a 23,000-megawatt (MW) nuclear power plant in Iran by the end of the century and tasked the newly established Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) with overseeing this task. In the five years that followed, Iran signed numerous nuclear technology-related contracts with the USA and European countries and invested in the training of its personnel. Under these agreements, foreign suppliers have provided Iran with key technologies in the nuclear field, such as uranium enrichment and plutonium separation technologies (Kibaroglu, 2013). Thus, by 1979, Iran had begun to build the basic infrastructure for nuclear science and technology (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2020). Although the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War hindered Iran's progress in the nuclear field, towards the end of the war, the administration decided to continue its nuclear work. Iran approached various states, notably Russia and China, and in the 1990s, it advanced its nuclear program (especially uranium enrichment technology) in close cooperation with these two states. The Iranian nuclear issue has been a focal point of rigorous international negotiations and sanctions from 2002 to 2015. This situation heightened attention came about after the revelation in 2002 that Iran had been conducting nuclear activities without the knowledge of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Meanwhile, Tehran has persisted in its nuclear pursuits without abandoning its nuclear activities.

## 1.2. Recent Status of Iran's Nuclear Program

The Iranian nuclear crisis, which started in 2002, reached a resolution on July 14, 2015, through the signing of the JCPOA by the P5+1 countries (the USA, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) and Iran. However, as is well known, since Joe Biden's predecessor Donald Trump's decision to unilaterally withdraw the USA from the agreement and swiftly impose sanctions on Iran, the Nuclear Deal has existed only on paper. In this process, Iran started to gradually suspend its nuclear-related commitments arising from the Nuclear Deal one year after the unilateral withdrawal of the USA from the JCPOA in 2018 (as of May 8, 2019). It is possible to say that the steps taken by Iran in this regard between May 2019 and December 2020 were not provocative and escalatory to a large extent. For instance, Iran did not enrich uranium at a high rate during this period (The Iran Primer, 2021). Nonetheless, as of 2021, Iran has adopted a policy of controlled escalation by accelerating its nuclear activities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Iran's policy of controlled escalation as of February 21, 2021, is directly related to the "Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect Iranian Nation's Interests", a bill passed by the Iranian Consultative Assembly on December 1, 2020. The law obliges the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to accelerate its nuclear activities. In accordance with the law, the AEOI is mandated to produce enrichment at a level of 20%, which significantly exceeds the 3.67% uranium enrichment rate specified in the Nuclear Deal. Additionally, the AEOI is required to store a minimum of 120 kg per year, install second-generation advanced IR-2m centrifuges, incorporate a minimum of 164 sixth-generation IR-6 centrifuges for R&D purposes, and achieve a total of 1,000 centrifuges within one year. In addition, the law obliges the government to suspend Iran's voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol if the other parties to the agreement (Germany, France, the UK, China, and Russia) fail to normalize banking transactions

### 1.2.1. Monitoring and Verification Activities of the IAEA in Iran

According to the IAEA's most recent report, "Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231", dated May 31, 2023 (IAEA, 2023), Iran ceased implementing transparency and confidence-building measures, including the Additional Protocol, on February 21, 2021. Following Iran's request on June 8, 2022, between June 9 and 11, 2022, the IAEA removed all equipment previously installed in Iran under the JCPOA for surveillance and monitoring. In other words, since June 8, 2022, the IAEA's surveillance and monitoring equipment storing Iran's nuclear activities has not been operational. The IAEA has been unable to carry out monitoring and verification activities under the JCPOA for over two years, including one year when the equipment was not operational. However, by May 2023, in line with the Joint Statement dated March 4, 2023, the IAEA had reinstalled surveillance cameras in centrifuge-parts production facilities in Esfahan. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Iran's required cooperation with the IAEA has significantly decreased since February 2021.

### 1.2.2. Iran's Enrichment Activities and Enriched Uranium Stocks

Iran declared its commencement of uranium enrichment at various rates: 5% starting from July 8, 2019, 20% from January 4, 2021, and 60% from April 17, 2021 (IAEA, 2023). Although the IAEA has not been able to verify Iran's total stockpile of enriched uranium since February 16, 2021, based on information provided by Iran, it forecasts Iran's estimated stockpile of

covered by US sanctions, remove obstacles to the export of oil and petroleum products, and allow for the full and prompt repatriation of foreign exchange from sales.



enriched uranium in UF<sub>6</sub> form at 4384.8 kg as of May 13, 2023. Iran's total stockpile of enriched uranium is currently more than 21 times the JCPOA limit.

