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Marlene Da Cruz
Seton Hall University

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Why Do States Acquire Nuclear Weapons? A Theoretical Framework in Assessing Nuclear Proliferation in Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia

Marlene Da Cruz

Marlene Da Cruz is a senior at Seton Hall University with plans to graduate with a B.A. in Political Science in May 2020. After graduation she plans on attending law school. The objective of her senior thesis was to analyze and explain nuclear proliferation in some Middle Eastern countries.

Over the past few decades, nuclear weapons have been regarded as an intolerable threat to international security and humanity. A nuclear weapons attack has the ability to destroy entire cities and kill billions of people, while also harming future generations and jeopardizing the natural environment through its long-term catastrophic effects (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs). The spread of nuclear weapons and the risk of a nuclear attack has alarmed the international community. As a result, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was established in 1968 to curtail the spread of nuclear weapons by promoting cooperation amongst international state actors. Despite the establishment of the NPT, the last decade has seen the addition of three new, publicly acknowledged nuclear states, namely, India, Pakistan and North Korea (Kreiger 369). Iran has also publicly expressed high ambitions to create nuclear power. However, there are states who have refrained from weaponizing their nuclear energy such as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Palestine. The question then becomes: why do some states choose to pursue nuclear weapons and others do not?

In this paper, there will be an emphasis on why some nations in the Middle East weaponize their nuclear energy and why others decide not to. Theories regarding nuclear proliferation act as a tool to help understand the

motivations behind a state's decision to acquire nuclear weapons. A state's commitment to proliferation should be seen less as a singular decision and more as a process that may be influenced by national security reasons, domestic political interests, and national prestige. The comparative methodological approach will be employed to understand the significance of nuclear proliferation in Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The case studies will begin with a brief history of each state's nuclear weapons program and will assess the motivations for pursuing and maintaining nuclear weapons. More importantly, the case studies will focus on how the United States' presence and interests in the Middle East caused some Middle Eastern nations to obtain nuclear weapons. Ultimately, the international relations theories of Liberalism and Constructivism will be rejected as the determining factors of nuclear proliferation. This paper will argue that Realism and United States' interests and alliances are the two determining factors to explain the acquisition of nuclear weapons by some countries in the Middle East.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the creation of the first nuclear bomb by the United States in the 1940s, strategists and analysts have sought to explain why some countries choose to militarize their nuclear power and why others choose to refrain. The

conventional view of proliferation is that a country, at some point, makes an explicit decision to seek nuclear weapons. Next, the country launches a secret program and finally achieves nuclear status by testing a device on a particular date. In reality, the path to nuclear weapons capability requires many important and complex choices along the way (Davidson 20). The complexity of nuclear proliferation cannot be summarized in one simple international theory or model. Instead, existing literature revolves around the three fundamental international relations schools of thought with a primary focus on the perspective of nuclear weapons. Each theory and framework helps to provide an explanation of the causes and motivations of some Middle Eastern nations desire to become nuclear power states.

The traditionally dominant theory regarding the motivations for states to pursue nuclear weapons revolves around the security model or the international theory of Realism. Scott Sagan, in his article *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three models in search of a bomb*, outlines three theoretical frameworks to help examine why states decide to build or refrain from developing nuclear weapons. The first theoretical framework is called the Security Model. This model has been the most supported theory to explain why some nations choose to create nuclear weapons. The Realist theory in political science argues that states exist in an anarchical international system and must rely on self-help to protect their sovereignty and national security (Sagan 57). This is based upon the idea that individuals are thirsty for power and act in accordance with their own self-interests. A state will seek to develop nuclear weapons when faced with a significant military threat to their security that cannot be met through alternative means (Sagan 54). Due to nuclear weapon's destructive capabilities, a state that seeks to maintain national security must balance against any rival state that develops nuclear weapons

by gaining access to a nuclear deterrent (Sagan 57). Strong states pursue a form of internal balancing by adopting a policy of developing their own nuclear weapons, while weak states join a balancing alliance with a nuclear power as a means of extended deterrence (Sagan 57). Overall, Sagan's theory on the Security Model argues that states build nuclear weapons to increase national security against foreign threats.

Kenneth Waltz, in his book *Theory of International Politics*, argues that nuclear power states are concerned with maintaining their position within the international system. States work harder to increase their strength, or combine with others, if they are falling behind (Waltz 127). Waltz places high importance on the structure of the international system. He states that the distinction between international and national realms of politics is not found in the use or the nonuse of force, but in their different structure (Waltz 104). Since the structure of the international system is one centered around the idea of *self-help*, security subordinates economic gain to political interest (Waltz 107). In fact, the structure of the international system forces states to become self-reliant and power seekers. By creating nuclear weapons, that state becomes less reliant on others. Additionally, the acquisition of nuclear capability is a potent technique to prevent the rise of nuclear competition amongst surrounding nations. Waltz highlights that weaker states will create an alliance with stronger nuclear power states as a form of protection. Nuclear weapons act as an instrument by dominant states to safeguard and legitimize their status in the international community. More importantly, the acquisition of nuclear weapons was designed for nuclear power states to maintain their control over nuclear weapon supplies by preventing and eliminating competition.

