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QI Panel:

What if Iran Gets the Bomb?

September 5, 2024

12:00-1:00 PM ET

Steven Simon 3:32

Oh, hello. This is Steven Simon, a fellow at Quincy Institute, and I'll be moderating a panel today addressing the question, What if Iran gets the bomb? We have very distinguished panel to address different aspects of this question, Barbara Slavin, Ellen Laipson, Steven Miller and Gary Samore, all of them have devoted their careers, really, to the issues that relate to our central question, either within government or outside of government, and from different disciplinary perspectives, whether from a technical non-proliferation perspective, regional security perspective, or broader perspective of the formation of US policy towards the Middle East, and their long experience gives them a deep perspective on the subject at hand. So we're very eager, of course, to hear from them.

We're having this panel today because of two converging trends. The one is Iran's rapid progress towards the fabrication of a weapon. Should it choose to do? So in the absence of the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal that had regulated Iran's programmatic activities in that sphere, for several years, the Iranians have stockpiled an oppressive amount of nearly weapons grade uranium fissile material, and are assessed to be within, I don't know, days, weeks, a month, of creating a weapon, if, again, if that is what they choose to do. The other you know, new condition, really is the fact that Iran and Israel have attacked each other's territory for the first time directly, not through an angel, not a Seraph, not a and not a messenger to borrow from the Bible, but rather directly, they've done it themselves. No proxies involved. So we're looking at, you know, a fairly volatile situation between these two countries, one of whom is developing a nuclear weapon, or so it some people think, and others and another country that has a large nuclear weapon stockpile already. So we're on very, very shaky ground here. I'm going to ask our panelists in in alphabetical order, to begin the discussion by laying out their thinking on this, on this topic, taking a few minutes to do so, and I'd only ask them, of course, you know, you all have the right ex officio as as panelists to fight the question, but it'd be best if you kept you know, the battle against the question for Perhaps later on in the in the discussion. Anyway, let's start with Ellen Laipson, and then go to Steve Miller, Gary Samore, and then Barbara Slavin. Thank you.

Ellen Laipson 7:11

Thanks so much, Steve. You anticipated my very first comment, which was a little bit to remind us that the question before us is not the most likely scenario, possibly. I mean, we can still hope that it is not inevitable, but we are certainly in a different era than we were during the JCPOA. And Iran is now without dispute, a threshold nuclear power or a latent nuclear power, if you will.

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People are still debating whether Iran's intends to go all the way to the finish line, or whether they have a strategic concept that would keep them shy of weaponization, but for purposes of today's conversation, we're going to assume that they've crossed the threshold correct so I would start with sitting in a in a Western country that has cared deeply about this problem set, I think them crossing the threshold would be seen as a catastrophic setback for a variety of interests and parties. Bad for regional stability, since some of Iran's neighbors have long feared Iran being a nuclear power bad for the Non Proliferation regime, bad for Western diplomacy, bad for Israel and bad for the concept of deterrence. So I think there will be professionals in the field who will be pretty close to, you know, hysterical. If this were to happen, this would be seen as a failure of such, so many years of efforts to prevent this, this event. But then we have to pivot to, you know, what would actually on the ground realistically be the day after? And we should not assume that, you know, Iran would use that weapon aggressively in the short run, does it make a true nuclear weapons exchange highly likely in the region? Probably not.

So Iran is therefore trying to maybe reassure the international community that it is a deterrent. It's a weapon of last resort. It has some characteristics to it that is not a conventional different than any kind of conventional or even asymmetric military capabilities. But I think we do want to ask ourselves immediately, what would be the impact on Iran's regional behavior? Would Iran, a more confident Iran, take more risks in the region? Would it feel that its capacity to either with its partners and proxies or all by itself, assert a greater kind of leverage and make demands of the countries in the region, or in other ways demonstrate that it considers. Itself a hegemonic power in the region, that it has kind of primacy over its smaller neighbors. But here I'd like to also just suggest that none of us on this panel can say for sure what the reaction inside Iran would be, both prior to this event of crossing the threshold and immediately after. And I was thinking of India, when India crossed the nuclear threshold, you know that they had ginned up enormous public enthusiasm. You know we will eat grass. You know, we will make sacrifices of ourselves in order to achieve this goal that makes us an important country. I don't feel like Iranian society is has that state of mind? And I think Iran's leaders perhaps, know that. You know, Iranian society may be questioning, is this worth the price, and what is the cost that we will bear for more isolation, for more economic constraints on us? So that balance between, is Iran going to be more confident regionally, but have to manage the consequences and the secondary effects at home. And I guess the last point I would make is to raise this concept in international relations of the stability instability paradox, when countries cross the nuclear threshold in theory, that means they are somewhat constrained in full scale conventional war because of the fear of escalation, at least responsible countries that don't want to use their nuclear weapons in a real sense. But I think the theory suggests, and work has been done in South Asia and other regions of the world, that when you cross that nuclear threshold, it makes small conflicts more likely. And I would simply end with the point isn't that the world we already live in, that Iran behaves regionally in it does tit for tat. It does it. It goes up to the red line and steps back. It demonstrates some kind of discipline in, you know, punishing retaliating against the Israelis or others that cause it harm. But it seems to always, and certainly with this new president, are they are signaling strongly that they know how to restrain themselves, that they are not going full bore for a conventional war that could move into something even more dangerous for the region. So I think I'll stop there. Thanks.