According to this data, Iran could produce enough enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon in less than two weeks. That is, Iran's nuclear threshold has been reduced to two weeks. In addition, if Iran uses its entire stockpile of highly enriched uranium, it could produce enough weapons-grade uranium for four nuclear weapons within a month. Therefore, Iran could produce enough weapons-grade material for five nuclear weapons in less than a month (Albright, Burkhard, Faragasso, and Stricker, 2023). At this point, Iran is only one step away from being a de facto nuclear state.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Türkiye's Official Position on the Iranian Nuclear Program

Understanding Türkiye's official position on the Iranian nuclear program requires a grasp of Türkiye's "Non-proliferation Policy". As a member of NATO, a nuclear alliance since the

mid-1950s, Türkiye not only possesses substantial conventional military power but also continues to enhance its modern military capabilities, allowing it to effectively project power beyond its borders. Consequently, Türkiye appears to enjoy a commendable level of security. However, Türkiye believes that nuclear weapons would increase instability and pose a serious threat to global peace and security (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). In this sense, Ankara has always been firmly opposed to the proliferation of nuclear weapons (mainly Weapons of Mass Destruction, WMD) and has strongly supported nuclear-weapon-free-zone in the Middle East and nuclear non-proliferation norms. Türkiye is not only a party to international disarmament and non-proliferation treaties and arrangements, but also an effective participant in the necessary mechanisms. At the same time, Ankara notes at every opportunity that it is the right of states to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and to develop these technologies in accordance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).<sup>3</sup>

In light of all this information, it is possible to summarize Türkiye's official stance towards the Iran nuclear crisis that erupted in 2002 as follows (Çetinsaya and Köse, 2006):

- It has adopted a diplomacy-first or even diplomacy-only approach to resolving the crisis.
- While arguing that Iran, as a signatory to the NPT, has the right to conduct nuclear work for peaceful purposes, Ankara has urged Iran to fulfill its NPT commitments and to compromise to resolve the crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> Under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), states that are parties to the Treaty and have tested producing nuclear bombs and achieved success by January 1, 1967 (the USA, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and China) are considered de jure nuclear powers, while no country other than these five is recognized as a legitimate nuclear-weapon state. All states that have acquired or will acquire nuclear weapons outside this framework are referred to as de facto nuclear powers. Currently, four states (Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea) are recognized as de facto nuclear powers. Iran has not yet tested a nuclear weapon, nor has it officially announced that it will acquire nuclear weapons. However, since it is one political decision away from weaponizing its nuclear capacity, it has become known in some circles as a de facto nuclear state (See Vaez, A. & Nasr, V., 2023, The Path to a New Iran Deal, Foreign Affairs).

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<sup>3</sup> All NPT signatory states have the right to conduct peaceful nuclear activities under Article 4 of the Treaty.

# STATEMENTS FROM TÜRKİYE ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM FROM PAST TO PRESENT

Chief of the General Staff Hilmi Özkök stated that Türkiye, like everyone else, follows Iran's nuclear activities with concern and that Ankara's policy is to make the region free from nuclear weapons.

2005



2006

President Abdullah Gül said, "Reports from the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have revealed the fact that Iran has concealed its nuclear program for years, which raises doubts about Iran's intentions. This situation disturbs Türkiye as well as all members of the international community."

In an interview with the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Anbaa, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, "States have the right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes."

2007



2008

When Prime Minister Erdoğan was asked at the Munich Security Conference why Türkiye did not seem concerned about the Iranian nuclear program, he stated that "Our Iranian colleagues said they wanted nuclear power to meet their energy needs, not to obtain weapons."

Noting that Türkiye does not assume that Iran has a completely peaceful program, but it would still be wrong to accuse Iran without evidence, President Abdullah Gül said, "We want Iran to be transparent to IAEA officials."

