
IRAN'S BOMB

American and Iranian Perspectives

With Papers by

**Geoffrey Kemp
Michael Eisenstadt
Farideh Farhi
Nasser Hadian**

THE NIXON CENTER

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Iran's Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives
Edited by Geoffrey Kemp

The Nixon Center
1615 L Street, N.W., Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 887-1000
Fax: (202) 887-5222
E-mail: mail@nixoncenter.org
Website: www.nixoncenter.org

Prepared by Cole Bucy and Rick Rust

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The Nixon Center is pleased to release this monograph, *Iran's Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives*. It draws upon papers prepared for a number of Nixon Center workshops on Iran's nuclear programs organized and supervised by the Director of Strategic Programs, Geoffrey Kemp. These workshops have been supported by grants from the Smith Richardson Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

In view of the growing importance of proliferation as an issue facing the United States in the new century, this monograph is both timely and relevant. These studies are part of a broader program at The Nixon Center to examine Americans' interests in the Persian Gulf and Caspian region, including the growing importance of the regions' energy supplies. Forthcoming monographs include a paper by Geoffrey Kemp on U.S.-European discord over Israel and Islam.

Dimitri K. Simes
President
The Nixon Center

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Introduction

The urgency of dealing with Iran's nuclear program took center stage in the spring of 2003, when Iranian officials publicly acknowledged they had made very large investments in activities and facilities that would eventually give them an indigenous nuclear fuel capability that will, in turn, enable them to produce weapons-grade fissile material for use in a nuclear bomb. The reaction of the United States, the European Union, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was to demand that Iran fully disclose the extent of its nuclear activities and agree to cooperate with the IAEA to demonstrate that its actions are in compliance with the IAEA's requirements for state's parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). What followed in the summer and fall of 2003 was a remarkable display of international solidarity among parties to the NPT. Iran realized that its nuclear program was now subject to exacting scrutiny and its erstwhile allies on the IAEA Board of Governors and its major commercial partner on nuclear energy (Russia) were siding with the U.S. and EU in demanding transparency and Iran's eventual signature of the Additional Protocol to the IAEA's safeguards requirements that had been added in 1993.

Iran's cooperation with the IAEA and the international community is regarded as a positive step forward and, together with the decision of Libya's Colonel Qaddafi on December 19, 2003, to abandon his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, the Bush Administration and Britain can take some credit for the effectiveness of their robust diplomacy and intelligence efforts. However, while Libya may now be in compliance with its international obligations, the situation in Iran is far from satisfactory – both from a Western and Iranian perspective. Iran has agreed to suspend – but not end, let alone dismantle – its fuel cycle capabilities, especially the uranium-enrichment plant at Natanz. Yet this is exactly what the Western powers want. Iran, on the other hand, as a matter of principle, prestige, and very considerable sunk costs, wants to keep this capability. As a matter of principle and international law, the Iranians argue, they should be allowed to complete the fuel cycle once they have been found in full compliance with the IAEA. As a States Party to the NPT, they should, under the Provisions of Article IV of the treaty, be eligible for nuclear technology imports from other states' parties in good standing. To discriminate against Iran is illegal under the terms of the treaty and anything else reeks of a

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double standard. This issue has become a factor in Iranian pride, an important element in the public debate going on within the country. Lastly, Iran has invested billions of dollars in developing its fuel cycle. This has created its own momentum, as companies, bureaucracies, and individuals now have a growing stake in the nuclear program and are naturally loathe to give up undeniable perks that come from such lucrative activity.

There is no easy way out of this impasse. It is highly unlikely that any Iranian regime will forgo its civil nuclear program just because the Europeans and Americans demand that it do so. There will have to be a quid pro quo, and that almost certainly would involve lifting U.S. sanctions and all other discriminatory actions against Iranian interests, including opposition to Iranian applications for concessional loans with the World Bank and other financial institutions. However, it is difficult to imagine any American administration or Congress agreeing to such terms, unless Iran changes its behavior on other sensitive issues, such as its opposition to Israel and support for terrorist groups dedicated to the destruction of Israel. In short, it is unlikely that there can be any specific agreements on outstanding issues between the West and Iran outside of the context of a broader agreement, or what some have called a “grand bargain.”