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Steven Simon 12:27

Thanks, Ellen, Steve?

Steven Miller 12:33

Thanks Steve, hello everybody. A hard and interesting question to think about, and as Ellen points out, the fact that we're forced to contemplate this question represents, in a sense, of failure to keep Iran further from from a nuclear weapon. I'd say the first point is that the implications will depend in part on how it happens. And in particular, I have in mind the fact that there will be a transitional period. There's a big gap between possessing a nuclear weapon and deploying an operational nuclear capability. And in that period, there will be substantial vulnerabilities on Iran's part and on the part of the United States and Israel, there will be the temptation of preventive action. So I see, you know, a period of worrisome, uh, possibilities in that transitional phase, assuming Iran succeeds in actually, uh, deploying a modest nuclear capability, it will join a very small universe of cases that constitute hostile, successful proliferation. And it's hard to make great generalities, because the number of cases is few. The most important cases being China in the 60s and North Korea 20 years ago, 15 years ago. But the the basic pattern in both of those cases, strikingly identical, if you look at the rhetoric and the posturing vis a vis both China and North Korea, is we resist it, we oppose it. We do everything we can to prevent it. We gnash our teeth about it, we issue stern warnings. We insist that it's intolerable, and then when it happens, we live with it. That's what happened in the North Korean case, North Korea detonated a nuclear device on October 9, 2006 for nearly two decades, we have lived with a nuclear armed North Korea. We're not happy about it, but that's the reality, if, if this happens in the Iran case, we then end up with two, I think, two deterrent, nuclear deterrent relationships to manage. One is the very asymmetric nuclear relationship between the United States and whatever modest nuclear capabilities Iran is able to deploy, and then the regional nuclear. Balance, which at least initially, will be Israel, Iran, but down the road might involve other nuclear armed actors. So that would be one implication.

I also think that speaking as a Non Proliferation wonk, there's been this ever present worry, which mostly hasn't come true, about proliferation cascades in the case of Israeli nuclear weapons, however, we've seen Iraq, Syria and Iran all in a slow motion way over a very long period of time, turning into potential nuclear antagonists of Israel. And we know in the Saudi case, there's declarations from Saudi elites that they will match whatever Iran does. It's imaginable that proud and ambitious countries like Egypt and Turkey, who already have some civil nuclear aspirations, might at least have a nuclear weapons debate. So that would be another potential regional implication that might unfold over the longer term, although it's it's worth pointing out that between the date that J Robert Oppenheimer took over the Manhattan Project and the date of the first nuclear test in Alamogordo, it was less than two full years. So the nuclear timeline isn't necessarily as long as we assume. I think that there are two other quick points that I just put on the table. One is with respect to diplomacy. And again, this is something we saw very much in the North Korean case. You know, we have been focused for

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decades, in a very insistent fashion on the question of prevention and diplomacy will have to convert to an emphasis on restraint and rollback. There's no evidence in the North Korean case that those are easier or feasible objectives, but the whole nature of our diplomacy with respect to arms control and so on, will be altered. And finally, I think one of the big questions is the one that Ellen has already highlighted, which is the so called emboldenment question, Will nuclear acquisition embolden Iran to be more aggressive, more assertive in the pursuit of its interest than what then is already the case. Since they already seem pretty, pretty ambitious. The academic literature is actually mixed on that question, but this is one of the worries that I think will haunt us if, if Iran actually crosses the line. So that's my five minutes. Steve.

Steven Simon 17:39

Thanks very much, Steve. Gary?