2010



2018

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye published the following statement: "Türkiye has always supported that diplomacy and negotiations are the only way to resolve the issue regarding Iran's nuclear program, and has made great efforts to this end in the past. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, Nuclear Deal), adopted in 2015, is an important step towards non-proliferation. Nevertheless, we consider it as an unfortunate step that the USA has decided to withdraw from the Deal."

Source: Prepared by İRAM experts from various sources.



- It has urged Tehran not to use nuclear technology for military purposes.
- Ankara has emphasized Israel's nuclear weapons and pointed out that making the region WMD-free is a critical point for solving the Iranian nuclear crisis.
- Since it has good relations with both sides of the crisis, Türkiye has stated that it can contribute to the solution of the problem by assuming a mediation role.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, it is very important for Türkiye to make the Middle East a nuclear-free zone. In this respect, Ankara is absolutely against Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. At the same time, Türkiye has also opposed a policy of isolation and military intervention against Iran. It is critical to understand the motives behind this policy. First of all, Ankara categorically rejects the military option to resolve the crisis because it does not want a recurrence of the instability in the region as in the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Also, Ankara adopts a principled position that economic sanctions do not contribute to the solution but negatively affect the process. The USA making Iran a target and imposing heavy sanctions will have an adverse impact on Türkiye's growing energy needs, its fight against the PKK, and the economic relations between the two countries. For all these

reasons, Türkiye has tried to be involved in efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons for its own interests without antagonizing its neighbor.

### 3. Nuclear Iran and the Middle East

According to the traditional view, states that acquire nuclear weapons will disrupt the regional balance and force their adversaries/rivals to acquire nuclear weapons (nuclear domino effect). Due to their extraordinary power and the impact they have on military/political strategies, nuclear weapons are a variable that may force other states in the region to re-evaluate their balance of power calculations militarily, strategically, and psychologically. In the scenario where Iran obtains nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Türkiye emerge as the key countries in the Middle East that may embark on a nuclear arms race. These three nations have garnered significant attention due to this situation. A close analysis of these three countries shows that in the current international context, Iran's transformation into a nuclear power could trigger the proliferation of nuclear technology in the region and/or a regional nuclear arms race.

#### 3.1. Saudi Arabia

Given its enduring rivalry with Tehran, Saudi Arabia stands out as one of the regional countries harboring significant concerns over the potential emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran. After conducting interviews with mid-level and senior-level Saudi officials, Bradley Bowman, a former member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, reached a significant conclusion. Accordingly, Saudi officials expressed greater concern over Iran's potential use of nuclear weapons to advance an assertive hegemonic foreign policy in the region

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<sup>4</sup> Türkiye's interest and initiatives to play an active role in the crisis took a new dimension with the proposal of then-IAEA Director Mohamed ElBaradei. The former IAEA Director put forth a proposal recommending Türkiye as a temporary storage site for Iran's supply of low-enriched uranium. The suggestion involved the subsequent transfer of the uranium from Türkiye to West once the committed fuel from France and Russia reached Tehran. It was the beginning of Türkiye's active role in the Iranian nuclear crisis that erupted in 2002. Following this process, Türkiye, Iran, and Brazil signed an agreement on May 17, 2010, known as the Joint Declaration or the swap deal.

rather than directly targeting Saudi Arabia. In principle, Saudi Arabia opposes the proliferation of nuclear weapons technology in the Middle East region (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2006). However, Saudi Arabia began to express interest in peaceful nuclear energy development shortly after Iran's nuclear program was revealed,<sup>5</sup> and it has gradually raised its goals in this field (such as developing domestic uranium enrichment technology) (Congressional Research Service, 2023). The failure to find a solution to Iran's nuclear ambitions and the recent weakening of US-Saudi Arabia relations have raised the possibility that Riyadh may pursue the path of developing nuclear weapons.

Official statements from senior officials are a clear indication of this possibility. In 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MbS) stated that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would increase the likelihood of a nuclear arms race in an already conflict-ridden region and that Saudi Arabia would follow suit if Iran developed nuclear weapons (Reuters, 2018). At the World Policy Conference in Abu Dhabi on December 11, 2022, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said in an interview that "if Iran acquires operational nuclear weapons, everything changes", implying that the country will adopt a new strategy to adapt to this potential new situation (Reuters, 2022). In short, Saudi Arabia has made it clear that it intends to acquire or

produce nuclear weapons in the face of a nuclear Iran.

