

Political study

The Future of the Iranian Nuclear File Post- Trump



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Driss Lagrini

Professor of International Relations and Director of the International Crisis
Studies Center- Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakesh

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King Fahd National Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lagrini . DR.Driss

The Future of the Iranian Nuclear File Post- Trump.

/ Lagrini . DR.Driss .- Riyadh , 2019

..p ; ..cm

ISBN: 978-603-91279-3-2

1- Nuclear weapons - Iran I-Title

621.480955 dc 1440/10229

L.D. no. 1440/10229

ISBN: 978-603-91279-3-2

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Before the United States officially announced a unilateral withdrawal from the agreement, and the re-imposition of US sanctions, the US President Donald Trump continuously played down Iran's nuclear deal concluded with the six major powers: China, Russia, America, France, Germany, and Britain - in 2015.

By examining the new approach of the US administration in this regard, this study seeks to address the Iranian nuclear file and its development as well as the potential repercussions of this approach for Iran's nuclear and regional ambitions. Currently, Iranian policy has been a source of concern for many regional and international powers as it has led to instability in the Middle East and has promoted Iran's expansionist and hegemonic agenda through the use of soft and hard power.

The study also aims to monitor the potential effects of the new and tough US policy on Iran's nuclear file following its withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and the escalation of its threats against Tehran. In addition, this study examines Iran's ability to withstand and confront these challenges to it. Through the analytical and historical approach, the study aims to answer the following two questions: What is the background and context of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal? What are the potential repercussions of the new US approach towards Iran's nuclear ambitions and its expansion in the region?

First: The US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and the exertion of pressure on Iran

Since the inauguration of nuclear negotiations, Iran missed several opportunities. In particular, it failed to take advantage of the incentives offered by Western countries such as to enhance its nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes, to provide it with important technologies in this field, and to help it join the World Trade Organization. Iran also missed the opportuni-

ty to open a new chapter with the United States and with Western countries in general that pledged to break its isolation and to revoke some sanctions imposed on it in exchange for abandoning its military nuclear potential.

After turning down all the aforementioned opportunities, Iran has been subjected to a series of American, European and international sanctions. America and Israel share a common concern about Iran's nuclear ambitions. This ambition, from the American perspective, is a serious issue that threatens its strategy in a vital area for US policy as well as the interests of its allies, especially the states in the Gulf region which are energy-rich. Washington is also concerned that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons may result in their falling into the hands of terrorist organizations if the conflict between Tehran and Washington escalated in the future, and may motivate other countries in the region to acquire nuclear weapons. In the same context, Israel believes that Iran's nuclear weapons will destabilize its security and pose a real threat to its existence and influence in the region.

Arab countries have expressed their concerns about the development of Iran's nuclear program and its interventionist policies in the region. At the same time, the Gulf countries have always called for the region to be free of nuclear weapons. In addition, the United States has always insisted on confronting any Iranian ambitions to use its nuclear energy for military purposes. Therefore, it imposed many unilateral sanctions on Iran through its European allies and the United Nations.

As a result of the hardened Iranian position and the insistence by the United States to curb any attempt by Iran to develop nuclear weapons, the two sides came to a dead end. Then the negotiations between Iran, the United States, and other major international powers were initiated to reduce the tension and to reach a solution balancing all the divergent positions of the Iranian nuclear file. This led the EU countries to lift the sanctions

imposed on Iran for half a year as a sign of goodwill to support these negotiations, which began under challenging conditions domestically and internationally for the United States; therefore, it was reluctant to open additional fronts.

These conditions coincided with the presidency of Barack Obama, who chose to deal diplomatically and to be flexible with this file, although other voices in America itself and Israel called for the Iranian nuclear reactors to be destroyed.

