

Can a Nuclear-Armed Iran Be Deterred?

Amitai Etzioni



INCREASING EVIDENCE THAT Iran has embarked on a course that will lead it to develop nuclear arms in the near future has reintensified the debate about the ways the world should react to such a danger. Questions concerning ways to deal with the proliferation of nuclear arms are of course not limited to Iran, but also include other nations or groups that might employ nuclear arms, especially North Korea and terrorists.

Four possible responses are commonly discussed in dealing with Iran: engagement, sanctions, military strikes, and deterrence. *Engagement* has been tried, especially since the onset of the Obama administration (and previously by European governments) but so far has not yielded the desired results. *Sanctions* are deemed an unreliable tool, as some nations, especially China, have so far refused to authorize them. Also, sanctions, in the past, have often been readily circumvented and have not generated the sought-after effect, even when imposed on nations that are more vulnerable than Iran, such as Cuba and Syria. And sanctions may help solidify the regime in place and subdue democratic opposition. *Military strikes* are said to be likely to fail. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated on 13 April 2009, “Militarily, in my view, it [a bombing of Iran’s nuclear facilities] would delay the Iranian program for some period of time, but only delay it, probably only one to three years.”

Hence the growing interest in *deterrence*, that is, in tolerating a nuclear-armed Iran but keeping it at bay by threatening retaliation in kind should it use its nuclear weapons. Although the Obama administration has not formally embraced this position, several observers believe that this is the direction it is headed. Indeed, a statement by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Thailand on 22 July 2009 was understood as implying such an approach. She stated, “If the U.S. extends a defense umbrella over the region, it’s unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer, because they won’t be able

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PHOTO: Iranian Defense Ministry photo of Shahin missiles mounted on Iran’s new advanced anti-aircraft system, 11 April 2010. (AP Photo/Iranian Defense Ministry, Vahid Reza Alaei, HO)

Rationalist champions of deterrence often draw on the same assumption as mainline economists do: that people are rational.

to intimidate and dominate, as they apparently believe they can, once they have a nuclear weapon.” In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* on 5 March 2010, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former National Security Advisor, also called for such an umbrella as the way to deal with Iran.

Retired General John Abizaid, former head of U.S. Central Command, put it as follows: “We need to make it very clear to the Iranians, the same way we made it clear to the Soviet Union and China that their first use of nuclear weapons would result in the devastation of their nation. I don’t believe Iran is a suicide state. Deterrence will work with Iran.”

Fareed Zakaria, the editor of *Newsweek International*, a *Washington Post* columnist, and a frequent TV commentator, is a leading advocate of deterrence. In his article “Don’t Scramble the Jets,” he argues that Iran’s religious leaders comprise a “canny (and ruthlessly pragmatic) clerical elite,” and that military dictatorships like the one that is now forming in Iran “are calculating. They act in ways that keep themselves alive and in power. That instinct for self-preservation is what will make a containment strategy work.” Among academics, Columbia University professor Kenneth Waltz has written that “It would be strange if Iran did not strive to get nuclear weapons, and I don’t think we have to worry if they do. Because deterrence has worked 100 percent of the time. After all, we have deterred big nuclear powers like the Soviet Union and China. So sleep well.”

A State Department official, who asked that his name not be used, pointed out that the United States is already providing to its allies in the Middle East countermeasures, such as positioning batteries of Patriot missiles, that might be employed to discourage Iran from using its nukes—but not from acquiring them.

In the following paragraphs, I focus on the question of whether deterrence might work and, if not, what kind of military strike—if any—could have the required effect.

Rational Actors?

One of the few points on which there is wide agreement is that for deterrence to work, the lead-

ers of the nations that command nuclear arms must be rational. The same holds for terrorists who may acquire nuclear arms one way or another. In effect, a small cottage industry has developed of popular authors and researchers who argue that both heads of states and terrorists do act rationally, and thus—fearing retaliation from other nuclear powers—they will not employ their nukes. (To those who may ask, if nations such as Iran do not intend to use their nuclear arms, why would they go through the cost and risk of acquiring them—these rationalist mavens respond by explaining that the nuclear weapons serve these nations by fending off attacks against them.)