Gary Samore 17:50

Steve, thank you very much for bringing together a terrific panel to talk about a very difficult question, which I hope we don't face. But I think there are two important issues. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, first, how does that affect the likelihood of war between Israel and Iran, including nuclear war? And second, how does that affect the further spread of nuclear weapons in the region to other countries? With respect to the first question, war between Israel and Iran, if they both have nuclear weapons, it's very difficult to calculate. As Steve Miller said, we have very few cases, fortunately. But it is true, historically, there's never been a nuclear war, or even a major conventional conflict between nuclear armed adversaries. The only use of nuclear weapons in war has been by a nuclear power the United States against a country that didn't have nuclear weapons, Japan. And the reason for that lack of nuclear conflict, I think, has a lot to do with nuclear deterrence leaders recognize the consequences of use of nuclear weapons could lead to devastation or even mutual annihilation. So nuclear weapons does impose constraint, caution to some degree stability, but that doesn't mean that the risk of nuclear war is completely eliminated, and we can look at the classic Cuban Missile Crisis. Is a good case where there could have been an escalation to nuclear use. The India, Pakistan, example, there have been a series of skirmishes where both sides of managed but there were times when it looked like it might escalate to a major conventional conflict, and that could lead to nuclear conflict.

So would nuclear stability apply in the Middle East? Well, I would say probably yes, that neither Israeli nor Iranian leaders would want to would. Choose to go to war if it meant a high risk of destroying their own countries. But at the same time, I think there's an argument that the Middle East may be an exception to the rule, and Israel and Iran may be exception to the other nuclear armed dyads in history. First of all, the level of hostility, fear, suspicion is extremely high. I mean, even in the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US and the Soviet Union had diplomatic relations. There was a back channel that allowed Kennedy and Khrushchev to come up with a diplomatic solution to resolve the question, there's really nothing like that between Israel and Iran, and so I think the risk of miscalculation and escalation is is higher. The other important factor that Steve

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Miller mentioned is that, at least for the time being, Iran is going to have a relatively small and vulnerable nuclear force, and the Israelis, in contrast, have a very sophisticated capability for preemption, not just nuclear, but also conventional, and we know that they have extremely good intelligence on Iran's capabilities. So the risk of a Israeli decision to launch a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear program, or the risk that Iran will feel they need to use nuclear weapons early in a conflict rather than lose them, I think that's a reasonable risk. I mean a reasonable concern, and even if it's only 1% the consequences of what that would mean for the two countries and for the region and for the world are extremely high, and something we would, I think, want to avoid.

On the second question of further proliferation in the region, I don't think there's an immediate risk, because the other countries in the region, whether it's Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, they really lack the infrastructure and personnel and scientific capability to quickly produce nuclear weapons unless they got massive external assistance. But over the long term, I think there will be additional pressure on those countries to pursue nuclear weapons, and I think especially because an Israeli response to Iran having nuclear weapons is to change its nuclear doctrine, which is currently ambiguous. The Israelis don't confirm or deny even though we all know they have nuclear weapons. But in response to Iran having nuclear weapons, the Israelis may feel the need to be overt about their capabilities and their willingness to retaliate. If Iran threatens their existence, that'll put more pressure on the other countries in the region, in addition to the pressure that Iran having nuclear weapons would create. So I think in the longer term, it's likely to increase the risk of further spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. And I, for me, the idea of there being a handful of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, a country you know that is not known for stability, peace and good relations among neighbors. To me, that's just a nightmare waiting to happen.

Steven Simon 23:25

Hey, not gonna sleep tonight. Barbara?

Barbara Slavin 23:32

Well, last and least, I feel like I'm in a room with a virtual room with many of my former sources. I questions. Maybe I'll play devil's advocate a little bit, since everyone has said this will be a total and complete catastrophe if Iran finally crosses the line. You know, we have seen certainly in recent years, but especially since October the seventh of last year, a series of attacks by Israel on Iranians and Iranian guests, most recently Ismail Hania attending the inauguration of the new president in Tehran and Israel has been able to act with impunity against Iran even the barrage of missiles and drones that Iran sent in April to Israel after seven of its military officers were killed in Damascus that did not establish the deterrence that Iran hoped it would. So it's possible that if Iran were actually able to show that it had succeeded in producing a nuclear weapon that this might actually give it some deterrence. You know, the notion that the Israelis or the Americans are go, are going to go and attack this program, I mean that the time for that is long past. As, as all of you know, even better than me, the. Are too many facilities, too dispersed.