The negotiations between Iran and the six major international powers - China, Russia, America, France, Germany, and Britain - witnessed many difficulties and constraints, resulting in their being halted on numerous occasions, but they concluded an agreement on July 14, 2015, on Iran's nuclear program after a year and a half (21 months) of arduous negotiation in Geneva, Vienna, New York, and Lausanne. The agreement provided for keeping the peaceful nature of the program in exchange for revoking the sanctions imposed on Iran gradually. It also contained a set of detailed terms that can be summarized as follows:⁽¹⁾

- 1-**Providing a set of restrictions to prevent Iran from using its nuclear energy for military purposes.
- 2-**The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would inspect several nuclear facilities inside Iran and those related to extraction, research, and transformation.
- 3-**IAEA inspectors could visit Iran's nuclear sites if any doubts emerged concerning Iranian intentions.
- 4-**Lifting of the European and US nuclear sanctions on Iran following the confirmation of the implementation of its commitments by the IAEA.
- 5-**Iran would be obliged to reduce the number of centrifuges enriching uranium to 5,060 compared to 10,200 once the agreement was signed, and shall pledge not to exceed this

number for 10 years, and also to modify its Arak heavy water reactor under the supervision of the IAEA so that it will not be able to produce plutonium for military use.

6-Iran would agree to keep the arms embargo in place which is imposed by the UN for five years, while there was the possibility of reducing the embargo duration if the IAEA was convinced that its nuclear program could only be used for peaceful purposes.

The UN Security Council still has the discretionary power to abrogate the previous resolutions related to Iran's nuclear program.

The nuclear agreement elicited mixed reactions, even within the United States itself. Some believed that it underlined the importance of negotiations and diplomatic solutions to win important battles at a lower cost since it restrained Iran's military nuclear ambitions while others expressed their reservations and suspicions.

Meanwhile, Iran presented the agreement as a victory for its vision, since it gave it the opportunity to develop its relations on the international level after the US lifted the sanctions imposed on it and to continue its nuclear program despite the conditions imposed.

On the international level, two major positions are dominant. The first considers the agreement as an opportunity to consolidate peace and stability by preventing Iran from using its nuclear capabilities in the military sphere. This position was reflected by the UN and other EU countries including Germany, Britain, and France as well as China and Russia.

The second position raises concerns and suspicions about this agreement, given Iran's hostile policies in the region. This position is reflected by the stance taken by the United States, some Arab countries and Canada, while Israel decided that it would strive to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Regardless of these divergent positions, it can be said that the agreement provided Iran with an opportunity to use its nuclear potential for peaceful purposes and saved the region from military confrontation if Israel or the United States targeted Iran's nuclear facilities. The agreement gave Iran the chance to bypass the economic and social constraints created by the international sanctions; correspondingly, it helped Iran to recover its frozen assets abroad and to alleviate the pressures it faced that isolated it regionally and internationally.

The agreement assumed an international nature with the issuance in 2015 of the UN Security Council Resolution 2231. Accordingly, Iran gradually started to involve itself in world oil markets; for example, "Europe has steadily increased its purchases of Iranian oil accounting for one third of Iran's crude oil exports and reaching more than 700,000 barrels, which were mostly exported to Turkey and other markets such as France, Italy, Greece, Spain and other countries, along with China as the biggest importer of Iranian oil in 2017, followed by India, while the other major importers were from South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and other Asian countries."⁽²⁾ Iran has also taken advantage of several economic and trading opportunities by opening up its markets to foreign investment.

On the other hand, the agreement was an initial step to reduce the growing regional and international concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, some believe that lifting the sanctions imposed on Iran is a key factor in reinforcing its strength and presence in the region through implementing its agendas and supporting its allies in areas of tension in the region making the situation much worse.

The agreement found a mechanism to monitor Iran's nuclear program regularly by the IAEA. Through the UN Security Council resolution 2231 (2015) the IAEA has carried out several regular verification operations. In this regard, IAEA reports submitted to the UN Security Council in recent years affirmed

Iran's compliance with the terms of the nuclear agreement. However, the US thinks that Iran is playing tricks and has plans to maintain its nuclear program secretly.

Since the US President Donald Trump took office, he has made a number of debatable decisions on vital issues including the environment, immigration, economic cooperation, international terrorism, human rights, and armaments. Accordingly, these decisions have given the impression that there are new approaches characterizing the foreign policy of the current administration of the United States; a pragmatic policy driven by the obsession with maintaining and supporting American leadership at the domestic level.