However, intentions alone do not determine whether a country will acquire nuclear weapons. It should be emphasized that technological capacity plays a key role here. When Saudi Arabia's technical capabilities to develop nuclear weapons are analyzed as a whole, it can be said that it largely lacks the necessary infrastructure to produce nuclear weapons. Basically, Riyadh is behind in the nuclear "game", at least for the time being. The Saudi political and military elite is also aware that the country lacks the technological and human resources to develop and operate its own nuclear infrastructure for the foreseeable future. It is therefore looking for ways to overcome its technical shortcomings. The most likely method for Riyadh would be to accelerate efforts to develop its civilian nuclear program infrastructure. The leading countries that Saudi Arabia could cooperate with for its civilian nuclear energy program are China, Russia, South Korea, and Pakistan. Indeed, it has taken concrete steps in this direction in the past and continues to do so. To this end, Saudi Arabia has signed nuclear cooperation agreements with China, South Korea, France, and Argentina (Solomon and Al Omran, 2015). Another method for Riyadh, although considered highly unlikely by experts, is to directly acquire nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons technology from another country. Pakistan is the country that Saudi Arabia would most likely look to for external assistance. Saudi Arabia could purchase the necessary infrastructure to produce nuclear weapons (uranium enrichment and plutonium separation technologies) from Pakistan or develop a joint nuclear weapons program with Pakistan.

Given Riyadh's history in the nuclear field, it would not be wrong to say that neither of these two methods will be easy. First of all, Saudi Arabia is still dependent on the USA for

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<sup>5</sup> In January 2007, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud announced the development of a nuclear program to set an example for a country that seeks to adopt nuclear technology under strict controls and for peaceful purposes, with no intention of entering the nuclear arms race. Until then, Saudi Arabia's leaders had indicated that they did not anticipate the country would need to develop nuclear power (Kibaroglu, 2012).



security guarantees. As long as Washington remains Riyadh's main security guarantor, it will have the power to influence Saudi Arabia's decisions on other issues, notably the acquisition of nuclear weapons. It will also affect Saudi Arabia's decision on high-level nuclear cooperation with China and Russia. The acquisition of sensitive nuclear technology from these two countries, despite the USA, will have a negative impact on Saudi Arabia-USA security relations. Yet current international structural conditions make room for Riyadh's access to civilian nuclear technology because the main role in preventing the proliferation of sensitive nuclear technology relies on cooperation and coordination among the major powers in the system (Gheorghe, 2019). However, the international system is moving from unipolarity to multipolarity due to China and Russia increasingly challenging the dominant role of the USA. Advanced competition between great powers and the evolution of the global distribution of power towards multipolarity raises the possibility of undermining activities/strategies to control and manage transfers of sensitive nuclear-related materials, equipment, and technology. This dynamic and political climate could provide Saudi Arabia with the space to pursue an advanced civilian nuclear program or a nuclear weapons program. In other words, it is possible to argue that in this conjuncture, Saudi Arabia will have easier access to the materials and technologies necessary to join the nuclear club.

### 3.2. Israel

Iran's nuclear program is undoubtedly a critical development also for Israel, one of the countries in the region. Over the past two decades, Israel's leading threat perception has shifted from the Arab world to Iran and its anti-Israeli proxy forces in the region. Even though Israel became a nuclear weapon

state<sup>6</sup> by the early 1970s and thus gained a strong deterrent against rival states in the region, the Iranian nuclear program has been perceived as an existential threat to Israel. Under the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Iranian nuclear issue has clearly become the country's number one security concern (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2014). Netanyahu has repeatedly stated that a nuclear Iran (or even an Iran capable of producing nuclear weapons) is unacceptable and a threat to Israel's existence. Ephraim Sneh, a former Israeli Defense Minister and retired general, profoundly characterized Iran's attainment of nuclear weapons as a perilous progression capable of triggering a catastrophic event akin to a "second Holocaust" (Rezaei and Cohen, 2014, p. 453). Threatening statements against Israel by senior Iranian figures reinforce this perception. Many Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as well as the IRGC commanders, have frequently and openly stated that their main goal is the destruction of the Jewish state. There are five main ways in which a nuclear Iran could undermine Israel's national security:

1. Iran could launch a nuclear attack directly on Israel.
2. Having acquired a second-strike capability, a nuclear Iran, with its security guarantees, could adopt a more aggressive policy towards Israel in the region.
3. Nuclear Iran can offer a tacit security guarantee to anti-Israeli proxy forces in the region. This would allow the proxy forces to act with impunity without fear of international consequences.