Rationalist champions of deterrence often draw on the same assumption as mainline economists do: that people *are* rational. One way economists protect this assumption from obvious criticism is by using one data point to assess both the intentions and the actions of the person involved. Thus, economists have argued that if a person who never drank wine—and had no intention of drinking wine—suddenly purchased a bottle of wine, this must have been a rational choice—because otherwise why would he have bought it? And they state that when a person chooses to become a criminal, he “must have” weighed the pros and cons and made a rational decision that being a criminal was the optimal choice. As Nobel Laureate George Stigler pointed out, “A reason can always be found for whatever we observe man to do,” which “turns utility into a tautology.”

This approach violates a basic tenet of science—that propositions are to be formulated in ways that can be falsified. Using the same academic sleight of hand, the champions of deterrence maintain that whatever the leaders of a nation do is rational, because one can find some reason according to which their actions make sense. However, this line of reasoning would also make dropping nuclear bombs and ignoring the effects of retaliation “rational”—say, because, like Herman Kahn, the leaders believe that their nation will fare better in such a

war than their enemy, or because such bombing would bring about a rapture that provides a shortcut to heaven.

The champions of deterrence further defend their position by suggesting that the only alternative to being rational is to be irrational, which is treated as tantamount to crazy. They then argue that Iran's leaders, terrorists, and even Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il are not insane people. They demonstrate this by showing that these leaders react, in sensible ways, to changes in the world around them. For instance, by far the most conciliatory offer made by Iran regarding its nuclear program was made in May 2003, after the U.S. military wiped out Saddam's army within a few weeks with few casualties, something Iran had been unable to do even after an eight-year-long war. It is also when Iran was told in no uncertain terms by the president of the United States that it was on the same short list of members of the "Axis of Evil." In short, Iran had reason to expect to be attacked. Because by these proponents of deterrence, actors can act only either purely rationally or purely irrationally, showing that

the leaders of Iran and other rogue states respond to changes in facts and are not insane seems to prove their assertion that they are rational.

Other scholars who have studied terrorism further uphold this line of thinking by explaining that terrorists act strategically and not irrationally. In an article entitled "Deterring Terrorism: It Can Be Done," UCLA professor Robert F. Trager and Columbia doctoral candidate Dessislava P. Zagorcheva observe that "The assertion that terrorists are highly irrational is contradicted by a growing body of literature that shows that terrorist groups . . . choose strategies that best advance them. The resort to terror tactics is itself a strategic choice of weaker actors with no other means of furthering their cause." Further, in "Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review History," Stanford professor Martha Crenshaw reports, "There is an emerging consensus that suicide attacks are instrumental in or strategic from the perspective of a sponsoring organization. . . . They serve the political interests of identifiable actors, most of whom are non-states opposing well-armed states. This method is mechanically simple and tactically efficient . . ."



(AP Photo/Iranian Defense Ministry, Vahid Reza Alaei, HO)

Iran's Qadr 1 missile is displayed during a military parade to mark the beginning of the 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq on 22 September 2009 in Tehran, Iran.

The trouble with this line of reasoning is that it makes a jump from showing that the rulers of countries such as Iran and North Korea, as well as terrorists, are not irrational—they have clear goals, find means suitable to their goals, and respond to facts and logic—to assuming that they hence act rationally, and reach the same conclusions as the observers do from changes in facts.

However, leading sociologists, notably Talcott Parsons, have long pointed out that there is a third category of decisionmaking and behavior, which they called “nonrational.” This may at first seem like typical academic hair-splitting, a weakness that is rather prevalent among social scientists. In this case, though, it points to a major category of human behavior, where people act in response to deeply held beliefs that cannot be proven or disproven; for instance, their sense that God commanded them to act in a particular manner. People have long shown that they are willing to kill for their beliefs, even if they will die as a result. True, they respond to facts and pressures, but only as long as those factors affect the ways they implement their beliefs—not the beliefs themselves. Thus, a religious fanatic Iranian leader may well believe that God commands him to wipe out Tel Aviv, may calculate whether to use missiles or bombers, and what season to attack, but not whether or not to heed God’s command to kill the infidels.

