



## INFORMATION SERIES

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### **Self-Perceptions and Nuclear Weapons**

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#### **Introduction**

The Middle East may be on the brink of a new and dangerous nuclear era. The trigger to this era – if or when it happens, will probably be Iran. Most Western Intelligence communities – the US and Israel in particular – agree that Iran is now weeks away from a sufficient quantity of enriched uranium for a number of weapons and – depending on the status of the weaponization program and the decision by the Iranian leadership – can be months away from a military nuclear capability.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to a prospective Iranian nuclear capability, the conventional wisdom in the region is that the resolve – and capability – of the international community, including that of the United States, to continue to delay Iran’s program will diminish with time and the efforts to do so will shift from preventing Iranian nuclearization to restricting it, along with efforts to prevent a domino effect of regional proliferation. As far as the countries of the region are concerned, the die has been cast; barring an unlikely volte-face by the United States regarding the military option against Iran’s nuclear program, an Israeli pre-emptive attack or the fall of the Iranian regime, Iran is on track towards a military nuclear capability within months.

The shape that a nuclear Middle East takes will owe much to cultural factors such as self-images and traditional threat perceptions of the countries of the region. Such factors impact a wide range of domestic and strategic issues from the social structures of the countries (secular



or Islamic), the inter-relationships between majorities and minorities both in relatively homogenous countries (Egypt) and in multi-ethnic countries, economic structures and ties with the West and East, and global orientations and alliances with countries in the region and beyond. It is only natural, therefore, that these cultural factors will have a deep influence on the motivation to acquire nuclear weapons and the subsequent nuclear doctrine and model of command and control of such weapons.

### **Self-Images and Nuclear Doctrine**

One of the more salient of these cultural factors will be the perception by the peoples, elites, regimes and religious establishments of the essence and implications of nuclear weapons. The basic beliefs that will ultimately form attitudes towards nuclear weapons are already present in the culture, religion and decision-making processes. In a region that is coming increasingly under the influence of fundamentalist Islam, it is crucial to understand the underlying logic and belief systems that will influence the attitude of these regimes toward nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> The Islamic analogy of nuclear weapons as modern “catapults” from the point of view of Islamic jurisprudence is a case in point; if the Prophet Muhammad authorized the use of catapults, then the use of nuclear weapons is also legal.<sup>3</sup> Many do not derive the legality or illegality of use of nuclear weapons from “international law” (discriminatory “infidel” conventions imposed on the Muslims), but from traditional Islamic jurisprudence, which does not embrace the Western nuclear “taboo.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, even the non-Islamic public discourse in the region does not reflect the sense of a “taboo” on the actual use of nuclear weapons that developed in the Western community as the result of fear of worldwide nuclear conflagration. The elites of the emerging (or potential) nuclear states have no collective traumas of the experiences that brought the Western World to subscribe to these taboos.<sup>5</sup> The public discourse in the Middle East reflects a contradictory view of the capability of nuclear weapons. On the one hand, they are indeed perceived as “doomsday weapons.” They also are viewed as a “silver bullet” that will allow the nation that has access to them to reduce reliance on conventional power and achieve security through threatening its enemies with total annihilation.

The absence of the Western nuclear “taboo” will affect the nuclear doctrines of those countries – particularly measures to prevent unauthorized or accidental use and to guarantee full control in escalatory situations. It is also unlikely that the acquisition of nuclear weapons will fundamentally change their decision-making paradigms, their levels of risk propensity or aversion, or will reliably prove the expectation that “the likelihood of war decreases as deterrent and defensive capabilities increase... [because] new nuclear states will be more concerned for their safety and more mindful of dangers than some of the old ones have been... nations that have nuclear weapons have strong incentives to use them responsibly.”<sup>6</sup>