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The IAEA has not been able to monitor the program in recent years very well, the likelihood that Iran has centrifuges swirled away somewhere very, very high. So you know, given that preemption, military preemption, is no longer an option, it's possible that this could actually introduce some some stability the Israelis, who, after all, have their hands full still in Gaza after 11 months, have not achieved the victory that they have declared as their aim over Hamas, might actually be deterred from from further such attacks on Iran and Iranians. I think that if this happens, you know, I'm looking at a bunch of former diplomats, it's time for major diplomatic efforts to begin to finally resolve some of the root causes of instability in the region. Iran, as we know, has been a major provocateur, but it is, it is fishing in troubled waters so many disputes that have not been resolved, particularly, of course, the Israeli Palestinian conflict. And this is another reason why we have to get these small wars under control as soon as possible. There has been a lot of talk about Confidence Building Measures and so on, having some sort of regional dialog about nuclear power. All of this, I think, is very important, and would be even more important in the context of Iran actually having a small nuclear arsenal, I don't think that it will.

I was looking back at what I wrote 15 years ago in my book. A guy named Patrick Lang, who used to be a top Defense Intelligence Agency guy, said that that if Iran had nuclear weapons that would give them more geopolitical oomph in the region, but I think they've shown they have plenty of geopolitical oomph as it is, I'm not sure that having nukes would really make a difference there. What they have is a potent ideology that has found favor with a large group of Arab Shia primarily, but also Sunnis in Palestine and having nukes, I don't think is going to appreciably change that. The power is there, the influence is there, because the grievances are there. So if it happens, we work as hard as we can to find some way to restrain the program. Can it be rolled back? Well after the experience of the JCPOA, the Iranians are understandably suspicious that any sanctions relief that got promised could be taken away. I think we have to. We have to also address the root cause of our problems with Iran, and Iran, with US and Iran with Israel. I mean, these are the issues that have to be resolved, and then what kind of weapons one possesses will be somewhat less significant. So maybe I'll stop there. It's a bit of a mishmash, but I hope we'll clarify a little bit more in the Q and A

Steven Simon 28:22

Thanks very much, Barbara. I've got a few questions I'd like to address to you all, based on on your remarks thus far, and particularly the first one is particularly for Ellen and and Steve Miller. And it's going back to this, what, what we used to call socialization problem. That is to say, when a country, after many, many years of trying and going through a much travail, tears and flap doodle, you know, to finally get a nuclear weapon, they think it's got to be worth something surely, you know, we can parlay this result of a long struggle into some geopolitical gain, tangible geopolitical gain. And it's during this period that is the period between that mindset and the mindset that sinks in after a while to the effect that you know something, this bond is worthless. It's just we can't, we can't really do anything with it. In that intervening period, there is a danger that Iran, in this hypothetical case, would take risks that could entail escalation. So I wanted to ask our panelists to probe a little more deeply. And I think was it, I think Steve, both

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Steve and Gary mentioned the Pakistani case, and I think that. Very relevant here, because if you look back, I was still in government in 2002 and when, well, in that first stint anyway, and what I recall is the US government sending out high level envoys to Pakistan and India to Pakistan, telling them not to launch a nuclear weapon against India, which we knew they were planning to do, and and to tell the Indians that this is what the Pakistanis were doing, and and they better shape up. And it was, it was a very fraught it was a very fraught moment, and the United States sent down its its only diplomat who could bench press 400 pounds to to Islamabad to to deal with this issue. But these but, but the Pakistanis anyway, they were in this in between period. You know, and I really thought that that their nuclear weapon could could do them a lot of good anyway. If you could help me out there, that'd be great start with Ellen

Ellen Laipson 31:12

Sure, thanks Steve. No, it's a really interesting period. In fact, just pick up on what Steve had also said, that there are moments of greater uncertainty as a country transitions before you know whether they're going to be the phrase we use with Pakistan was a responsible steward of their nuclear weapons. So, you know, certainly in the case of Iran, we don't have the same history that we had with India and Pakistan. So you the starting point is that this is a hostile act. This is, this is a development that is, that is frightening in a way, and it takes a long time before you think the country is demonstrating that it's a responsible stakeholder. When you and I were in the Clinton White House, I remember it was Hazel O'Leary, the Secretary of Energy, who, you know, cajoled the bureaucracy to say, I know we strongly disapprove of India being a nuclear power, but can we at least talk to them about nuclear safety? Can we at least start a conversation on, you know, low end, you know, realities that could affect us? So we're not approving, we're not welcoming them into the nuclear Non Proliferation regime as a nuclear weapon state. We are. They're still in the penalty box. But are there other things that we can work on together? You know, when musavian was out on the hustings telling us that Iran wants to be like Japan. It wants to be a latent nuclear power. It doesn't really want to weaponize you know, we had to say, actually, we sort of trust Japan, but we don't trust you, you know, and at what point so again, compare India and Pakistan. In one country. There's a level of sort of political engagement that, at least within our government. There are some who would argue, can we please, you know, start to treat India, normalize their status normal, at least get them into the nuclear suppliers group, etc. In the case of Pakistan, there's always that uncertainty of because of the larger politics of the relationship. So so I think that Iran would have to accept the reality that it is not going to be embraced as a responsible steward for a good number of years.