On a similar note, in *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed*, Kenneth Waltz argues that the growth of nuclear membership

will contribute to a safer world. He also states that despite nuclear proliferation efforts, nuclear weapons will continue to spread. Waltz claims that each state has a responsibility to protect themselves by establishing a form of security, that can be done by incorporating either the defensive ideal or deterrence theory. If war were to occur between two nuclear states, the fear of imminent escalation will prevent these states from attacking due to the uncertain realization of annihilation or survival (Waltz 9). Furthermore, he uses a Realist perspective saying that possession of nuclear weapons may slow arms races down, rather than speed them up. Additionally, less-developed governments do not have the monetary means nor intellectual knowledge to formulate nuclear weapons. Lastly, highly unstable regimes are unlikely to initiate nuclear projects due to domestic political turmoil (Waltz 11). The spread of nuclear weapons will enhance a states' national security. This is all to say that the gradual spread of nuclear weapons should be more welcomed than feared (Waltz 45).

John Mearsheimer, in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, argues that great-power rivalry is still present in the international system, which contributes to a dangerous security competition between powerful nations. Great powers are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal (Mearsheimer 29). Mearsheimer emphasizes that the principle goal for great powers is to achieve regional hegemony. The acquisition of nuclear weapons is one-way great power states can maintain their security in an archaic international system as well as reach regional hegemony. Power states regard each other with suspicion and fear. The basis of this fear is that in a world where great powers have the capability to attack each other, any state bent on survival must at least be suspicious of other states and reluctant to trust them (Mearsheimer 32). The consequences of falling victim to a

possible attack by another powerful state further emphasizes the importance of being fearful of other nations. Political competition among states is a much more dangerous business than economic intercourse, because in extreme cases, war can lead to the destruction of states (Mearsheimer 33). Mearsheimer emphasizes that states in the international system aim to assure their security and survival. More specifically, each state tends to see itself as vulnerable and alone, and therefore it aims to provide for its own survival (Mearsheimer 33). Additionally, Mearsheimer mentions that states look for an opportunity to alter the balance of power. States employ a variety of means to shift the balance of power in their favor, even if doing so makes other states suspicious or even hostile (Mearsheimer 34). By acquiring nuclear weapons, a state has the ability to change the balance of power and increase their own security while threatening the security of surrounding nations.

The origins of Liberal theory have roots in the eighteenth-century period of enlightenment. Liberalism holds that human nature is basically good and that people can improve their moral and material conditions (Mingst 83). More specifically, understanding laws allow people to improve their condition in society. Additionally, Liberalism views war as a result of inadequate institutions and misunderstanding between world leaders. Liberals are strong proponents of democracies and cooperation amongst state leaders. According to Liberal thinking, the expansion of human freedom is best achieved in democracies and through well-regulated market capitalism (Mingst 83).

Scott Sagan proposes a second model of nuclear proliferation that focuses on domestic actors who encourage or discourage governments from pursuing the bomb (Sagan 63). In his article *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three models in search of a bomb*, Sagan introduces the Domestic Politics Model to help explain nuclear proliferation. The

Domestic Politics model is similar to the international theory of Liberalism. Liberals believe that injustice, war, and aggression are not inevitable but can be moderated through institutional agencies and cooperative measures (Mingst 83). Because individuals are rational beings who have the ability to improve their social conditions, an unjust society is thus formed as a result of unjust government institutions. Adherents to the Domestic Politics Model argue that the decision to acquire nuclear weapons is based upon bureaucratic interests and parochial priorities. Additionally, domestic leaders create the conditions that favor weapons acquisition by encouraging extreme perceptions of foreign threats, promoting supportive politicians, and actively lobbying for increased defense spending (Sagan 64). In fact, initial ideas for the development of nuclear weapons is caused by the formation of domestic coalitions within the scientific-military-industrial complex that favor weaponization due to the influx of money and prestige flowing into the laboratories (Sagan 64). In order to gain political and social support, scientific domestic coalitions persuade politicians within the executive and legislative branches to shape social perceptions regarding the benefits of nuclear weapons. The Domestic Politics Model views international security threats as being more malleable and merely as windows of opportunity through which parochial interests can jump (Sagan 65).

Robert Betts, in his article *Paranoids, Pygmies, Pariahs, and Nonproliferation*, explains how the domestic political structure of a state has the ability to exert influence on the decision-making process regarding nuclear weapons. Betts argues that national security and status are the two fundamental motives to a nation acquiring nuclear weapons. However, he highlights the pivotal role that domestic political leaders have in the creation of nuclear weapons by analyzing Pygmy States, Paranoid States, and Pariah States. Pygmy States are concerned with national security and strongly

believe that nuclear weapons can act as a powerful deterrent tool as well as a “tactical application against forces concentrated for land breakthroughs and amphibious landings” (Betts 166). Paranoid States are concerned with national security however, this paranoia can make them believe in an unrealistic security threat. Lastly, Betts argues that Pariah States have the concerns of both Pygmy and Paranoid States, therefore being the most dangerous nations. Pariah States tend to have paranoid attitudes towards the international community thereby having the clearest incentives to increase their military power (Betts 167). This paranoid attitude is commonly recognized in an authoritarian regime where political power is centralized in one ruling force. Because there is minimal political mobilization in Pariah States, domestic political leaders hold a tremendous amount of influence in the nations’ military decision.