In the essays of this monograph, Michael Eisenstadt and Geoffrey Kemp reflect the overwhelming sentiment in the United States that an Iranian nuclear weapons program would be unacceptable under almost any circumstances and, therefore, a way must be found to end Iran’s fuel cycle. Kemp, however argues that some concessions on nuclear power reactors might be possible, provided they were under international supervision. Farideh Farhi and Nasser Hadian, two highly-qualified Iranian scholars, outline why the issue is so difficult for Iran at the political level, and why persuading Iran to give up its nuclear program in its entirety will be a Herculean, but not impossible, task.

Kemp’s *Iran’s Bomb and What to Do About It* argues that the dangers of permitting Iran to develop its nuclear infrastructure are compounded by Iran’s continued support for terrorism and its intense hostility towards Israel. Absent some fundamental change in Iranian policy on these matters, the U.S. must work closely with Europe and the IAEA to stop the fuel cycle from being completed and present Iran with a united front on the unacceptability of its current nuclear program.

Eisenstadt’s paper, *Delay, Deter, and Contain, Roll-Back: Toward a Strategy for Dealing with Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions*, posits that the US should not assume that a nuclear Iran is inevitable (though if Iran continues along its current trajectory, that seems a likely

outcome). It remains that Iranian efforts to acquire the bomb may fail, for a variety of reasons. Thus, an alarmist stance toward Iran's nuclear program, that causes American allies to proliferate or pursue accommodationist policies towards Iran, would be self-defeating. Hence, the U.S. must be clear that an Iranian bomb will not stop the U.S. from meeting its security commitments to friends and allies in the region, or from responding to Iranian-sponsored terrorism or use of nonconventional weapons. And the U.S. must find ways to strengthen its deterrent capabilities and reassure allies, without frightening them and contributing to regional tensions. While continuing its nonproliferation efforts and taking steps to deter and contain a nuclear Iran, the U.S. must shape the regional environment to maximize the prospects for a future Iranian decision to abandon its nuclear ambitions and nuclear weapons.

Farhi's paper, *To Sign or Not to Sign?: Iran's Evolving Domestic Debate on Nuclear Options*, contends that the agreement reached with the European foreign ministers on October 21, 2003, was stunning both in terms of content, as well as the manner in which it came about. While in Iran there was much talk that the Iranian leadership will ultimately "buckle under" the international pressure and sign the protocol, very few expected the agreement to come about in a such a dramatic manner, with a confirmation of Iran's symbolic importance to Europe and a clear statement about European willingness to pursue a less belligerent path towards Iran than the one taken by the United States. The quick agreement with Europe, however, followed an extended period of national conversation that was unusual in many ways, both in its frankness about Iran's difficult international position and in what can be done about it. It is difficult to assess the extent to which the European offer to work with Iran will allay international concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Undoubtedly, much will depend on the direction of internal dynamics in Iran, favoring those who are pushing for a more open, globally conscious, and non-confrontational Iran. At this point, the Iranian political scene remains too fluid to allow for any definite predictions, although the recent agreement with Europe and the fact that the fractured political system of Iran was able to pull it off in such a creative manner should be seen as a positive sign.

Hadian's paper, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Contexts and Debates*, makes the case that American policy towards the Iranian nuclear program should be calibrated to opinion within Iran, rather than pushing a hardline agenda out of step with Iranian perceptions and demands. Decision-making in Iran is slow and often chaotic, but this also gives a chance

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for different sides of key policy questions to be expressed. The growing debate within Iran over how far down the nuclear path Iran should go is far from settled, and reasonable compromises are very possible once Iranian fears – based upon ideology, history, and geopolitics – are all taken into account. The United States should admit Iran's right to nuclear energy and even help facilitate its peaceful use. American claims that Iran would become less secure by developing nuclear weapons would thereby gain credibility among Iranian decision-makers who might otherwise be suspicious of American arguments.