Steven Simon 33:25

Thank you, Steve, well, Steve?

Steven Samore 33:28

You've identified what I think of as as in an inevitability, which is in the beginning, Iran will be basically a nuclear neophyte, presiding over a small, vulnerable nuclear force, and the

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traditional remedy for such vulnerabilities as secrecy, this is what the Chinese have done, ambiguity about what you have, and lack of transparency about where it is. But if you're Iran, you have to feel that that your adversaries have historically shown remarkable ability to penetrate your system, and so secrecy may not be a reliable option. This is precisely the what raises the kind of use them and lose them pressures that Gary alluded to so that may be a nerve wracking phase. And then what you have is what you see in the in the Pakistani case, which is a parallel process of nuclear learning on the management side and evolution of the force posture on the stability side. And eventually you end up with a a more robust capability presided over by people who have a more mature system for for nuclear stewardship, and surviving that interval is precisely one of one of the issues, I actually think that the allusion to the significant efforts that were made. To share best practices with respect to safety and security of nuclear weapons, reliable command and control, prevention of unauthorized use and so on. Those are very valuable lessons, and we did that even in cases where we were uneasy about the parties with whom we were sharing simply because we were worried exactly about these kind of, these kinds of sources of instability.

Steven Simon 35:28

That's cheery. Um, yeah, okay, so let's, I just want to one more follow on to drill down on this, on this particular aspect, and it's and the questions for Barbara and Gary, you seem to disagree on the potential for an Israeli disarming strike against Iran, just as a as a possible response to the acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability by by Iran, Barbara, you, you seem pretty skeptical about that, I think, mostly because you said that the program is dispersed and, you know, there's almost inevitably bits of it that people don't really Know About and can't target. So you know it wouldn't happen. Gary seemed less sanguine on that score, but I was wondering if, if you each would drill down, starting with with you Barbara.

Barbara Slavin 36:33

Yeah, sure. Let me quote Gary Samore in his book from 2007, "the longer the United States waited, the less useful airstrikes would be, the likelier that Iran had hidden facilities to enrich uranium and build weapons". I mean, that was in 2007 we had an event at the Stimson Center with the former head of Central Command in June, and he said, the one thing that would push Iran across the line and make it develop nuclear weapons would be an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. I just think, you know, I think that that opportunity, whatever you want to call it, it's, it's just, it's too late and and, you know, we have to accept that if Iran finally makes the decision to cross the line, it will cross line, and military action could only be a further incentive to that. The only look, the you know, diplomacy is the only thing that has ever slowed, rolled back the Iranian program, and I still think that is our best shot at restraining the program that Iran now has.

Steven Simon 37:42

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Yeah, when I, you know, I hear you and I and I don't know what to what to think myself. I mean, I'm kind of whipsawed between you and Steve Miller here, where you know Steve is, is emphasizing the small size of that initial inventory, and which suggests to me that, and I think this is what Steve is implying, makes it more inviting as a target for a strike to disarm the Iranians. But let's Gary, are you still where you were in 2007?