Scott Sagan introduces a third model that can help explain why some states choose nuclear weapons acquisition. This model focuses on non-material factors such as status and prestige. According to the Norms Model, state behavior is determined not by leaders’ cold calculations regarding national security interests or their parochial bureaucratic interests, but rather spearheaded by deeper norms and shared beliefs about what actions are legitimate and appropriate in international relations (Sagan 73). Within the realm of Sociology, *new institutionalism* refers to modern organizations and institutions coming to resemble each other not because of competition or rational learning but because institutions mimic each other (Sagan 74). *New institutionalism* emphasizes the importance of the roles, routines, and rituals of individuals and organizations. Such interests are shaped by the social roles actors are asked to play and thus are embedded in a social environment that promotes certain structures and behaviors as rational and legitimate and others as irrational and primitive (Sagan 74). Nuclear weapons are

viewed as a tool of modern society where states believe that they must possess them in order to look legitimate to surrounding states and the international community. Although the establishment of nuclear weapons may not be logical or cost efficient for some states, it is a symbol of modernity that possesses an abundance of power.

The international relations theory of Constructivism is similar to the Norms Model. It focuses on the power of ideas, norms, values and principles of a particular state in the embracement or refrainment of nuclear proliferation. Domestic political actors shape and influence a states' decision in becoming a nuclear power state. According to political scientists, literature regarding the development and escalation of nuclear weapons is a result of norms within the international community. The norms perspective emphasizes the importance of power and coercion in influencing states to see the value of acquiring nuclear weapons. In fact, normative pressures may begin with the actions of entrepreneurial non-state actors, but their beliefs only have a significant influence once powerful state actors join the cause (Sagan, 75). Similarly, normative beliefs regarding nuclear weapons contributed to the creation of legal restrictions that prohibited their use during war. Additionally, nations who possess nuclear weapons use them as a fear tactic to deter other nations from acquiring nuclear armaments.

CASE STUDIES ON NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A. ISRAEL

Established in 1948, the state of Israel can be classified as a success story. A transition from Holocaust to revival, Israel has become the region's most formidable military power by turning a small, service economy into one of the world's greatest centers for technological innovation (Cohen). Despite Israel's success as a nation, it continues to be haunted by its past and the country's survival

is constantly at stake. Israel's survival as a civilization surrounded by a hostile and populous Muslim world has contributed to an inner feeling of absolute fragility (Cohen). Israel viewed the establishment of nuclear weapons as a fundamental and critical necessity in order to preserve their security as a nation. In fact, nuclear weapons were seen as an important element of military power. The fear of a military attack by a hostile Arabian nation, its geographic location and the security protection of a major power such as the United States, were all contributing factors that led to Israel becoming a nuclear weapon state.

Israel's nuclear weapons program was conducted in secrecy with the help of France during the mid 1950s. Israel and France formed a cooperative relationship due to shared commercial and strategic interests in the formation of nuclear weapons. At the time, both France and Israel viewed this as an opportunity to maintain a degree of autonomy in foreign policy in the bipolar environment of the Cold War (Bahgat 91). Additionally, by helping Israel produce nuclear weapons, it helped France's nuclear industry establish credibility in the international community. More importantly, what created such a powerful alliance between these two nations was a common enemy, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein. In 1956, Hussein nationalized the Suez Canal that was controlled by France and Britain. Due to this, the United States and Britain agreed to stop financing the construction of Egypt's Aswan High Dam. This led to the "Suez Crisis" where Nasser declared martial law in the canal zone, seizing all operations of the Suez Canal Company (The Suez Crisis, *Britannica*). Israel decided to invade the canal while British and French troops withdrew. The Suez Crisis ended with Egypt being the victor contributing to more aggression towards Nasser by the French and the Israelis. For these reasons, France helped Israel achieve nuclearization.

The primary reason as to why Israel chose to nuclearize was due to national security, more specifically the Arab-Israeli conflict. Tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors began after the birth of the nation in 1948. The conflict involves issues relating to ethnic and religious differences as well as disputes over territorial claims and national integrity (Bickerton 18). Essentially, the struggle is between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews over territory that each nation claims is theirs. For Israel, the most important issue is that of national security. In 2006, the terrorist organization Hezbollah, launched an attack against Israel in order to pressure the country into releasing Lebanese prisoners. The war ended after thirty-four days and left over a thousand of Lebanese dead or displaced (Arab- Israel Wars, *Britannica*). Additionally, Israel's geographical location and close proximity to Palestine has made them a target for attacks. With an increase of military presence on the West Bank, Israel has not only become immune to the violence but has also increased conventional military power. Due to the possibility of being attacked by its Arab neighbors, Israel's primary motivation for establishing nuclear weapons was to enhance their national security.