The US president did not hesitate to underestimate the significance of the nuclear agreement and called it on many occasions "the worst deal ever negotiated [...] it does nothing" as it does not halt the nuclear proliferation in the region and does not address Iran's ballistic missile program, which threatens American allies and their interests in the region. He also believes that the agreement enabled Iran to recover frozen funds from the US and European banks exceeding \$100 billion, which Iran invested in "financing terrorism" and that the agreement does not establish guarantees after its expiration date in 2025.

In addition, he believes that the agreement did not include terms that would curb Iran's ambitions to dominate the Middle East. According to Trump, the Iranian government continues to fuel conflicts and terrorism in the Middle East, even more than three years after the signing of the agreement, confirming that Iran violates the spirit of the agreement.⁽³⁾

In May of 2018, Trump signed a decree to unilaterally withdraw from the agreement and to re-impose the sanctions on Iran that were lifted under the agreement. This decision shocked Iran's policy-making elite. The United States also called on countries, companies, and banks all over the world to end their business

in Iran, and it threatened Iran seriously if it sought to enrich uranium.

The US decision, coming two years after the conclusion of the agreement, was a result of a prior assessment of the repercussions of the agreement on Iran's external behavior towards its regional and international environment, the threat it poses to US interests and its interference in several countries of the region. In addition, there was an assessment related to Iran's compliance with the terms of the agreement itself. The pressure exerted by many Arab countries is also important in this regard, especially since they have previously expressed their suspicion of Iran's commitment to the terms of the agreement

It seems that the US decision was made primarily on an assessment of Iran's hostile behavior towards its neighbors in the region, which continued even after the agreement, and on violations related to Iran's compliance with the agreement particularly regarding the use of its nuclear capabilities for military purposes.

The American decision was not surprising, given Trump's tough domestic and foreign policies and his harsh criticism of the agreement since he took office. However, this led to divergent reactions ranging from appreciation, reservation, and rejection. In fact, these positions reflect the strategic calculations of their holders.

Some European countries expressed their concerns about the US withdrawal from the agreement, pointing out that this would confound efforts to monitor Iran's nuclear file. In addition, some countries such as Germany, France, and Britain opposed Trump's decision, especially since they had undertaken initiatives before such as to stop his withdrawal from the agreement and to review its substance. The European Union also expressed its regret over the US withdrawal because the agreement was the result of international and diplomatic ef-

forts. China and Russia expressed similar concerns perceiving the US decision as uncalculated and unjustified and “an attempt to waste years of international efforts and to go back to square one.”⁽⁴⁾

On the other side, Iran insists that the agreement is still in place with the rest of the partners. It also asserts that it is committed to its provisions. Iran considers the US withdrawal as an illegal move that violates an international agreement. It also threatened to return to uranium enrichment if the negotiation option failed. It is important that “the US withdrawal from the agreement doesn’t cancel it completely but undermines its effectiveness, and forces other parties to seek alternatives to deal with the situation.”⁽⁵⁾

Many Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates welcomed the US decision;⁽⁶⁾ this was expected, given Iran’s ongoing intervention in the region by taking advantage of the signing of the agreement. The Arab League called for reviewing the agreement and taking a firm stance towards the Iranian nuclear file.⁽⁷⁾

Iran is trying to convince the European countries as well as Russia and China to maintain the agreement by offering a series of concessions and economic inducements in the field of energy. However, important questions arise amid these developments; to what extent are the Europeans able to recognize the agreement while they have strategic interests with the United States economically and militarily? And what is the impact of the US decision on Iran’s moves and policies regarding either its nuclear file or its behavior towards the Arab countries?

Undoubtedly, the sanctions imposed on Iran have motivated it to work hard to achieve its goals and to be more determined to maintain its position. Therefore, the situation has continued as a push and pull between tensions threatening to explode and a semi-appeasement through diplomatic negotiations.⁽⁸⁾ In addi-

tion, while Iran-West relations are still undecided in the short term, neither are they at the edge of explosion or complete de-escalation.

Many researchers offer a set of possibilities, ranging from an optimistic to bleak outlook, regarding the future of the Iranian nuclear file and Iran's foreign policy approach after the US withdrawal from the agreement.