## **The Middle East Domino**

In the wake of Iranian nuclear breakout—or during the period leading up to it—the key candidates for achieving military nuclear capabilities are: Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. While Iran will be constrained only by the resolve of the international community and Israel to block its nuclear aspirations through diplomacy or military action, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt will have to overcome their close relations with the United States if they embark on a course of acquisition of nuclear weapons—either each on its own or in a collaborative effort. They will also have to take into account the political prices they will have to pay in their relations with the West, and the price that the potential source countries for the necessary technology, China, North Korea, Pakistan and Russia, will exact. In addition, Turkey may have to decide between an independent nuclear capability and remaining under the NATO umbrella.<sup>7</sup>

But these are all practical strategic considerations. The Arab states and Turkey will also have to deal with non-practical cultural considerations. They will have to grapple with what they will see as a historic burden to protect the Sunni Arab world against a Persian (i.e., anti-Arab) and Shiite (i.e., anti-Sunni) nuclear weapon in the hands of the Iranian regime. This response will have to correspond with their own national self-images and perceptions of the relations among them.

In this regard, Egypt, which sees itself as the historic leader and defender of the Arab world, will be hard put to forgo nuclear weapons while its rival for Arab primacy—Saudi Arabia—and two non-Arab claimants for regional hegemony—Iran and Turkey—pursue such a capability. Egypt will find it equally difficult to accept that (non-Arab) Pakistanis and/or the desert Arab Saudis will become the nuclear protectors of the Sunni Arab world against Shiite Iran.

Turkey, as noted above, may have to decide whether or not to develop its own independent nuclear capability and possibly compromise its status as a NATO member under the NATO nuclear umbrella. It may attempt to promote its nuclear program as far as possible without withdrawing from NATO. This would be the rational choice. However, ultimately, consideration based on Turkish-nationalism and Neo-Ottomanism (which is far deeper and pervasive than just the Erdogan regime) are more likely to prevail. Turkey may well decide that its self-image and national role in the region does not permit it to rely on the West and forego its own independent nuclear capability.

An important factor in the decision by any Middle Eastern country to achieve a military nuclear capability is the perceived credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent. American policy since the Obama Administration (and including the Trump Administration) has raised doubts in the region regarding the likelihood that the U.S. would fulfil any commitments of “extended deterrence,” were it to offer them to its allies in the region in return for their refraining from acquiring their own nuclear deterrent. The retreat of the Obama Administration from its stated “red lines” regarding use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and the inconsistency of the Trump Administration are seen as further proof that U.S. deterrence cannot be relied upon.



The chances are slim, therefore, that the Arab states and Turkey will be satisfied with U.S. declarations of extended deterrence. Anything less than an unambiguous and binding commitment on the part of the United States to use nuclear weapons against a nuclear power that uses them against a country to which the U.S. has provided extended deterrence will not satisfy any of the prospective nuclear states in the region. In the past, it was assumed that Saudi Arabia would request “extended deterrence” from Pakistan, on the basis of the agreement between the two countries when Riyadh funded the Pakistani nuclear program. However, such a scenario is unlikely today, and it is more likely that Saudi Arabia will attempt to build its own nuclear capability alone or in collaboration with the other Gulf States and even with Egypt.

The disintegration of three states that were in the past on the road to acquiring nuclear weapons—Iraq, Libya and Syria—has caused analysts to ponder what situation may have evolved had those countries achieved their goals before their collapse. The scenarios for states to acquire nuclear weapons and then to disintegrate or to undergo some sort of a revolution are not far-fetched. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has been in power and could achieve power again. In Saudi Arabia, the Crown Prince could fall and be replaced by an unknown quantity. In Iran, the death of the Supreme Leader could pave the way to an IRGC<sup>8</sup> “praetorian regime” or—under circumstances of extreme economic decline—to disintegration and power grabs by elements of the IRGC and the Basij.<sup>9</sup> In all these cases, the new “owners” of the nuclear weapons may have a diminished sense of responsibility regarding the weapons they control.