In “Can Iran Be Deterred? A Question We Cannot Afford to Get Wrong,” *National Review* Deputy Managing Editor Jason Lee Steorts writes, “[Iran’s] religious zealotry causes it to exaggerate the significance of issues that are, objectively speaking, only tangentially related to its interests. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, has no direct bearing on Iran’s security, but much of the regime sees it as fundamental to Iranian interests and even to Iran’s identity as a Muslim nation.” This is an example of nonrational, not irrational, thinking.

Nonrational behavior is not limited to one faith. The Israelis, for instance, who have been criticized roundly on many accounts, are usually not considered irrational. But they have a strong Masada complex, which led their forefathers to kill each other and commit suicide, rather than surrender. This is more than an idle piece of history. Many Israelis still hold to this fatalistic belief, further reinforced by the narrative about Samson, who pulled a building

down on himself in order to kill his enemies, and by the strong commitment to “never again” go “like lambs to the slaughter” as Jews did (in the Israeli view) during the Nazi regime. Israelis model themselves after those few Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto who fought the Nazis—despite the fact that they had no chance of winning—until the bitter end. Such beliefs might lead Israel to attack Iran even when rational considerations indicate that such an attack would be extremely detrimental. Such an attack would serve their beliefs and is rational in this technical sense—but the beliefs themselves are based on nonrational commitments that one cannot argue with on the basis of facts and logic, and thus cannot be reliably deterred.

Does the Past Predict the Future?

Related to the rationality thesis is an argument based on the historical record. Waltz writes, “It is now fashionable for political scientists to test hypotheses. Well, I have one: If a country has nuclear weapons, it will not be attacked militarily in ways that threaten its manifestly vital interests. That is 100 percent true, without exception, over a period of more than fifty years. Pretty impressive.” In “Containing a Nuclear Iran,” Zakaria writes, “Deterrence worked with madmen like Mao, and with thugs like Stalin, and it will work with the calculating autocrats of Tehran.”

Such arguments fail on several grounds. First, as we learn in Logic 101, the fact that all the swans you see are white does not prove that there are no black ones. The fact that so far no nukes have been employed (since 1945, after which the deterrence system was instituted) does not prove that no such incident will occur in the future. This is especially true as the number of actors increases and they include a number of fanatics.

Moreover, the historical record reveals several occasions in which nations governed by leaders who are considered far from irrational came dangerously close to nuclear blows. India and Pakistan earned this dubious title several times. John F. Kennedy almost hit the “launch” button during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Moshe Dayan nearly did as well, readying the Israelis’ nuclear arsenal for use in the Yom Kippur War. Mao planned to drop a nuclear bomb on the U.S.S.R. during a 1969 border dispute.



Space Imaging Middle East

Nantanz reactor site suspected of housing hidden uranium enrichment operations.

The pro-deterrence champions point to the same incidents as demonstrating that deterrence did work; after all, the various nations pulled back from the brink, albeit some at the very last moment. However, as I see it, heads of states have shown themselves in the past to be very capable of making gross miscalculations that cost them their lives, their regimes, and all they were fighting for—take Hitler, for instance. Similarly, the Japanese, when they attacked Pearl Harbor, believed that they would be able at least to drive the U.S. out of their part of the world. And both the Germans and the French completely misjudged the course of World War I. History is further littered with numerous, less grand miscalculations, from Bernard Montgomery’s “a bridge too far,” to Lord Cardigan’s charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War, to Pickett’s charge in the American Civil War. Note that to start a nuclear war, only one miscalculation is required; once an order to strike is executed—there is no room for reconsideration. In contrast, the miscalculations cited required days and months and in some cases years of holding on to the same mistaken

strategy. And still heads of states persisted. In other words, it is many times easier to fall into a nuclear showdown than to carry out a misadventure using conventional weapons.