Second: Iran's nuclear file - challenges and opportunities

The stances and attitudes of states at the external level remain merely slogans without any strategic value in the absence of actions that ensure their execution on the ground.

In this sense, it is possible to ask the question of whether Iran possesses the strategic components to translate its ambitions into reality and thus challenge the United States, the West, and the regional states. Is it able to withstand the sanctions imposed on it to gain more time to accomplish its dream of joining the nuclear club countries through imposing fait accompli policy in this regard?

Iran's possible resumption of its nuclear program may pose a real international challenge given that "Iran's nuclear program is dangerous enough to threaten the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. If North Korea's withdrawal from the nuclear nonproliferation treaty in 2003 could be considered as deviant, Iran's challenge will be precedent due to the international failure in dealing with North Korea, which may lead to the collapse of the nuclear proliferation regime."⁽⁹⁾

The concern of Iran developing its arsenal is justified because it poses a threat to the international order that calls for the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and helps a non-democratic state to acquire strategic weapons.

The persistence of the Iranian position, which rejects any attempt to curb the development of its nuclear arsenal, is due to the differences between the United States and the other signatories of the agreement, and this worked to the favor of Iran. The European troika countries stood against Trump's decision

to withdraw from the nuclear agreement because they thought it was an important pillar in their relations with Iran. Britain announced on August 12 in response to US demands to stand by the American side that it is unlikely to support the US position on Iran. Germany also called for establishing payment channels independent of the United States. These positions converged with the position of the European Union, whose 28 members agreed to provide support to Iran in accordance with the nuclear agreement. A joint statement was issued by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini and the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Britain in which they criticized the US decision to re-impose the sanctions and considered the lifting of the sanctions of the nuclear file “an essential part of the 5 + 1 agreement.” In addition, the other parties to the nuclear agreement pledged to maintain sufficient financial channels with Iran, to continue importing Iranian oil and gas and to maintain economic ties with Iran. China and Russia announced that they would fulfill their commitments to Iran and implement the agreements concluded.⁽¹⁰⁾

Notably, the US strategy that deals with the Iranian nuclear file is in fact complicated. On the one hand, it is extremely intimidating. On the other hand, it has encouraged the reformist and moderate voices inside Iran.⁽¹¹⁾

Undoubtedly, the Iranian nuclear file’s developments have impacted the security of the region and created more serious concerns and tensions. Upon Iran’s insistence on joining the nuclear club, by all means, the Arabs find themselves trapped between two expansionist states. The first is Israel; the only regional power that has nuclear technology. The second is Iran which has likely succeeded in gaining time that could help it join the nuclear club, thus inevitably stifling the region. Iran’s expansionist approach is no different from its Israeli counterpart, but with different mechanisms.

The development of the course of the Iranian nuclear file over the last two decades indicates that Iran seeks to maneuver and

exploit any available opportunities and potential to develop its nuclear file. Therefore, betting on the American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement cannot be overestimated, given that Iran has the ability to utilize its strong points and files in order to overcome the repercussions of the US withdrawal and pressures facing it by destabilizing some countries in the Arab region including Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq and continuously undermining the security and stability of the region.

Some Arab countries are concerned about Iranian intentions to possess nuclear weapons because it will jeopardize their security. If reaching a solution failed, and with Arab-Iran political problems in place, such as Iran's occupation of the three islands of the UAE and its influence in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, Arab countries including Egypt and Saudi Arabia will seek to possess such weapons, creating other regional challenges, especially as oil prices are rising. These countries would justify the need for possessing nuclear power for self-defense and as a deterrence, since there are two opponents, Iran and Israel, in the region developing their nuclear capabilities continuously.

After signing the nuclear agreement, it was believed regionally and internationally that Iran's policies towards its neighboring countries would change in a way that would encourage ending its involvement in the crises of many regional countries and support the political consensus that can develop sustainable solutions to various conflicts in which Iran is involved. This can help Iran in expressing its goodwill towards its Arab environment, where there is concern about its expansionist policies and the international community which has always urged Iran to respect its neighbors.