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<sup>6</sup> Because it could not be officially confirmed that Israel has nuclear weapons due to the deliberate nuclear ambiguity policy (opaque nuclear strategy) it has adopted, Israel's position remains ambiguous as "the state that is believed to have nuclear weapons".

4. A nuclear Iran could push a number of adversaries, including Saudi Arabia, into a nuclear arms race.
5. Since a nuclear Iran would neutralize Israel's nuclear capability, Israel could lose its military superiority in the region.

Given the seriousness of the perceived nuclear threat from Iran to Israel, military action is still on the table among Israel's possible reactions. Nevertheless, given Israel's unique alliance with the USA and the inextricable connection between its overarching national security priorities and the regional considerations of the USA, Israel's capacity to execute a military campaign against Iran remains as reliant on the USA today as it has been in the past. Considering the active participation of the USA and Europe in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, along with the significant US engagement in China's containment policy, it appears highly improbable within the current international landscape that the USA would initiate military action against Iran or grant Israel the approval for unilateral military intervention. Furthermore, Iran has diligently progressed its nuclear program to a level where it poses significant challenges for any military efforts aimed at restraining or halting it. In simpler terms, Iranian nuclear infrastructure is increasingly becoming too hardened to be targeted militarily. In this situation, the only reasonable option for Israel in the face of a nuclear Iran is to abandon its policy of nuclear ambiguity and openly declare its nuclear capability.

#### **4. Nuclear Iran and Türkiye**

The impact of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons on Türkiye can be examined through the lens of the instability that would inevitably arise from a nuclear-capable Iran in the Middle East. In this framework, the prevailing view is that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons

would destabilize the region. Certain prominent theorists within the neorealist school of thought contend that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons could potentially introduce a form of relative stability to the Middle East. They attribute this stability to the notion that nuclear weapons played a role in maintaining peace during the Cold War era. (Waltz, 2012; Mearsheimer and Zakheim, 2012). According to this approach, nuclear weapons provide relative stability by creating a balance of terror between two or more rational nuclear states/actors. But applying a theory modeled on Cold War dynamics to an entirely different geopolitical situation - the Middle East and Iran - constitutes a flawed analogy. First of all, the nuclear balance of terror refers to a phenomenon that exists between nuclear states. However, there is no country in the Middle East that is officially recognized as possessing nuclear weapons. In other words, as the first state in the region to officially introduce nuclear weapons, Iran will shift the balance of power in the region in its favor. In this case, Iran's relationship with non-nuclear Türkiye (and other countries in the region) will no longer be one of equals.

The analogy is also flawed also in the following respect: It is based on the presupposition that Iran, having gained deterrence through nuclear weapons, will abandon the aggressive and interventionist regional policies it has adopted since the Revolution because its security concerns will diminish. However, it is a misreading of Tehran's regional strategy to think that Iran will leave its traditional foreign policy after nuclear weapons as it will feel more secure. While security concerns have played a key role in the development of Iran's asymmetric force, this force has always been aimed at more than "self-defense" and "retaliation". Iran has sought to use its unconventional military power to expand its regional influence and advance the revisionist agenda it has pursued since the Revolution. In summary, Iran has consistently



pursued an assertive and interventionist foreign policy, driven by the dual objectives of sustaining its regime and advancing its revisionist aspirations. This approach has involved enhancing regional influence and maximizing its own interests. Therefore, nuclear weapons will not pacify Iran. On the contrary, Iran will pursue more adventurous and aggressive policies in line with its interests in the region.

Indeed, states with nuclear weapons are more prone to low-level conflict in their bilateral relations with non-nuclear states (Bell & Miller, 2013). This phenomenon does not stem from the notion that nuclear weapons offer protection to states against stronger conventional military powers. Rather, it arises from the tendency of nuclear-armed states to seek the expansion of their interests following the acquisition of nuclear capabilities. So, it has the potential to destabilize the region and severely limit Türkiye's regional interests, particularly in the Middle East, many of which are directly linked to national security concerns. As a result, Türkiye is likely to join the nuclear arms race alongside Saudi Arabia and Israel.