The issue of Iran's nuclear options will be with us for many years. It is unlikely there will be a 'Qaddafi moment' whereby an Iranian regime suddenly and willfully comes clean and hands the whole program over to international inspectors. Iran is not Libya, and, at this point in time, its nuclear program has been embedded in its broader search for regional credibility and international stature. How the international community manages the Iranian nuclear program is its most important non-proliferation test to date.

March 2004

Geoffrey Kemp

Iran's Bomb and What to Do About It¹

Geoffrey Kemp

There are two reasons Iran remains on George W. Bush's "axis of evil." The regime continues to sponsor terrorists who murder Americans and it is building a very sophisticated, independent nuclear-technology infrastructure. The Bush Administration has vowed to take pre-emptive action against regimes that pose such threats, so Iran's mullahs must be wondering if they are next in line for the application of U.S. force. The mullahs know that the United States has sufficient military power to reduce most of Iran's budding nuclear infrastructure to rubble within forty-eight hours, and they know, too, that all international efforts, including U.S. economic sanctions, to dissuade Iran from the nuclear course short of using force have failed. They have well earned the right to be worried.

So has the United States. Absent a fundamental change in the policy of the Iranian regime, especially its support for terrorism, or a change of the regime itself, the prospect of an Iranian bomb is extremely dangerous. The dangers fall into several categories. Nuclear weapons in the hands of the current regime would be regarded by its neighbors as a profound threat, and would almost certainly stimulate interest in acquiring nuclear weapons in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The smaller Gulf Cooperation Council members (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman), meanwhile, are likely to call for a more explicit U.S. nuclear guarantee – and they might get it. Whether or not the United States agrees to a new iteration of nuclear guarantees, an Iranian nuclear capability, together with its missile program, will eventually threaten Europe, Russia, and the United States itself. Such a capability would further harm the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), whether Iran obtains the bomb legally by withdrawing from the Treaty, or illegally by violating it. Furthermore, the bomb in the hands of the current Iranian regime could embolden it to provide more military and political support to the terrorist organizations, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, all pledged to destroy the state of Israel. In extremis, it could provide nuclear material to these groups.

In light of all this, it may be satisfying to contemplate the expeditious destruction of Iran's nuclear facilities – and some Americans do contemplate it. But the use of force

¹ The first part of this essay is an updated and edited version of an article first published in *The National Interest*, Summer 2003. (Geoffrey Kemp, "How to Stop the Iranian Bomb," No. 72, pp. 48-58.)

should be the very last resort in dealing with the problem of Iran's would-be bomb. There are three main reasons for this.

First, an attack would not end, but probably only delay the regime's ambition; and one can imagine political circumstances in which third-party countries would aid a post-attack Iran such that the delay would not be very significant. Even more important, some senior Iranian officials are mindful of the dynamics iterated just above, and are not convinced that moving from a nuclear infrastructure to the actual fabrication and deployment of nuclear weapons is in Iran's national interest. But the more likely a U.S. attack seems, the less influence such doubters are liable to have. A U.S. attack could also be counterproductive politically in Iran, where those opposed to the regime could be harmed by a welling up of Iranian nationalist fury.

Second, the broader political price the United States would pay for attacking Iran would be considerable, unless Iran were in clear breach of its legal commitments to existing non-proliferation agreements.

The best reason, however, for avoiding the use of military force, at least for now, is that diplomatic means are available that can seriously slow and complicate, if not halt altogether, the Iranian program. Some of these means relate to technical vulnerabilities in the Iranian program. This is a case, moreover, where slowing the program may yield qualitative advantage. For if the regime in Tehran should change for the better, or change altogether, before Iran's bomb comes into being, then the problem, while not disappearing, becomes a good deal easier to manage. This possibility is not far-fetched.