However, for decades, Iran's policies in the region have confirmed that it is using its influence in a number of Arab countries as a tool to achieve strategic goals such as developing its nuclear file. The US withdrawal from the agreement with Iran seems only to increase the latter's determination to extend its influence in the region to obfuscate the issue and exploit it in any future negotiations with the United States, especially with

the growing presence of both China and Russia in the international arena and the European position on the Iranian nuclear file. Indeed, the strict US policies of the Trump period may further isolate the United States itself and Iran can seek to end its isolation and to alleviate the effects of the sanctions imposed on it.

The extent of the severity of the US embargo imposed on Iran will likely increase after the US designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist group earlier in April 2019. It is part of a series of previously taken measures such as classifying Iran as part of the “axis of evil” and a “rogue state” a few years ago and imposing a group of severe sanctions on Iran.

The aforementioned decision can create serious consequences given the political, economic and security weight of the IRGC, which was established in 1979 following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and its movements and contributions in implementing Iran’s policies and strategies abroad. Therefore, the US decision is expected to have evident repercussions on the Iranian nuclear file, given that the United States has always planned to translate this resolution on the ground by calling on a number of countries to sever their ties with the IRGC and to tighten the embargo against Iran’s nuclear intentions.

Third: the future of the Iranian nuclear file

After the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, a range of possible scenarios can be examined.⁽¹²⁾ First, the other parties of the Iranian nuclear agreement including Iran itself announce their withdrawal from the agreement. Second, the EU stays committed to the deal strengthening its own interests despite the US withdrawal. Third, Iran adopts the model of North Korea if it submits to all US demands and starts to negotiate a new deal. Fourth, China and Russia commit to supporting Iran and the nuclear agreement. Others warn that the extreme containment policy adopted by the United States is likely to strengthen Iran’s hardliners rather than its moderates,⁽¹³⁾ while others ⁽¹⁴⁾argue that the US withdrawal will weaken President

Rouhani's position during the rest of his second term.

Since the beginning of the Iranian revolution, the United States has not developed a specific foreign policy towards Iran, limiting its options with regard to Iran. Deterrence policies such as US dual containment and the economic and political boycott of Iran have failed in forcing it to change its political behavior, just as these policies were insufficient in dealing previously with Iraq, leading to its occupation in the end.⁽¹⁵⁾

In the meantime, there is growing international awareness of how dangerous Iran will be after acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran would endanger international peace and security by involving such a strategic region in a feverish and new arms race. The US approach in dealing with this issue is apparently by many Arab countries due to the serious threats it poses to Arab national security.

The pressures and challenges Iran faces in developing its nuclear arsenal for military purposes cannot be underestimated, making it hard for Iran to win this bet. This difficulty is further accentuated with the presence of a strict US administration that has not hesitated to take difficult decisions since it took office and has shown its ability to turn its threats into concrete policies.

Some may think that the US policy towards Iran has been and will remain – at best – incoherent, and it will not improve in the foreseeable future. They may think that the absence of productive relations with Tehran will greatly thwart the US efforts in achieving political goals in the Middle East.⁽¹⁶⁾ However, the perpetuation of international uncertainties in general and in the US in particular with regard to Iranian intentions to develop its nuclear program, the impasse prevailing in the negotiating and diplomatic track, the US withdrawal from the agreement, and the US administration led by Donald Trump are all indicators for resorting to a military option that may be carried out

by the United States through Israel in which Iranian nuclear facilities would be targeted by missiles. Yet others believe⁽¹⁷⁾ that the United States would only exert more economic pressure on Tehran through the United Nations or beyond it.

The nuclear weapons industry needs expertise, enormous potential and considerable funds which some countries may be unable to afford, thus leading them to pursue other countries for help. International cooperation in the field of research and nuclear industries has therefore been a key factor in the proliferation of these weapons.⁽¹⁸⁾

In the Iranian case, the pressures and indictments led by the US for tightening the embargo on Iran cannot be overestimated, whether by imposing economic sanctions or convincing major powers, especially the Europeans, China and Russia, to cooperate to curb Iranian attempts to join the nuclear club because of its suspicious movements in the region. The United Nations has always stressed the importance of creating nuclear-weapon-free zones, and it considers this as a step in the right direction to curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons.⁽¹⁹⁾

Iran's tendency of possessing nuclear weapons is undoubtedly facing a lot of difficulties and challenges that make this bet unattainable, given the hostile policies of Iran towards its regional environment as well as its suspicious movements in many parts of the world. They are accomplished through its use of soft power elements to strengthen its presence without considering the security aspects of the countries, their cultural and political aspects, or sovereignty, like what Iran has been doing in some African countries for example.