Theoretically, possible models for nuclear breakout and doctrine in the Middle East may be derived from the models that were adopted by the veteran nuclear powers. These models include: testing and declaration (the United States, USSR, U.K., France and China); “premature posturing” (similar to the way that Iraq, after the occupation of Kuwait in 1990, attempted to project deterrence by making oblique references to WMD capabilities that it did not have); early posturing (the “Indian model” of exploding a nuclear device before achieving a weapon capability); “Bomb in the Basement” (the “Israeli model”); and breakout when credible (the “Pakistani model”).

Under the circumstances of heightened international attention to nuclear proliferation, it seems more likely that any country that intends to break out as a nuclear power will do so as early as possible out of fear of attempts to pre-empt or sabotage its nuclear assets. The moment one of the countries in the region (i.e., Iran) breaks out, the other nuclear candidates will likely accelerate their programs.

### **Nuclear Doctrine – No “One Size Fits All”**

Once any of the nations in the Middle East acquires a military nuclear capability, its nuclear doctrine will also be affected by underlying beliefs and attitudes that exist in the military culture, leadership paradigms and political decision-making processes of those nations. These factors, in turn, are influenced—and frequently dictated—by geography (size, distance from potential enemies and access to sea) and demography (population density, existence of perceived potential “fifth columns”). These factors will influence the perception of nuclear



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weapons as weapons of deterrence alone, to be used only in extremis as a “last resort” weapon in case of a nuclear attack, or weapons of compellence to be integrated into conventional military doctrine and to be brandished in the course of conventional conflicts in order to intimidate neighbors.

Mutual perceptions of the enemy’s willingness to risk nuclear war will affect a country’s policy of safeguards on its own nuclear weapons, and the potential triggers for first use. Some countries, for reason of their close relations with the West, will be obliged to keep a low nuclear profile. Others will be more ready to brandish their nuclear weapons as means for deterrence and/or compellence of their adversaries. In this respect, Iran—and possibly Turkey—may view their nuclear arsenals as umbrellas under which they can advance their respective regional ambitions, whereas Saudi Arabia or Egypt would likely prefer to keep the weapons as a pure deterrent. Unlike Iran and Turkey, these two countries have been less involved in the last decades in the projection of military power beyond their borders (Saudi Arabia in Yemen is the exception that proves the rule). They are also constrained by their relations with the West to refrain from provocative postures.

The first country after Iran that will achieve the goal of nuclear weapons will face the problem of the relationship between itself as a nuclear power and its formal and informal allies in the region. A declaration of “negative assurances” may be a first stage, but it is likely that the first (non-Iranian) nuclear power will also attempt to offer formal extended deterrence commitments in order to enhance its status as the nuclear “protector” of its allies. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this process would be natural as the Saudi nuclear umbrella would likely be applied to the entire Arabian Peninsula.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Egypt or Turkey, this will not be a foregone conclusion. Neither of these countries have existing mutual defense agreements with any other country in the region. However, they both may wish to use their new-found nuclear capability to forge such alliances and to position themselves as the new protectors of the other countries against Iran.

An important element of the emerging nuclear doctrines will be their reference to the issue of first use. Adoption of a “No First Use” policy would have to derive from some level of confidence that the country involved will have the capability to ward off or survive first use by the enemy. However, for some time to come, the new nuclear powers will likely lack a credible second-strike capability. This will increase the inclination of a country to first use. Some of the states involved may adopt a posture of “minimum deterrence” that takes into account their inferiority in stockpiles of weapons and survivability of delivery systems after an enemy’s first use.<sup>11</sup>

### **Command, Control and Communication (C3)**

The potential that Iranian breakout will lead to a “Poly-Nuclear” Middle East raises questions regarding how such a system will function, what safeguards and command and control measures will be integrated and what will be the risk of nuclear confrontation. The potential of



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such a system also raises questions regarding the implications for the involvement of external powers in regional conflicts that will be fraught with higher risks than in the past.

An important aspect of nuclear doctrine will be the location of the deployment of weapons and delivery systems. Unlike veteran nuclear powers, some of the countries involved—like Iraq in the past and Iran today—are likely to deploy their weapons near large, closely-aligned population centers—both out of fear to deploy them in areas not populated by ethnic minorities and as a means to discourage the enemy from hitting them. The political and military culture of these regimes is also likely to result in concentrating assets (weapons, uranium stockpiles and delivery systems) in the same areas in order to facilitate their control by a small number of loyal forces.