Above all, there are no iron laws in history. What did not happen before provides no guarantee that it will not happen tomorrow. It is hence rational to apply here the rule that if the potential disutility is very large, avoiding it must govern the decision, even if the probability of suffering that disutility is very low. A simplistic way to highlight this point is to note that rational people will happily accept a bet for \$1 if the probability of winning is 99 out of 100. They will do the same for \$10, and even \$100—but not for \$1,000,000. The reason is that although the probability of losing remains the same and is very small, the cost of losing is so high (assuming those who bet will have to pledge their future income as collateral) that the disutility is so great that it makes sense to refuse such a bet. Only a reckless gambler would accept such a wager. Obviously, the disutility of being attacked with nuclear arms is so high that even if the probability that deterrence will fail is very low,

it makes sense to go a long way to avoid it. In plain words, we had better be safe than sorry.

I should add that the matter of probabilities is essential here. Many of the champions of deterrence use hedged wording to explain that the risk of attack is very low. In “Terrorism: The Relevance of the Rational Choice Model,” George Mason economist Brian Caplan writes, “While millions believe that they earn vast rewards in the afterlife if they engage in terrorism or—better yet—suicidal terrorism, only a handful put their lives on the line.” Well, a handful may well suffice. Similarly, when Waltz writes, “I don’t notice that many religiously-oriented people act in ways that will result in the massacre of thousands of people. I think people are people. I don’t think heavenly rewards motivate very many people,” one cannot but note that many hundreds of thousands of people have been slaughtered because of one faith or ideology or another; Armenians by Ottomans, Jews by Hitler, Russians by Stalin, and many more. And even if not “many” people are motivated by heavenly rewards, it did not take many terrorists to bring down the Twin Towers, nor will it take many to place and activate a nuclear device in one of our cities.

Nor can one ignore that terrorists have a nontrivial probability of getting their hands on nukes and finding ways to deploy them. One or more small nukes can be placed in one of the 6,000,000 containers that make their way to the U.S. each year and are only minimally screened, or they can be delivered by one of the more than 2,000,000 recreational boats and small private planes that enter the U.S. each year with next to no oversight (in the case of the boats), and rather attenuated screening (in the case of the small planes). As one Coast Guard commander told me, “The best way to bring a nuke into the U.S. is to put it into a ton of cocaine.” In short, given that nobody is really denying that there is small probability of a very great disutility, we had better seek to prevent the proliferation of nukes than grow to learn to live with them.

Side Effects: Undermining the Norm

Clearly the more nations that command nuclear arms, even if one disregards the differences in the mentalities and predispositions of those who now seek nukes compared to older members of the club, the greater the danger that some nation will employ these catastrophic weapons. The champions

of deterrence scoff at this danger and stress that rather few nations have acquired nukes over the last decades, in contrast to the fear voiced early in the nuclear age. Thus, President Kennedy observed that soon there might be “10, 15, 20” countries with a nuclear capacity. And C.P. Snow wrote at the time that, unless there was a nuclear disarmament, a nuclear war would be “not a probability but a certainty.” Actually, over the decades that followed, a considerable number of countries capable of developing nuclear weapons have refrained from progressing down this road, including Canada, Sweden, Italy, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Although it is true that proliferation has been slower than some initially predicted, those who draw on this fact to claim that we have nothing to worry about disregard the fact that we are at a tipping point at which the old restraining regime may give way to a nuclear free-for-all. For decades, we were able to promote a taboo on nuclear weapons, well depicted in *The Nuclear Taboo* by Brown University professor Nina Tannenwald. Major segments of the population of the world and their leaders embraced the precept that nations should refrain from acquiring nukes, and that giving them up was the desired policy. When President Obama called for a world free of nuclear weapons and promised that the U.S., working with Russia, would move toward zero nukes, he was widely cheered. The taboo is at the foundation of a treaty signed by 189 nations, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Both the taboo and the treaty were undergirded by various diplomatic and economic measures, as well as some arm-twisting.

In recent years, though, as North Korea thumbed its nose at the NPT and Iran seemed increasingly to move toward developing nuclear weapons, the taboo has weakened and respect for the NPT has waned. Moreover, the champions of deterrence in effect argue that the taboo and treaty are so yesterday, that more and more countries will obtain nukes, and that we ought to get over it, adjust to the world as it is now, and move on. Thus, Texas A&M University professor Michael Desch writes, “If [during the Cold War] we could live with those rogue nuclear states [the Soviet Union and China], which were willing to sacrifice millions of their own people to advance an eschatological ideology, there

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is scant reason to think Iran poses a more serious threat . . . To paraphrase the subtitle of Stanley Kubrick's great nuclear satire *Dr. Strangelove*, it might just be time to stop worrying and learn, if not to love, at least to tolerate the Iranian bomb."