The fundamental question that Israel now faces regarding nuclear weapons is whether their possession would serve or harm the nation's national security (Cohen 34). The primary reason Israel established nuclear weapons was for national security reasons because the bomb acts as a deterrence for other nations. Israel established a unique style of proliferation and a code of nuclear conduct that set it apart from other nuclear-weapons states (Cohen 35). Israel adopted an *amimut bargain* where the nation does not acknowledge its possession of the bomb despite the international community being aware that it does. Secrecy and non-acknowledgement became the key ingredients for Israel's *amimut bargain* with nuclear

proliferation. In order for *amimut* to work, there should be enough credible evidence to deter enemies, but sufficient ambiguity and lack of acknowledgement to allow friends to look the other way (Cohen 46). Firm knowledge that Israel has a nuclear arsenal much larger than needed would encourage Arab states to acquire nuclear weapons (Barnaby 46). Mutual nuclear deterrence would destabilize the Middle East, so by adopting the *amimut bargain*, Israel created a code of conduct by not recognizing itself as a nuclear weapon state. However, Israel was in favor of an effective Non Proliferation Treaty as a nuclear-weapons state, but as long as it faced existential threats, it was not willing to relinquish it (Cohen 40). Although national security was the primary force that spearheaded Israel's decision to become a nuclear weapons state, United States toleration of Israel becoming a nuclear superpower was a secondary factor to the nation's success in proliferation.

Since Israel's founding in 1948, successive U.S. Presidents and many Members of Congress have demonstrated a commitment to Israel's security and to a close U.S. - Israel cooperation (Zanotti). More importantly, the United States became tolerant of Israel's nuclear weapons program because the two nations share common democratic values, economic partnerships, and security interests. Over time, U.S. -Israeli relations have evolved to incorporate legislation, bilateral agreements, and trade (Zanotti 1).

The United States was willing to tolerate Israel's nuclear pursuit due to shared democratic values. In the first decades following its founding, Israeli society sought to build a country dedicated to Western liberal ideas and values (Zanotti 5). The United States and Israel share the same values of tolerance, freedom, and democracy to all persons regardless of race, religion or ethnicity. Both democratic nations hold the concept of liberty and freedom to the highest

regard. Israel's deep and extensive commitment to democracy was a result of their admiration towards American culture and society. Israel's government structure and political system is based upon free and fair elections, a mirror reflection of the United States. The U.S. - Israeli relationship was built upon similar fundamental democratic principles and values, which contributed to the United States becoming tolerant of Israeli nuclear weapons.

A second factor that contributed to the United States acceptance of Israeli nuclear proliferation is economic interests. Economic aid from the United States to Israel began after Israel's victory in the Six Day War in 1967. The Six Day War was a bloody conflict between Israel and the Arab nations of Syria, Egypt and Jordan. Israel's success in the Six Day War was largely due to its military strategic planning. By launching preemptive air strikes and coordinating ground offense strategies, Israeli victory completely altered the geographical landscape of the Middle East. This altercation greatly benefited the United States and Israel with regards to economic trade. In 1985, the two nations signed the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which became the cornerstone of a vibrant U.S. - Israel economic relationship (Oren 128). Since then, Israel became one of the largest trading partners to the United States. This mutual economic relationship is primarily due to shared common values of a free and competitive market economy. The constant dialogue between the governments of Israel and the United States to upgrade their economic partnership and to ensure continued prosperity has resulted in a strong alliance between these two nations (Oren 128).

The most significant factor that led to the United States acknowledging and accepting Israel's nuclear weapons program is largely due to security interests. Strong bilateral relations regarding security interests in the Middle East reinforced U.S. - Israel

relationship regarding military aid, arms sales, and information sharing (Zanotti 16). More importantly, the United States helped transform Israel's military through money and information sharing. In fact, Israel has generally been the largest annual recipient of U.S. foreign assistance by providing \$3 billion in grants (Zanotti 18). Additionally, Congress continues to provide hundreds of millions of dollars in annual assistance beyond Administration-requested amounts for Israel's Iron Dome anti-rocket system and joint U.S. - Israel missile defense programs (Zanotti 20). United States aid was designed to maintain Israel's "qualitative military edge" over neighboring militaries (Zanotti 16). By helping to reinforce Israel's national security through military equipment and monetary aid, the United States is establishing regional stability in the Middle East. Due to similar democratic values and economic interests, Israel's national security is of great importance to the United States. Essentially, the United States is aware that re-enforcing Israel's national security will help in stabilizing the Middle East. More importantly, Israel's national security is of equal benefit to the United States because it helps decrease traditional security threats from the surrounding Arab nations.

Israel's acquisition of nuclear weapons is largely influenced by the Realist theory where gaining nuclear weapons is the only way to guarantee the nation's security. In fact, nuclear weapons were seen as insurance against the day when Israel loses its conventional military technological superiority over the Arabs and needs a deterrent against an Arab chemical attack (Barnaby 50). More importantly, a state will decide to go nuclear depending on the level and type of security threats that it faces and the nature of the interactions with its adversaries and its geo-strategic environment (Bahgat 8). Additionally, the realist approach

can be implemented to describe Iran's nuclear ambitions.

B. IRAN

For more than two decades, Iran has aggressively invested time, money and resources into nuclear weapon capabilities. An examination into Iran's motivations to acquire nuclear weapons requires a close evaluation on each analytical level. Each analytical level can offer specific insight into the reasons why Iran has chosen to proliferate. Taken together, system, state and individual level motivations can provide a fairly complete picture of Iran's nuclear proliferation process (Mayer 1). Three factors that largely motivated Iran's ambition to acquire nuclear weapons were domestic political interests, national prestige, and national security.