The role of the nuclear arsenal in each country's nuclear posture will affect the command and control procedures that they will adopt. Some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, may prefer to keep a low nuclear profile, while others (Iran, Turkey) may brandish their nuclear weapons as means for deterrence and/or compellence of their adversaries. These two latter countries have a history of projection of conventional power both through their own forces and through proxies, and they may well view their nuclear weapons as another element in such projection of power. These countries likely to view their prospective nuclear weapons as part of a their conventional deterrence and compellence doctrines (Iran, Turkey) will ultimately have to adopt positive control measures in order to accord a greater flexibility in demonstrating their nuclear prowess. Those that view nuclear weapons only in the context of deterrence and last resort measures would probably be satisfied with simpler negative command and control measures.

Analysis of existing cultures of political and military command vis-à-vis conventional weapons and missile systems can shed light on the corresponding paradigms that could apply to nuclear weapons. These cultural elements include: traditions of political vs. military control in countries where the political leadership has little trust in the military hierarchy and prefers loyal praetorian guards; the lack of traditions for delegation of authority or preference for extra-bureaucratic affiliations—religious, tribal, family—to determine who would have access to nuclear weapons, and to whom, and when, authority would be delegated. In most of these regimes, elite units close to the leader would probably serve as channels for verification and authorization. However, autocrats tend to be loath to appoint seconds in command or second echelon verification parties who may restrict their freedom of action.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the Western system of delegation of authority and reliance on a hierarchal chain of command, the leadership culture in most of the Middle East prefers a more individualized, personal chain of command consisting of fewer, but highly loyal and trusted, individuals, with less compartmentalization between them. Hence, it is highly unlikely that any of the regimes in the region will adopt procedures for human verification of the orders of the head of government (by deputies or ministers). In authoritarian regimes, the leadership would probably not accept any restrictions on its authority to launch weapons—even authentication by a “trusted” deputy. This will mean that any leadership confronted with a potential enemy nuclear strike could be under pressure to execute first use of its own, lest it be



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destroyed or lose communications. In regimes such as the Iranian or future Jihadi-Salafi ones in which the leader is perceived as inspired by Allah (the Sunni concept of Amir al-Muminin – Commander of the Believers, or the Iranian doctrine of Vali-Faqih – Supreme Leader), restriction of his discretion by a lesser individual would be tantamount to imposing restrictions on the will of Allah. Another possible implication would be that under the political culture of the region and the weakness of C3 in most of these countries, the “Dead Man’s Hand” operating procedure may not be viable as the leaders may (correctly) fear that their authority will disappear with their own lack of communication.<sup>13</sup>

An issue that may arise – and will be precedential – will be the possibility of multi-lateral control by a number of allied states, as once envisaged by NATO. This could create a unique relationship, and unique problems of command and control. The main candidates for such collaboration would be Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the GCC States, with Egypt providing the technological know-how and the military backbone, and the latter the funding for the project. Even without Egyptian involvement in the Saudi weapons program, the option of Saudi-UAE joint command could appear. Other issues will include limited confidence in technological means, such as a permissive action link (PAL), for the prevention of unauthorized use. The integration of such technologies into the command and control structures of regimes in the Middle East is doubtful, at least in the early stages.

The C3 paradigms that may emerge in the early stages of a nascent nuclear power in the region will probably be closer to the early structures of the veteran nuclear powers, with adaptations for regional cultural, political and religious idiosyncrasies, and will not necessarily reflect the accumulated lessons of those powers. The latter developed their paradigms gradually as nuclear weapons became more abundant, and in a thoroughly different strategic and cultural context. Furthermore, suspicion of the West is likely to lead countries of the region to reject solutions that are based on “off the shelf” Western patterns and technology, and to try to develop local solutions, which will be, initially at least, less sophisticated. They may, however, turn to willing supplier states with which they have long-standing strategic relationships, or other commonalities of interest, for assistance in expertise and hardware, to establish the required C3 infrastructures – Iran, North Korea, Pakistan and the China all come to mind as possible suppliers thereof, in one context or another, for one or another of the states examined.