The sanctions imposed on Iran also limit the possibility of financing its nuclear project, which depends heavily on financial resources and recruiting qualified experts from abroad in this field, especially from Western countries. In this context, statistical data reveals that the Iranian oil sector was negatively

affected as a result of re-imposed US sanctions following the withdrawal from the agreement. However, Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons faces rejection by the United States; a great power which can deter any Iranian attempt in this field. Based on several considerations, the military option is not the best solution for the United States to prevent Iran from possessing nuclear weapons. These considerations include the fear of repeating the Iraqi experience and chaos it has left behind, given that Iran possesses military capabilities, geo-strategic potentials, and vital influence in the Gulf and Central Asia. In addition, the Iranian nuclear secret and public facilities are increasing and extending, making it difficult to target them. Moreover, the use of the military option against Iran will not compel Tehran to comply with US demands. Rather, it will increasingly harden Iran's position and make it respond with inflammatory reactions against the interests of the United States and Israel. Iran is also still pulling the strings in Iraq and it is able, therefore, to cause more trouble for Washington, which is already depleted there, and disrupt the plans of America and its allies in Afghanistan. Finally, European allies are reluctant to take any new military action in the Middle East, particularly against Iran, due to European economic and strategic considerations.⁽²⁰⁾ Therefore, any American military action against Iran will have implications on the global energy market and the international economy and will be strongly opposed by friend and foe alike.⁽²¹⁾

Iran's management of its nuclear file shows that it will stick to its desire to join the military nuclear club by using all possible means, whether by betting on Russian and Chinese support in this regard or using its interventions in the Arab region to gain more time or concessions from the United States and the West. However, the Arab countries can disrupt these plans, either by involvement in this field within a framework of coordination and cooperation or using their regional and international relations in order to strengthen the pressure, curbing any Iranian military approach in this regard.

Scenarios of how the United States can deal with the Iranian file can be laid out as follows: neglecting the Iranian file, seeking to change the system from inside Iran, waiting until Iran's development of its nuclear weapons program reaches an advanced level so that any American military strike will be of military significance along with European and public support, continuing diplomatic negotiations through European countries by following the Iraqi model, a breakthrough in US-Iranian relations, carrying out a military strike by Israel with US approval under the pretext of self-defense or following the North Korean model.⁽²²⁾

Regardless of these possibilities, the option of imposing pressure is still in place after Trump turned many electoral slogans into actual policies. Significantly, they are clear messages to Iran that can be understood from its side to comply with the international pressure to limit its nuclear abilities to the civilian field. Iran will face difficult options if it ignores these messages, which may cost Iran a lot, especially if the United States resorts to the military option in a limited and accurate air strike that can be carried out by Israel due to its increasing concerns over Iranian influence expanding within Syria.

The development of the Iranian nuclear file is also linked to the extent to which Iran can use the options available at its disposal, whether related to its economic and oil capability or its relations with Russia and China as well as its ability to exploit Western divergence in its favor and its continuous contribution in destabilizing the political, security and social conditions in a number of countries in the region that could force the United States to adopt more flexible policies through pursuing a new agreement that balances different interests.

The international community is increasingly aware of Iran's lack of seriousness in curbing its military nuclear program. Its determination in developing nuclear weapons along with its hostile policies towards its surroundings give a bad impression

of the international community if it were to agree to this Iranian behavior and it would be an ill-calculated adventure on its behalf, negatively affecting peace and security in a fragile region at this level.

The increasing pressure on the Arab region and its encirclement by nuclear arsenals from both Israel and Iran necessitates the adoption of a unified strategy to achieve some balance through the possession deterrence and the harnessing of human and economic energies to acquire nuclear technology in the civilian and military fields.

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