It is also likely that a nuclear Iran will indirectly strain Türkiye's security relations with the USA and Europe. In the short term, this could force Ankara, which is largely deprived of nuclear technology and capacity, to push for closer cooperation with NATO and the USA. Without a reliable security guarantee for Türkiye in the face of a nuclear-armed Iran, the fragility, fragmentation, and vulnerability of the alliance would resurface. Furthermore, in the event of a prospective attack on Iran's nuclear facilities by the USA, European countries, and Israel, prior to Iran attaining a second strike capability following its acquisition of nuclear weapons, Türkiye could potentially become a target for retaliatory strikes due to the presence of US and NATO military forces on its soil. Indeed, in 2011, Iran not only expressed its discontent with the missile detection radar

installed in Kürecik/Malatya as part of the NATO missile shield system but also declared that it would target this radar in the event of any attack and threat (Habertürk, 2011).

Besides the national security aspect, an examination of Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons within the context of Türkiye-Iran bilateral relations reveals that the issue encompasses considerations of image and parity as well (Fuerth, 2004). States may opt to pursue the development of nuclear weapons due to the perceived significance they hold as a prominent symbol of national prestige and, in some cases, an indication of attaining "global power status". Therefore, Iran becoming a nuclear power raises concerns about the disruption of the strategic and psychological balance between Ankara and Tehran that has been in place for 400 years (Kibaroglu, 2012).

#### **4.1. The Options of Türkiye**

Türkiye's options vis-à-vis a nuclear Iran range from a strategy of denial that ignores the threat to achieving its own nuclear deterrent. As the first option, Türkiye could develop a strategy of denial in the face of a nuclear Iran. There is precedent for this strategy in Türkiye's foreign policy (Lesser, 2005). Türkiye remained relatively indifferent to WMD proliferation trends in Iraq and the Middle East prior to the 1990 Gulf War. In the scenario where Iran adopts an opaque nuclear strategy, characterized by the absence of openly deployed nuclear weapons, their exclusion from the official security strategy, and their separation from security policy, Türkiye is likely to adopt a denial strategy in response.

As a second option, Türkiye could choose to adopt a strategy of denial first and foremost, while rapidly and aggressively building up its conventional military capacity and civilian nuclear energy program. A rapid expansion of Türkiye's domestic missile activities would be

a less controversial and less reactive but more beneficial approach than launching a nuclear weapons program. Under this option, Türkiye could improve its deterrence capacity against immediate security risks by seeking additional diplomatic and political assurances and requesting more advanced weapons from the USA, including advanced missiles and aircraft (such as the F-35). The USA and Western states may see Türkiye's development of conventional capabilities as an urgent need to break the nuclear domino effect in the region. Historically, it is known that the USA has resisted Türkiye's interest in nuclear energy, mainly due to proliferation concerns. However, a nuclear Iran could override this concern. Indeed, there have been similar developments in Türkiye-USA bilateral relations in the past. For example, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran increased Türkiye's geostrategic importance. Despite the severely strained relations after Türkiye's 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, these two major events led to an improvement in relations and renewed military and economic cooperation between Türkiye and the USA. Within this framework, the Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement (1980) DECA was signed to modernize Türkiye's air power.

The failure of the USA to effectively counter Iran's nuclear ambitions, coupled with a similar outcome in dealing with North Korea, presents a considerable obstacle for the USA in adopting a firm stance against Türkiye's nuclear energy plans. Türkiye can benefit from this situation in two ways. Firstly, with the increased availability of peaceful nuclear technology, Türkiye will have a greater opportunity to advance its civil nuclear energy program. This development will enable Türkiye to effectively meet its escalating energy demands by supplying electricity at more affordable prices, while also ensuring environmental and political sustainability. Second, given the dual-use nature of nuclear

energy, it will have easier access to sensitive knowledge, experience, and know-how in the nuclear field, providing it with at least the basic infrastructure for nuclear weapons capability in the medium and long term. More importantly, Ankara will be able to achieve this capability without violating its treaty obligations under the NPT and without disrupting political, economic, and military relations with Western alliances. In other words, through this option, Türkiye would have the opportunity to address some of its immediate security needs and gain technological expertise and know-how to launch its own nuclear weapons program.