### **Israel’s Nuclear Posture in a Nuclear Middle East**

Israel is the only country in the world today that maintains a posture of nuclear ambiguity. Until 1998, Israel shared the status of nuclear ambiguity with Pakistan. However, while the Pakistani policy was driven by a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis a nuclear neighbor that delayed breakout until a reliable long-range missile capability was achieved, the Israeli policy was crafted from the beginning to be a permanent policy.<sup>14</sup>

Israeli nuclear ambiguity though has been honored more in the breach than in the observance. This issue has become more relevant in recent years with the growing possibility



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that the Middle East will become a “poly-nuclear” theater. Under such conditions, Israel may give up its policy of ambiguity. If it does so, it will have to consider the form of a new doctrine of nuclear deterrence. This will affect issues such as deployment of weapons, levels of readiness, policies of use (minimal deterrence, No First Use), protection of the population, exercises etc. The cost of such a shift could be extremely high.

### Conclusions

The potential for nuclear proliferation in the Middle East in the wake of Iranian breakout and the formation of a “Poly-Nuclear” Middle East raises questions regarding how such a system will function, what safeguards and command and control measures will be integrated and what will be the risk of nuclear confrontation. These questions cannot be dealt with merely on the basis of “rational actor” analysis or the experience of veteran nuclear powers, but must take into account the particular political and military culture of each nation and the way those nations view themselves, their neighbors and external powers.

The nuclear doctrines of these countries will differ and may not resemble those we know from the veteran nuclear powers. While some of these countries, such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt, may opt for a conservative nuclear doctrine integrated as a deterrent into their existing deterrence-oriented defense doctrines. Others, such as Iran or Turkey, are more likely to go down a route of brandishing of their nuclear weapons as an additional means for projecting power in the region, as they have with their conventional and missile capabilities.

The role that each country sees for its nuclear weapons, along with its own particular military and political structure and traditions, will also influence the command and control of these weapons. Traditions of inflexible military command and control, concentration of authority in the hands of trusted (frequently family-related) individuals and loyal praetorian guards, absence of paradigms for delegation of authority or verification, and lack of trust in the military hierarchy will contribute to building command and control structures and procedures that may not be able to deal with the response times that will be necessary in the region.

Traditional perceptions of “the other” will also affect the way these new nuclear powers respond to deterrent messages and efforts of de-escalation. Prof. Thomas Schelling said that, “Soviet expectations about the behavior of the United States are one of the most valuable assets we possess in world affairs.”<sup>15</sup> It is, however, difficult to establish such expectations with an adversary that cannot believe that the conniving, conspiratorial and satanic enemy is telling the truth. The “prudent and rational” nuclear posture presumed in Western deterrence theory may be lost given perceptions of an adversary who must despise the messages of the “Great Satan” or the “Little Satan.” Middle Eastern culture is not always conducive to the rational actor model. The flip side of not giving credence to calming signals is that deterrent messages may be lost on an adversary, whose doctrinal image is that the (Western) enemy consists of weak and spoiled societies that cannot act on threats.

No matter what road each country will take, if a “poly-nuclear” system evolves in the Middle East, it will not resemble the latter years of the Cold War. Mutual deterrence in the Cold





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War was facilitated by high levels of strategic intelligence on both sides that limited their falling victim to erroneous intelligence on preparations for launch of weapons. It also was facilitated by the fact that each party to the conflict knew that the other party was virtually the sole possible origin of a nuclear attack. In the Middle East, however, the array of multiple, mutually hostile nuclear states will create ambiguity regarding the source of any threat, and hence the target for reprisal. Consequently, for the foreseeable future, separate “MAD” relationships will likely be absent from a Middle East “poly-nuclear” system.