Iran's nuclear energy program was initiated when Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was still in power. The Shah was determined to create an ambitious nuclear energy program in order to help Iran modernize as a nation. With the expertise of Pakistani nuclear scientist Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan and with the aid of some nuclear weapon states, Iran embarked on an impressive scheme to evade export controls on dual use of technology (Greenblum 62). Additionally, Western countries like the United States supported Iran's quest for nuclear energy after the country signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1970. This was a period where the Shah enjoyed good relations with the United States and other Western countries (Greenblum 61). In the early stages of developing nuclear energy, the United States provided support and aid to Iran's nuclear energy program. Enriched fuel was supplied by an American company, AMF, where Iran agreed to purchase eight reactors (Bahgat 20). This purchase was used to create a uranium enrichment plant in order to generate nuclear energy which in turn had the potential to generate nuclear weapons. Since the United States wanted the Shah to rise to the role of Gulf protectorate, United States

leaders looked the other way during Iran's early nuclear foray (Mayer 7).

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini seized power and halted the country's nuclear weapons program. Khomeini strongly believed that nuclear weapons were a complete contradiction of what Islam stood for. However, despite damages to Iran's nuclear energy facilities by the United States and the Iraqi government, Iran restarted its nuclear weapons program in the 1980s. Iran argued that their development of nuclear energy is motivated by the desire to generate electricity and to master the fuel cycle in order to become a supplier of nuclear fuel in the future (Chubin 24). Iran's acquisition of fuel cycle includes facilities for plutonium reprocessing and highly enriched uranium, the two essential components needed to create nuclear weapons. Ultimately, Iran's focus on super-enrichment, its history of concealment, and its virtually limitless supply of oil leaves most experts convinced that it is in fact seeking nuclear weapons. In fact, Iran strengthened their nuclear energy program by creating the Atomic Energy Organization responsible for operating nuclear energy and nuclear fuel cycle installations. A closer analysis of Iran's nuclear weapons program reveals that the nation chose to proliferate due domestic political interests, national prestige and national security issues.

Iran's nuclear ambitions are shaped by domestic political interests. Iranian policy is driven less by a rigid ideological revolutionary to one that encompasses different national interests in order to be more receptive to global norms and rules. Looking at the individual level of analysis, Iranian leaders are locked onto particular interests of which they will be very reluctant to let go (Mayer 4). These domestic political actors have persuaded government leaders and societal elites that nuclear weapons are needed for political power and military strength. As a

result, Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani began improving economic and diplomatic relations with other world leaders. Internal political forces are utilized to persuade individuals that nuclear weapons programs are needed and essential for the nations' national security, regardless if these weapons serve the states interest. In this realm, bureaucratic actors from civilian scientific institutions, special military units, and political arms form *coalitions* strong enough to control the governmental decision-making process, through controlling information or by direct political power (Mayer 60). Iran's nuclear weapons program was facilitated by active participants that create conditions which favor proliferation to counter perceived national security threats (Mayer 60). Domestic political interests enticed Iran to expand their nuclear energy program and to establish nuclear weapons. Despite the influence of domestic actors in establishing nuclear weapons, the nuclear issue is a metaphor for Iran's quest for greater respect and a wider regional and global role (Chubin 28).

A deeper analysis into Iran's motivations to acquire nuclear weapons reveals a desire to gain national prestige. Most Iranians perceive their nation as a great civilization that has been deprived of its "rightful" status as a regional superpower by foreign intervention from the Russians, the British, and the Americans (Bahgat 36). This intense feeling of victimization has strengthened Iran's desire to build nuclear weapons. Establishing an Iranian nuclear weapon facility would establish respect as well as fear to the surrounding Arab nations, Israel and the United States. Driven by popular sentiments, Iranians insist that they have an "inalienable right" to produce nuclear fuel and to be self-sufficient in their nuclear program (Bahgat 36). More specifically, Iran has chosen to be self-dependent in acquiring nuclear weapons by refusing to ask for aid and assistance from

other nuclear weapon states. The choice to be self-reliant in creating nuclear weapons was largely motivated by Iran's inability to trust foreign countries, more specifically the United States. In fact, Iranians accuse the United States of pursuing a policy of "Selective Proliferation" that permits some countries to enrich fuel and others not to (Bahgat 37). This double standard of "selective proliferation" is evidently seen through the United States reaction of discovering Israel's nuclear weapons capabilities and later accepting it.

The primary motivating factor for Iran's nuclear ambitions is national security issues. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran would act as a deterrence strategy from conventional and existential threats by Iraq, Israel and the United States. The potential threat from Iraq is the most persuasive reason for Iran to consider acquiring nuclear deterrent (Iran's Nuclear Weapons Options: Issues and Analysis). Because Iraq is known to have sought nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, Iran's national security is threatened by the possibility of such an attack. In fact, Iraq continues to remain determined in creating nuclear and chemical capabilities despite the International community's condemnation of these actions. The fear of an Iraqi chemical attack became a reality in 1988 during the Iran-Iraq war when Iraqi Kurds used chemical weapons against Iranian troops. International inaction reinforced Iran's view that arming themselves with nuclear weapons will be for defense and deterrence purposes. The only way to ensure the nation's national security and safety is to acquire the bomb.