Gary Samore 38:18

Well, that was with respect to a military attack to destroy the nuclear program, the infrastructure. Once Iran has nuclear weapons, the issue will be a preemptive attack to destroy its nuclear forces. And in the beginning, if they have a small number of forces, and the Israelis know where those forces are, especially when they're mobilized, it will put a lot of pressure on the Israelis to try to knock them out before they can be used, even using conventional precision guided weapons. So let's think about this scenario. There's a war in southern Lebanon. Israel is pressing to destroy Hezbollah. Iran has said that it will defend its ally with all of its resources, including its nuclear weapons. As the war gets worse and Hezbollah begins to suffer losses, the Iranians mobilize their nuclear forces. Let's say they have five nuclear weapons located on missiles, and they roll them out, disperse them so that they're not vulnerable the Israelis, if they have the knowledge, there will be, I'm not saying it's a high probability, but it's a scenario that's plausible that they would try to knock out those nuclear weapons before they could be used, and the Iranians, knowing of that risk, might feel they need to use them early on rather than suffer the loss of their nuclear deterrent. So this goes into the transition period where there's a much greater risk of crisis. And stability. And I think that period could be some, you know, matter of years. I mean, eventually, Iran, that's the logic of nuclear deterrence, they'll build a much larger nuclear force with much more diverse and more accurate delivery systems, so that they won't be vulnerable to a preemptive first strike, and that will create more stability, but at least in the initial period, I think that's where the risk of escalation to nuclear use is the greatest. Again, I'm not saying it's more likely than not. I'm just saying there's enough of a risk and the Middle East is different enough from other cases so that we should be more worried India, Pakistan is a perfect example. The US relationship with India and Pakistan was never as hostile and suspicious mutually as it is with Iran or North Korea. And that's not going to change in the near future, not as long as Iran has the current government. It does so the ability of the US to step in to mediate and diffuse tension or to advise the Iranians on best safety practices. I mean, that's not a very plausible scenario for the foreseeable future.

Barbara Slavin 41:15

And can I just say I do not anticipate Iran ever using nuclear weapons to protect Hezbollah. I'm sorry.

Gary Samore 41:23

No, it doesn't have to be they intend to use them. It can be that they're threatening to use them in order to defend Hezbollah, to say to Israel, stop attacking, or we will intervene in the conflict.

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Barbara Slavin 41:35

Iran will will fight to the last Arab but it will not, I just, I find that really, really implausible. I think they would, they would, if they get them, they would be extremely careful about about how they might be used anyway, not for Hezbollah.

Steven Simon 41:53

This is not a question we're going to resolve right now, but I think we've, we've opened it up, you know, pretty, pretty deftly, thanks to, thanks to your interventions, we'll all be thinking about this. There were, there were two other issues that that I wanted to raise. And if you all want to raise issues, I think you should, you should jump in and ask other panelists what, what you want to hear from them, but the two, the two issues, are basically these. One of them has to do with the proposed U.S.- Saudi defense treaty and the nuclear dimension of that treaty, particularly the nuclear dimension of that treaty. And this relates to talk of the rest of the proliferation cascade problem, which may or may not exist, but I mean, I personally quite concerned about the nuclear dimension to the Saudi deal as I understand it, and and I haven't seen all the details, and all the details, I'm almost certain are not worked out, you know, completely. So maybe there's, there's nothing really to know right now, but I wanted to talk about that, and then, and then, I wanted to follow up on Barbara's remarks about the need for a diplomatic process. Should Iran obtain a weapon? So there's some, you know, international, regional regulatory mechanism that that reduces the risk of of nuclear use, especially during this dangerous interim period, and perhaps shortens the the duration of this, of this volatile period between acquisition and in and maturity, to borrow Steve's phrase, but let's, let's, let's turn to the US Saudi deal first, and I'm going to start with Gary on that, and then move to other folks around the table.

Gary Samore 44:12

So you know, if Iran gets nuclear weapons, it will increase pressure on other countries in the region to pursue nuclear weapons, like Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the US won't be passive in trying to prevent that, especially because none of those countries have the ability to produce nuclear weapons quickly. And one of the best tools the US would have in order to try to constrain pressure on those countries to pursue nuclear weapons is security guarantees and including the presence of US forces, alliances and so forth. And that's been very effective in Europe and East Asia in terms of relieving pressure on US allies to pursue their own nuclear forces. We would try to do the same thing in the Middle East with countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. I don't know how effective it will be. I mean, again, I think the the qualitative nature of the alliances the US has in the Middle East are nowhere near as strong and effective as they are in Europe and East Asia, because basically those countries don't like us and don't trust us, and the feeling is mutual. So I'm don't know how effective that would be as a tool, but I think it's something the US would certainly try to do in order to reduce pressure, and they in the case of Saudi Arabia, the defense alliance, and the presence of US forces in Saudi Arabia that would be intended to reduce pressure on Saudi I don't understand the nuclear dimension of the deal that's being discussed, because I think the idea of the US building a civilian enrichment

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plant in Saudi Arabia is crazy. I mean, it's something we've never done before. I think it would create a precedent that would be very difficult for us to refuse to other countries, and it's basically giving the Saudis the infrastructure they could eventually use, not in the near term, but in years they could eventually use for their own nuclear weapons. And since I'm not that confident in US ability to relieve pressure for proliferation in the region, I think it would be a mistake to provide any country in the region with fuel cycle capabilities that could be used to produce nuclear weapons materials done so.