Türkiye's third option is launching an independent nuclear weapons program. Türkiye could pursue this option in two ways: Either openly by withdrawing from the NPT or covertly under the guise of a civilian nuclear program. Being a transparent and democratic society, it is reasonable to presume that Türkiye would face immense challenges in clandestinely pursuing a nuclear weapons program. Furthermore, the consequences of such covert actions would be significant, entailing repercussions such as the erosion of international prestige and the potential jeopardy of security guarantees provided by NATO, including the USA's nuclear umbrella. The option of Türkiye openly violating its treaty obligations under the NPT would severely damage its political, economic, and military relations with the Western alliance. Moreover, if Türkiye withdraws from the NPT, its access to sensitive technologies for WMD production will be more difficult. Given that Türkiye has begun nuclear civilian activities but lacks domestic nuclear power reactors and commercial-scale fuel cycle capabilities, foreign suppliers will play a key role in Ankara's success in launching a nuclear program with a military dimension (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2012). Therefore, pursuing an independent



nuclear capacity would be a costly and long-term project for Türkiye in every sense.

So, under what circumstances might Türkiye be inclined to go beyond international non-proliferation commitments and arrangements in the face of a nuclear Iran and pursue a nuclear policy independent of its Western allies? The key points, in this case, would be

the collapse of NATO's nuclear guarantee with the breakdown of Türkiye's defense cooperation with the West, the de facto collapse of the global non-proliferation regime (NPT regime) with the rise of multiple new nuclear weapon states in the region after Iran, and Türkiye's sense of being isolated by the alliance in a dangerous geostrategic environment.

## Conclusion

Iran has positioned itself as a nuclear threshold state, equipped with a domestic nuclear fuel cycle capability, and possesses a substantial and progressively advanced ballistic missile program that could potentially serve as a means for delivering nuclear weapons. With this status, Iran has become one of the biggest sources of concern for future horizontal expansion. Iran crossing the nuclear threshold and becoming a nuclear power would have direct and indirect effects on Türkiye's interests. Türkiye could potentially find itself entangled in a regional nuclear arms race, with Saudi Arabia and Israel emerging as the primary contenders in this scenario. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran could pose a threat to Türkiye's interests across multiple security domains, particularly in the Middle East, as Iran may seek to prioritize its own interests at the expense of Türkiye's. A nuclear Iran could adopt a more aggressive and interventionist policy in the region, increasing regional instability. Unless Türkiye finds itself militarily and strategically isolated in the face of a nuclear Iran, the most profitable option for Ankara to maximize its interests would be to rapidly and aggressively develop its conventional military capacity (outlined above) and its civilian nuclear energy program. If Western states do not provide Türkiye with security guarantees against a nuclear Iran, Ankara's calculations will become more complex and uncertain.

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“Tanıtım nüshasıdır, para ile satılamaz.”

“Bandrol Uygulamasına İlişkin Usul ve Esaslar Hakkında Yönetmeliğin 5’inci maddesinin 2’nci fıkrası çerçevesinde bandrol taşıması zorunlu değildir.”

## About İRAM

Due to its historical depth and material power, Iran is among the countries that have to be reckoned with in the domain of international relations. The deep-rooted historical relations between Iran and Türkiye, border-sharing and comprehensive business relations make it necessary for Türkiye to understand Iran in a multitude of ways. Based on this necessity, the Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara (İran Arařtırmaları Merkezi, İRAM) was established as an independent think tank in Ankara with the purpose of informing the Turkish public and interested parties about Iran. With this in mind, not only does İRAM produce field research, reports, and analyses based on primary resources, it also provides language courses, internships/scholarship programs, support for projects and graduate theses, workshops, and expert seminars in order to meet the need for experts and researchers on Iran in various disciplines in Türkiye. Offering a platform where academicians can share their research on Iran, İRAM also provides digital and printed publications on a wide variety of topics ranging from economy to domestic politics, international policy to security, and Shi'ism to society and culture.



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