Israel is often depicted by Iranians either as a direct threat or as a state with imperial motivations (Iran's Nuclear Weapons Options: Issues and Analysis). More specifically, Iran views Israel as a regional competitor that was created by the United States to balance the power in the Middle East. Despite the current animosity between Iran and Israel, these two

nations were not always rivals. It was not until the defeat of Iraq in 1991 and the United States military intervention in 2003 that hostile tension between Iran and Israel surmounted. To make matters worse, the differing ideological perspectives and Iran's nuclear ambitions only heightened tensions between these two nations. Additionally, Iran views Israel as a military and geopolitical rival due to Israel's strong relationship with the United States. With Israel as the only regional state considering military action against Iran as its nuclear efforts move forward, the rivalry between Israel and Iran has emerged as a defining feature of the current regional environment (Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry). Gaining nuclear weapons will only help reinforce Iran's security and decrease conventional military threats from Israel and the United States. The ability to acquire nuclear weapons is strongly motivated by Iran's national security as opposed to domestic political interests and national prestige. Although national security is one factor that has contributed to Iran seeking nuclear weapons, the United States hostile response is what contributed to their lack of success.

The United States continues to be intolerant towards Iran's motivations to acquire nuclear weapons. United States hostility towards Iran's nuclear ambitions is largely due to the unstable relationship these two nations have with each other. More specifically, the establishment of nuclear weapons by Iran would threaten United States interests in the region. U.S. - Iran relations have been adversarial since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran where Mohammad Reza Shah, who was known to have ties to the United States, was overthrown. Orchestrated by Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolution led to the establishment of an Islamic republic in Iran, contributing to even more tension between these two nations.

Since the 1979 revolution, the United States has consistently identified Iran's support for militant Middle Eastern groups as a significant threat to U.S. interests and allies (U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications). Since 2002, the United States has attempted to constrain Iran's nuclear weapons program through the implementation of diplomatic agreements, economic sanctions and military deployments. In 2015, Iran and the six world powers met to establish a deal that would limit Iran's nuclear program by increasing surveillance in exchange for uplifting economic sanctions imposed by the United States. However, in May 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew the United States from the 2015 nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications). The Trump Administration argued that the agreement did not address the broad range of U.S. concerns about Iranian behavior and would not permanently preclude Iran from developing nuclear weapons (U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications). As a result, the United States turned to economic and military pressure in order to deter Iran from advancing their nuclear weapons program.

Ever since the Trump Administration withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran in 2018, the administration has pursued a policy of *Maximum Pressure* in the hopes of negotiating a better agreement with Iran. The policy of *Maximum Pressure* includes economic sanctions and military action by United States Armed Forces. For example, in May 2019, the Trump Administration ended a U.S. sanctions exception for any country purchasing Iranian oil (U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications). This course of action was taken to drive Iranian oil exports down, thus dealing a devastating blow to their economy. Additionally, the United States ended waivers under the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act, that allowed countries to help Iran remain within stockpile limits (U.S.-

Iran Tensions and Implications). The Trump Administration responded militarily by planning to deploy the USS *Abraham Lincoln* Carrier Strike Group to the region and sending a bomber task force to the Persian Gulf in the hopes of cultivating fear amongst the Iranian government (U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications). Unfortunately, this tactic by the Trump Administration was unsuccessful. The Administration responded by allocating immediate foreign military sales exceeding over \$8 billion to Saudi Arabia in an effort to “deter further Iranian adventurism in the Gulf and throughout the Middle East” (U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications).

Despite the Trump Administrations *Maximum Pressure* policy efforts, Iran responded by demonstrating its ability to harm global commerce and United States interests while raising concerns regarding nuclear activities. In June 2019, Iran shot down an unmanned aerial surveillance aircraft, claiming that it had entered Iranian airspace over the Gulf of Oman (U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications). The downing of the American drone was a clear message to the United States that Iran will defend its borders against any foreign aggressor. Iran’s retaliation against the United States economic sanctions and military deployment efforts did not stop there. In September 2019, Iran launched a large and sophisticated attack on Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that Iran has now launched an unprecedented attack on the world’s energy supply (U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications). As a result, the attack contributed to a significant portion of the Saudi oil fields being shut down. The attack on the Saudi oil field primarily devastated United States interest with oil. Despite United States efforts to punish Iran’s decades-long history of destructive tactics and nuclear ambitions, their efforts have only contributed to more hostility between the two nations. This hostility further exceeds Iran’s

ambitions to nuclearize and become a nuclear weapon state to defend itself from the United States and its allies. Iran’s efforts to nuclearize is primarily due to national security reasons as well as the intense feeling of victimization it has towards the United States.

C. SAUDI ARABIA

Very little attention is given to Saudi Arabia’s capabilities to create nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Being the third giant state on the Persian Gulf, the question must be asked: Is Saudi Arabia seeking nuclear weapons capability? No concrete evidence has been found to suggest Saudi acquisition of nuclear weapons. Although Saudi Arabia has the financial capability to create nuclear weapons, the nation does not experience a severe national security threat unlike Israel and Iran. More importantly, close security cooperation with the United States has left Saudi Arabia with little incentive to acquire nuclear weapons (Bahgat 65). Even more so, the United States commitment to the survival of the Saudi regime and the country’s territorial integrity has contributed to no security threats and is the best guarantee that the nation will not seek nuclear weapons (Bahgat 66). Saudi Arabia’s geostrategic placement and close alliance with the United States are the two significant factors to help explain why such a wealthy nation has chosen nuclear restraint.