Ellen Laipson 46:45

Steve, can I jump in on this? Yes, please. So first of all, let's assume that the US Saudi deal is still a triangular concept, where the trade offs vis a vis Israel, Israel, Saudi us, Israel, et cetera. So I think it's still looking kind of far fetched right now. I mean, under in what universe would the Saudis be satisfied in? You know, would feel that the criteria for normalizing relations with Israel have been met as a condition for whatever, you know, bilateral things, they may work out with Washington, but I think we want to, I think the Saudis believe they can manage Iran on their own. I think that I don't think that we should assume that what the Saudis are looking for is necessarily protection, only against Iran as a hostile actor. But I think we might be missing that the Saudis and I thank Emil. Hi. I'm at double I double S for writing about this, that the Saudis ambition is a global ambition. They want to be recognized as a as a g20 country. They want to look like Korea, they in terms of how they play on the global stage. So I think we are putting on, you know, we if we use just the regional dynamics of, you know, who wants to who's blocking whom, and how are they measuring their strategic objectives? We may be under misunderstanding what the Saudis have at stake here. It is also strange to me, and one thing we haven't talked about is whether any of the aspirants for nuclear weapons in the region, and I don't think we should be complacent about the spillover from Iran to other countries. I think that would be happening fairly, you know, early, if it's not already happening, at least in the preparatory stages outside actors. You know, we always, we used to talk about whether Saudi Arabia already had an tacit arrangement with Pakistan to be part of their nuclear umbrella, not just the US nuclear umbrella. So, you know, I just think we have to widen the aperture a little bit of who might be some of the other actors that have leverage, or that the regional players in the Middle East could be turning to. I don't think the US is going to be able to control this process. It's going to be multi, you know, vector in any in all respects.

Steven Simon 49:06

Yeah, that's those are wise words about opening the aperture to other countries, particularly Pakistan or China, or where there has been, you know, a Saudi link in prior years in terms of missiles, which could be delivery systems. But even if I accept which I do, your broad definition of Saudi objectives or ambitions, and how a security treaty with the United States might somehow give them the boost or the oomph to vault themselves into the ethereal realm of great powers. Where does the nuclear peace? Fit into this, and why would the US be offering it, given the tangible risk, proliferation risk to doing so?

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Ellen Laipson 50:20

I don't think that we're offering it, I think the Saudis are asking for it, and I think we are deeply conflicted about it. My sense is that the Saudis looked at the Emiratis agreeing to the 123 agreement that, you know, has all kinds of Non Proliferation components to it, and the Saudis said, we can get a better deal, you know, and they think they have a lot of leverage. And there is, you know, people are intrigued that there's somehow a, you know, a three part arrangement. But again, because of Israel's Gaza war, you know, I think that some of those things cannot be achieved in the short to medium term, and will take longer to work out. But I it was not my impression that we were happily offering the enrichment cycle to the Saudis, but it is their demand. It's they want to be shown that it's a status thing for them in the region, and I think they are also envisioning a post petroleum economy that may require, you know, major changes in their in their energy infrastructure.

Steven Simon 51:28

That that raises the question of the kinds of conditions that the Saudis have have posed to the United States, you know, over this nuclear deal, which, which tends to minimize oversight of the sort that, in a way, that suggests that that this is a capacity building program for more than just domestic power consumption.

Gary Samore 51:50

So I agree with Ellen. I think the Saudis asked for the enrichment facility because that's what Iran has. I mean, that's what has given Iran a nuclear weapons option is the construction of an enrichment plant under the guise of a civilian nuclear energy program the US, as I understand it, instead of accepting the Saudi enrichment demand, we offer them a conversion facility instead, which is A facility for taking natural uranium and converting it into a form of uranium that can be used for fuel, but not actually an enrichment facility. I don't know where that stands now in terms of what has actually been agreed, but in any event, as Ellen says, it's all moot. I mean, the Gaza war has put off for, I think, a long time any triangular deal, at least as long as the Israeli government continues to refuse to accept any framework for a political settlement in terms of a two state solution