<sup>1</sup> The IAEA reportedly issued a confidential report (February 28th) to the UN that it has detected uranium particles at Iranian plants enriched to 83.7%. The report does not estimate what quantity of uranium of this level of enrichment (or higher) Iran possesses. See, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-03/news/iaea-chief-sounds-alarm-iran-nuclear-progress>. The assessment that Iran is less than two weeks from a stockpile of weapons grade uranium for one nuclear weapon was voiced by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl in his testimony to the Congress (February 28<sup>th</sup>) and by CIA director, Burnes. This assessment more or less corresponds to the Israeli estimate. See, <https://armedservices.house.gov/hearings/full-committee-hearing-oversight-us-military-support-ukraine>; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/william-burns-cia-director-face-the-nation-transcript-02-26-2023/>.

<sup>2</sup> For an earlier discussion of this subject, see: Shmuel Bar, “The Danger of a Poly-Nuclear Middle East,” *Policy Review*, February 2013; Shmuel Bar, “Freezing Iran as a Nuclear Threshold State: Chances, Costs and Consequences,” *Friends of Israel Initiative*, Paper No. 16, October 1, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Shmuel Bar, “Religion in war in the 21st century,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (September 2020), pp. 443–474.

<sup>4</sup> Shmuel Bar, “Can Cold War Deterrence Apply to a Nuclear Iran?” *Strategic Perspectives*, no. 7, 2011, Jerusalem Center for Public Policy, pp. 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Schelling, in his foreword in Andreas Wenger & Alex Wilner, *Detering Terrorism, Theory and Practice*, Stanford, Ca. 2012, p. vii: “The present situation is vastly more unfamiliar, uncertain, complicated. ... no confidence in any taboo (biological, nuclear), no confidence in ‘rationality’ ...”. See also Thomas Schelling, “The Nuclear Taboo,” *MIT International Review*, Spring 2007 (<https://web.mit.edu/mitir/2007/spring/2007-spring-mitir.pdf>), pp. 8-11.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Better,” *Adelphi Papers*, Number 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981), p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Turkish acquisition of nuclear weapons would be in violation of its commitments to the NPT. While it is true that France and the UK are both nuclear powers inside NATO, it is highly unlikely that Turkey, under its existing regime would be welcomed in the same status.

<sup>8</sup> Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps — the primary military force in Iran and main powerbroker within the regime and the economy.

<sup>9</sup> The paramilitary force under the IRGC, which is used to crack down on domestic unrest. The Basij is generally perceived as even more “hard-core” and ideologically orthodox than the IRGC itself.

<sup>10</sup> Saudi Arabia is the leading member of the Gulf Coordination Council (GCC) and of the Gulf military coordination framework. As such, it is likely that it will see its nuclear capability as part of that framework and meant to protect not only itself but also its Gulf allies.

<sup>11</sup> The principle of minimum deterrence is suited to a state that does not have the resources, or nuclear assets, to establish first strike or flexible response capabilities against its adversary. In such a case, minimum deterrence may still deter the potential adversary in some scenarios of escalation.



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<sup>12</sup> In the case of Iran, the IRGC may try to compensate for the vulnerability of its own territory by contingency planning to “out-source” delivery of weapons to Iranian surrogates and proxies such as Hezbollah. This may serve as an alternative to the classic “Second Strike” capability of possessing residual nuclear assets at sea, well-hidden and hardened or in foreign countries.

<sup>13</sup> The Soviet Система «Периметр», Systema “Perimetr,” automatically triggered the launch of the Russian ICBMs by sending a pre-entered highest-authority order if there were clear indications that the entire Supreme Command had been destroyed. The system may originally have been intended to serve as an “assurance mechanism” that could enable the leadership not to take hasty decisions. In the reality of the Middle East, it may be an attractive mechanism but may have an opposite effect.

<sup>14</sup> Shmuel Bar, “Israeli Strategic Deterrence Doctrine and Practice,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (June 2020), pp. 321-353

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008 [1966]), pp. 124-25.

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