As I see it, the taboo and treaty are indeed being tested, but it is too early to write them off. If Iran can be stopped, which in turn would increase the chances that we could pressure North Korea to reconsider its course, we may be able to save the nuclear abstinence regime. In contrast, there is little doubt that if we allow Iran to develop nukes, other nations will seek them, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and, some believe, even Jordan. Also, as a countermeasure against North Korea, Japan and South Korea would not be far behind if the taboo is broken so flagrantly in the Middle East. Brazil and Argentina may well also follow suit as more and more "important" nations acquire nukes. In short, applying deterrence to Iran rather than trying to dissuade it from developing nukes in effect entails opening the world to truly large-scale proliferation that would significantly increase the probability of nations coming to nuclear blows and terrorists finding places to get their hands on nukes.

Side Effects: Shield and Blackmail

Even if Iran never drops its nukes on anybody, once it demonstrates that it has acquired them—say, by testing them—these weapons would have considerable consequences for our security and that of our allies. Desch correctly reports, "The concern is that once Iran develops a nuclear capability, it would become even more aggressive in supporting terrorist groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Gaza . . . Finally, many Americans fear that once Iran fields a nuclear weapon, it will become ever more meddlesome in Iraq." The side effects of allowing Iran to obtain nukes are well spelled out by Emanuele Ottolenghi, the executive director of the Transatlantic Institute in Brussels. I hence quote him at some length. He writes—

The fact is that an Iranian bomb would enable Tehran to fulfill the goals of the revolution *without using it*. A nuclear bomb is a force multiplier that, as U.S. President Barack Obama aptly said, constitutes a 'game changer.' Iran's success will change the Middle East forever—and for the worse. Under an Iranian nuclear umbrella, terrorists will be able to act with impunity, and its neighbors will enter into a dangerous arms race. Less understood are the dynamics that will emerge if Iran chooses not to use the bomb against its enemies. It matters little that Tehran may act rationally. If Iran goes nuclear, the Western world will have to negotiate a Middle East Yalta with Tehran—one that may entail a U.S. withdrawal, an unpleasant bargain for the smaller principalities of the Gulf's shores and an unacceptable one for Israel and Lebanon's Christians.

Last but not least is the risk that Iran, or some other rogue nation, will slip a nuke or two to terrorists, or they will obtain one without consent of the leaders with the help of one group or another, such as the Revolutionary Guard. The champions of deterrence argue that it suffices to deter such nations from sharing nukes with terrorists for us to declare that if terrorists use such weapons, we will hold responsible the nation that provided them. However, this argument assumes a much more reliable level of nuclear forensics than we command so far. We may well be unable to determine the source of a bomb, or it will take months, after which striking a nation with nuclear bombs in cold blood may well not seem a very credible counterthreat.

One hardly needs to elaborate any further that even if Iran can be deterred from employing its nukes directly, there are strong reasons to favor an Iran without nukes.

Costs of Prevention

So far, the discussion has focused on the question of whether an Iran equipped with nuclear arms poses a serious security threat that cannot be reliably deterred by the threat of a second strike. However, even if one agrees that Iran does pose a significant threat, one still must ponder the costs of the only viable alternative to deterrence—a military strike.

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(We already suggested that engagement and sanctions are unlikely to have the required effect.)

Opponents of a military strike argue that (a) the location of some key sites may not be known; (b) several sites are well protected; (c) some of the sites are in highly populated areas, and bombing them may cause a great number of civilian casualties; (d) in the past, bombing such sites was not very effective, and the bombing might delay the development of nuclear programs only slightly or even lead Iran to accelerate its program in reaction, and refuse all future inspections by the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency); (e) some even warn that bombing fully fueled nuclear plants could release radioactive materials into the atmosphere, resulting in disastrous levels of illness, deformity, and death among the population, both immediately and in years to come.