Steven Simon 52:53

But the US stance on this score itself has been has been divided. On the one hand, there's talk about this being only a triangular relationship, and that's the only way in which the Saudi peace is is being conceived. On the other hand, administration officials have said, No, this is a US Saudi deal, which the Israelis are welcome to join in the fullness of time. I mean, whenever, whenever things come down in Gaza, and things look, you know, like, like they could be expanded beyond the US Saudi deal, so that there's confusion here, and I think it reflects confusion within the administration. So I wouldn't, I wouldn't rely on a triangular point as one that makes, you know, makes a deal inconceivable. You know, in the short to medium term, the

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Saudis certainly want it. And I think the Biden administration is, I don't know what a Trump or a Harris administration would want to do, but the Biden administration is not motivated to do it. Steve, do you want to just chip in on this? Briefly, you're you're muted.

Steven Miller 54:12

The United States can control its own behavior, and we've stood on a position for a very long time of certainly articulated explicitly by President Bush after 911 that our preference is no additional fissile material production states. So we can hew to that posture. And we may or may not be have the discipline to do that, but that's the second instrument. Gary said, we have an instrument which is security guarantees. We have a second instrument which is our own Non Proliferation policies with respect to enrichment. I think one of the fears has to be other suppliers. And you know, for much of the history of the NPT regime, it has rested on the over. Lapping interest between Moscow and Washington, even in the darkest days of the Cold War, we managed to collaborate on Non Proliferation simply because we both shared the same interest in preventing it. It's not at all clear that we have a harmonious situation with Russia on any questions, including this one, as Russia tries to rebuild its connections with the world, find ways of earning hard currency, overcoming sanctions and so on and so forth. And you know, so even if the United States is disciplined in sticking to its own nonproliferation policy, Saudi Arabia could have at least one alternative option. The Chinese also are not necessarily fully committed to what we loosely call the liberal international order and and are quite keen on expanding their market share in global nuclear commerce, and they've been showing a growing interest, obviously, in the Middle East, and have their own high national interest in the oil bearing regions of the Gulf and so on. So there are at least two possibilities for the Saudis. And of course, that gives them potential leverage against us. And they can come to Washington and say, well, we'd prefer to buy American but if you're, if you're not going to play ball with us, you know, you know, we have a plane warmed up ready to go to Moscow. And so to me, in the medium term, that's kind of the dynamic that we have to, we have to worry about. And you know, whatever estates intentions at any given moment, if it possesses a if it possesses an enrichment plant, it has the option of developing a weapons program, because that's the great choke point.

Steven Simon 56:47

Okay, so we are now out of, are we out of time? Well, we've, we've got three minutes. So going back to you, Barbara, could you? Could you take those three minutes just to lay out a conception for a diplomatic response to Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons? If I don't know that, you'll need all three minutes, but you feel take them.

Barbara Slavin 57:14

Yeah, I'm the one journalist, and I'm looking at a, you know, a group of diplomats, and you're asking me to do this. Look, we have some some positive indications now coming from the new government in Iran. First of all, from Pezeshkian, that who has reassembled the team that negotiated the JCPOA. You know that they want to talk about not crossing the line. I think that,

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given our history of arms control talks and so on, that we would be very capable of mounting a multilateral process. It might not necessarily include the Russians. It hopefully would include the Chinese. And we have to also, you know, when there are problems over nuclear issues. There are also problems over other issues. In the United States and Iran we're long past the point where we need to finally recognize each other, restore normal relations, and begin to talk about a whole range of issues. We are at a very low point now, certainly in the Middle East, the worst that any of us have ever seen. And I think it's incumbent on those who are serving in government, who will come in in the next administration, to take this nightmare and turn it into a realistic diplomatic process, to begin to deal with root causes. The Iranians need to accept Israel's right to exist. Israel needs to provide for Palestinian dignity, sovereignty. These are the root causes the nukes are, you know, they're very worrisome, but, but it's, it's the root causes of the conventional conflict and animosity that worries me the most, and I think that's where our focus should be. If Iran gets nukes, will work on arms control, as we always do, we will have people who will be dedicated to that and who will be hopefully effective. But let's see if we can do something prior to that that might give Iran reason not to cross the line. How's that?

Steven Simon 59:17

I think that'd be great. And it's, and it's, it's, really well worth thinking about, but carefully and systematically and perhaps we'll start with another panel. We need to start somewhere. I'd like to thank all our panelists for just fantastically interesting interventions in this discussion and for really getting into the spirit of the hypothetical, and I just a round of applause from our invisible viewers. Thanks everybody