Saudi Arabia’s geostrategic characteristics has significantly shaped the nation’s security environment. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest and most powerful state in the Arabian Peninsula as well as an important actor in oil affairs (Peterson 7). Saudi Arabia has the smallest population in comparison to its rivals in the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia’s national security was of major concern during the Cold War when the Soviet Union pressured the nation to become Communist. The Soviet Union and surrounding Arab nationalist regimes presented a major security threat to the survival of the nation.

Additionally, like most of the Arab nations, the Saudis resented the establishment of the Israeli nation. In an effort to create peace, a meeting took place between U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and Saudi King Saud ibn Abd al-Aziz where two agreements were established. Despite this agreement between the two nations, Saudi Arabia continued to view Israel as a contributor to the high instability in the Middle East. But, instead of relying on the Soviet Union in the struggle against Israel, Saudi Arabia sought the help and alliance of western countries, particularly the United States, to exert pressure on the Jewish state (Bahgat 69). A comprehensive solution to regain back stability in the region can only be accomplished if Israel gives back Arab territories that was acquired after the Six Day War. Over time, Saudi Arabia has joined United States peace negotiations with Israel in an effort to decrease hostility between the two nations. Although Saudi Arabia blamed the creation of Israel for the instability in the Middle East, it never planned to confront Israel with a conventional or unconventional military attack. This is all to say, due to Saudi Arabia's geostrategic location, the nation did not gain any hostile enemies, therefore not having any security reasons to establish nuclear weapons.

The nature of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran did not contribute to any national security risks for either country. In fact, both nations share important similarities such as foreign policy orientations, Islam, oil, regional security and the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has shaped their relationship. Iran and Saudi Arabia share similar foreign policy and security orientations primarily throughout the Cold War. Both nations sought to contain and resist the spread of Communism to their country. Despite their close relationship in containing communism, Saudi Arabia continued to act suspiciously towards the Shah of Iran. As a result, Saudi Arabia viewed its alliance with the United

States as an important factor for the nations' security. To demonstrate the nation's commitment to nuclear restraint, Saudi Arabia signed a memorandum of understanding on Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation in 2008 (Squassoni, 8). No credible evidence suggests that Saudi Arabia has ever pursued nuclear weapons or has the ambition to do so. Shortly thereafter the signing of the Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation, the U.S. Department of State released a statement stating, "Saudi Arabia has stated its intent to rely on international markets for nuclear fuel and to not pursue sensitive nuclear technologies" (Squassoni, 8). Additionally, being a non-nuclear state member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Saudi Arabia has welcomed comprehensive safeguards in order to further the objective of a weapons free zone. Because Saudi Arabia does not suffer any security threats, the acquisition of nuclear weapons is not needed to deter potential attackers.

One factor as to why Saudi Arabia continues to be a non-nuclear weapon state is its close alliance with the United States. For more than seven decades, Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States centered around trade, technical cooperation and military and civilian contracts (Safran, 210). More specifically, these interests centered around oil supplies, security and the containment of militant Islam. Unlike Israel and the United States who share similar democratic values, the United States relationship with Saudi Arabia is predominantly shaped by economic and security interests for both countries. Saudi Arabia is the second leading source of imported oil to the United States, providing just under one million barrels per day of oil to the U.S market (U.S. Relations with Saudi Arabia). In fact, Saudi trade with the United States grew tremendously from \$2.6 billion in 1974 to \$10.2 billion in 1978 (Safran, 215). Saudi Arabia's ability to quickly ramp up oil

production has made the United States dependent on Saudi oil. However, an Iranian nuclear weapons program would trigger Saudi Arabia to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution suggested in 2016 that Saudi Arabia is less concerned about Iranian nuclear weapons than Iran's quest for regional hegemony because it believes it is covered by the U.S. nuclear umbrella (Squassoni, 12). As a result, Saudi Arabia benefits from the United States nuclear umbrella, a guarantee that the nation will prevent and defend Saudi Arabia from any potential nuclear attacks.

A second factor which led to a strong alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia is largely due to security reasons. After the September 11 attacks, President Bush informed the world that "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists (Bahgat 80). Saudi Arabia publicly condemned the terrorists' attacks and supported the United States position to go to war. The Bush Administration was content with Saudi efforts in cooperation with the War on Terror. This mutual alliance regarding security only strengthened the United States - Saudi relationship. The unofficial alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia is likely to endure for decades to come. Allying with the United States has contributed significantly to an increase in Saudi security within the region. Saudi oil has greatly benefited the United States. Additionally, heightened military action by the United States has contributed significantly to advancing Saudi Arabia's national security. The extensive economic and military ties between Riyadh and Washington offers no reason as to why Saudi Arabia should acquire nuclear weapons. Since Saudi Arabia benefits greatly from an economic and military relationship with the United States, by creating nuclear weapons, this mutually beneficial relationship will tremendously impact the security and the economy of Saudi Arabia. More importantly,

the American -Saudi alliance is built on shared interests, not common values. Despite growing security uncertainties in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia should not be considered a serious nuclear proliferation threat (Bahgat 86).