The fact that all these objections deal with bombing nuclear sites points to a *different military option*. It is one that has not been discussed in public so far and at first blush may seem controversial. Note should be hence taken that it has been previously employed, indeed on several occasions. The basic approach seeks not to degrade Iran's nuclear capacities (the aim of bombing) but to compel the regime to change its behavior, by causing ever-higher levels of "pain." It starts with demanding that Iran live up to its international obligations and open up its nuclear sites by a given date, to demonstrate that they are not serving a military program. If this demand is not heeded, the next step would entail bombing of Iran's nonnuclear military assets (such as the headquarters and encampments of the Revolutionary Guard, air defense installations and radar sites, missile sites, and naval vessels that might be used against oil shipments). If such bombing does not elicit the required response, the bombing of select dual-use assets will be undertaken, including key elements of the infrastructure, like bridges, railroad stations, and other such assets, just the way the U.S. did in Germany and Japan in World War II. (The reference is to dual-use assets, that can be

bombed at night, even after proper warning, to minimize civilian casualties, and not to purely civilian targets such as was done in Dresden and Tokyo.) If still more tightening of the screws is needed, Iran could be declared a no-fly zone, the way parts of Iraq were even before Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. This kind of military action is akin to sanctions—causing "pain" in order to change behavior, albeit by much more powerful means.

Note that the location of these assets is known, that it matters not if one misses some, that they are not well hidden nor well protected, and bombing them will not unleash radioactive materials. In short, from a strictly targeting viewpoint, they are much less problematic than nuclear sites.

Critics are likely to argue military action will help those in power in Iran to suppress the opposition, or make the opposition support the regime. However, the regime is going all out to repress the opposition anyway, and a weakening of the regime, following the military strikes, may provide an opening for the opposition. Moreover, experience in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the U.S.S.R., and Burma, among other countries, shows that we tend to exaggerate the likelihood that the opposition will win against brutal domestic regimes. Also, as the head of the reformers made clear to me when I was his guest in Iran in 2002, the reformers do not plan to fold the nuclear program. All this suggests that trying to figure out the vagrancies of Iranian domestic policies should not be allowed to determine our foreign policy when vital national interests are at stake.

Above all, we cannot delay action much longer if we are to prevent Iran from crossing a threshold after which a military option will become much more dangerous to implement—for us and for them.

Legitimacy?

In considering the way other nations and international institutions, especially the UN, would react to such a policy, one must distinguish between the acts of deciding to exercise a military option and deciding the specific kind of military action it will

be. This discussion assumes that military action of *some kind* has been deemed necessary and ordered by the president, after due consultation with our military authorities, has been authorized by the U.S. Senate, that allies have been consulted, and that the U.S. government decided that it must act even if no UN approval can be obtained. Given all this, I see no reason the UN would be more likely to approve striking the nuclear sites than it would be to approve increasing the “pain” by striking military assets, and if need be, dual-use ones. Critics may argue that the behavior-changing approach amounts to “total” war, while striking the nuclear sites entails only “limited” war. However, this distinction has been largely erased in recent years, and it is particularly inappropriate in this case, given that an attack on nuclear sites may cause considerably more collateral damage than the suggested option.

Coping with Side-effects

Critics of a military strike fear that Iran will retaliate by unleashing Hezbollah and Hamas, making our lives more difficult in Iraq and Afghanistan

and disrupting the supply of oil to us and to our allies. These concerns do not apply to the decision of *which* military mode is the proper one, but to the question of whether a military option should be considered in the first place. In response, I suggest that a nation that holds that it cannot cope with such countermeasures should not only forego its claim to the status of a superpower, but also cease to see itself as much of an international player.

In short, engagements and sanctions are very unlikely to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear power. Hence, increasing attention is devoted to containment. It may well work, but given the high disutility of a nuclear strike by Iran, even a relatively small probability that Iran may use its nukes is unacceptable. The argument that the rulers of Iran are not irrational disregards that quite a few national leaders have in the past “bet” their lives and regimes and lost. Hence, a military option should not be off of the table. However, bombing Iran’s nuclear sites might not be the most effective one. **MR**



M8 armored cars, provided to Iran under the Mutual Assistance Program, pass a camel train near Teheran, 19 December 1956.