THE DETERMINING FACTORS TO NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

National security and United States interests are the two determining factors regarding nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. The Security Model is one theoretical framework that provides insight into the motivations of nuclear acquisition by Israel and Iran. The security model, similar to the international theory of Realism, argues that states will seek to develop nuclear weapons when they face a significant military threat to their security that cannot be met through alternative means (Sagan 54). Israel chose to proliferate due to national security reasons. Specifically, the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Persian Gulf motivated Israel to seek nuclear capabilities. The creation of the Jewish state after World War II and the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Israel significantly altered the balance of power in the region. The possibility of a nuclear attack by Israel contributed to Iran's quest for nuclear weapons. Additionally, Iran viewed the United States military involvement as a threat to the states' sovereignty and national security. After funding both sides of the Iran-Iraq War, the United States intervened when Iraq invaded Kuwait resulting in the 1991 Gulf War. After the September 11 attacks, the Bush Administration invaded Afghanistan in hopes of capturing Osama Bin Laden. Two years later, the United States intervened in Iraq because American intelligence believed Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Iraq's ambition to attain nuclear weapons capabilities was an additional threat to Iran's national security. Ongoing American military presence in the Middle East left Iran feeling vulnerable and powerless, which

increased their interest in gaining nuclear weapons for security purposes.

According to Realist theory, every time one state develops nuclear weapons to balance against its main rival, it also creates a nuclear threat to another state in the region (Sagan 58). Saudi Arabia's commitment to refrain from developing nuclear weapons can be explained by the security model. Saudi Arabia is a wealthy nation that has the capability to acquire nuclear weapons. However, Saudi Arabia does not have the incentive to proliferate because the nation does not have a significant security threat. Despite Israel's creation of nuclear weapons and Iran's aspiration to proliferate, these two nations are not a security threat to Saudi Arabia.

A secondary factor that helps to explain nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is United States' interests. Israel and Saudi Arabia share a mutually beneficial partnership with the United States. Because of this, Saudi Arabia is protected under the United States nuclear umbrella. United States interests in providing military aid to Israel and Saudi Arabia will contribute to stabilization and the balance of power in the Middle East. United States alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia are motivated by the ability to dominate and control foreign policy efforts in the region. By having the United States as a close ally, Israel and Saudi Arabia benefit from economic and military aid that strengthens each nation's national security. The United States is highly invested in maintaining the close relationship that it has with Israel and Saudi Arabia because of its ability to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East. In contrast, Iran does not share in a mutually beneficial alliance with the United States, primarily due to U.S. military involvement in the region. Ever since the 1979 Iranian revolution that overthrew the Shah, the United States relationship with Iran has been hostile. Tension escalated between these two nations after the United States discovered Iran revamped its nuclear weapons program for

national security purposes. An Iranian nuclear weapons program would be a threat to the United States and United States interests. More specifically, nuclear weapons in the hands of an Iranian regime would endanger Israel's security and destabilize the balance of power in the region.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of nuclear weapons states in the Middle East poses a significant threat to United States' interests, international security and the stability of the region. Efforts by the international community to halt the spread of nuclear weapons, especially by rogue regimes, have been conducted through diplomatic negotiations and military intervention. In order to contain the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the United States has expanded its security presence by forming alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East. Longstanding security alliance between the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia has helped the U.S. contain certain rogue regimes from acquiring nuclear weapons. The two determining factors to explain nuclear proliferation and nuclear restraint in the Middle East are national security and United States interests and alliances.

The foreign policy theories of Liberalism and Constructivism fail to answer a critical question: why do some states choose to acquire nuclear weapons and others choose not to? Although domestic political interests and national prestige are two factors that can explain Iran's motivations to acquire nuclear weapons, national security was the overarching reason why this nation wants weapons. Similarly, national security was the primary force that spearheaded Israel's decision to become a nuclear weapon state due to its strategic geographical location. Saudi Arabia has little incentive to build nuclear weapons capabilities largely because the nation does not face a direct security threat. Nuclear proliferation in Israel and Iran's ambition to

acquire nuclear weapons aligns significantly with the realist perspective and the Security Model outlined by Scott Sagan. A state will seek to develop nuclear weapons when faced with a significant military or security threat (Sagan 54).

The United States has been and continues to be a powerful actor in international foreign policy. The U.S. interests and alliances with a nation dominates international foreign policy and is a second factor in explaining nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Due to shared democratic values, economic and military interests, the United States was tolerant towards Israel's nuclear weapons program. Additionally, the United States continues to provide military assistance in the form of weapons, monetary aid, and military knowledge in order to help Israel's national security. The U.S. is invested in Israel's national security because the Israeli military has prevented radical nationalist movements that would alter regional stability and security in the region. A similar comparison is drawn to Saudi Arabia's decision to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons. Because the nations do not have a perceived security threat, acquiring nuclear weapons would be more costly than helpful. Additionally, Saudi Arabia continues to enjoy and benefit from United States economic and security resources. Therefore, if Saudi Arabia was to initiate a nuclear weapons program, it would negatively impact the nation's relationship with the United States. Since Saudi Arabia has continued to refrain from creating nuclear weapons, despite the resources and monetary means to create a program, the nation continues to benefit from the protection of the United States nuclear umbrella. On the other hand, Iran's hostile relationship with the United States has posed severe security issues for the nation, thereby seeking nuclear weapons as a tool for security and deterrence. Overall, the United States will continue to be a dominant force in international relations and foreign policy. The findings of

this thesis conclude that national security and United States' interests and alliances are the two determining factors to explain why some nations in the Middle East choose to pursue nuclear weapons and why others have not.

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