There may also be an upside to U.S. restraint. If the present regime can be persuaded to abandon terrorism and as a result enter into a political dialogue with the U.S. government, the calculus of risks and incentives in Iran's contemplation of deploying nuclear weapons can perhaps be influenced for the better. Such an Iran could make possible the reconsideration of concepts for a regional security regime for the greater Middle East that could enfold the growing dangers of chemical and biological weapons proliferation as well as nuclear proliferation. If there is parallel progress on resolving the Palestinian-Israeli issue, a new dialogue on the sensitive subject of Israel's nuclear weapons might be possible.

To stop, or significantly slow down, Iran's push for a bomb will require a multilateral, multi-tiered effort, headed by the United States. It would have to involve tempting carrots as well as threatening sticks, as well as continued cooperation with

Europe, Russia and China. It will, of course, also require a fundamental change in Iran's bilateral relations with the United States. However difficult both parts of this effort may be, it is worth pursuing. Otherwise, either hoping for either a relatively quick regime change in Tehran, or a decision to use force made in Washington, will remain the only options available to stop the Iranian bomb, with all the uncertainties of the former and all the dangers and costs of the latter.

The Iranian Program

Iran's nuclear ambitions are the result of complex ideological and geopolitical circumstances. While the mullahs are clearly eager to build up their nuclear infrastructure, obviously to create an option to deploy a bomb, Iran's program began well before their tenure. The late Shah initiated it, and his motives were a fusion of Iranian national ambition and concern for the direction of the neighborhood. Some rather too casual observers have come to see Iranian strategic planning as if its planners had only one eye—facing westward, toward Iraq and Israel. But in the Shah's time, Iran looked also north and east toward the Soviet Union, and toward Pakistan and India. Over the past quarter century, the significance of an Iranian bomb as a sort of *force de frappe* style insurance policy against the Soviet Union has lost much salience, but the United States has come to replace it as far as the present regime is concerned. More important, the strategic problem posed by India and especially Pakistan has risen dramatically. While the Islamic regime's anti-Israel posture is radical, uncompromising (so far), and worrisome, it would be a mistake to underplay Iranian concern with Pakistan, a Sunni Muslim country with more than twice Iran's population, facing long-term political instability.

As a result of such concerns, Iran has long been embarked on a serious and cleverly structured project to develop a complete indigenous nuclear fuel cycle. The most advanced component is a 1,000 megawatt nuclear plant being built with Russian help at Bushehr, on the northern Persian Gulf. When this and related fuel cycle projects are fully operational, Iran will be independent of foreign fuel suppliers for its nuclear power reactors and therefore be capable of developing its own weapons-grade fuel. Since the procurement of weapons-grade material is one of the most difficult tasks for an aspiring nuclear weapons state, this capability would represent a major breakthrough for Iran.

Iran's desire for independence in the nuclear arena is not hard to explain. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran was isolated by the international community and subject to a very

effective arms embargo, orchestrated by the United States. In contrast, Iraq was provided with ample arms by the Soviet Union, France, and China with American concurrence and huge financial support from the Gulf Arabs. Furthermore, the world ignored Iraq's frequent use of chemical weapons against Iranian forces. These memories continue to generate bitterness among Iranians and join with a strong anti-colonialist nationalism in support of the attainment of maximum national independence in all respects.

But achieving an independent nuclear fuel cycle is not an easy task; it cannot be completed quickly, and it is vulnerable to interference and delays from abroad. Iran, of course, does have other, less demanding choices. It could purchase weapons-grade material from international sources. This route has the obvious advantage that the material would be fairly cheap to obtain in comparison to other options. However, the quantities are likely to be limited, and it would be a highly illegal transaction, which, if discovered, could trigger sanctions under the NPT. Furthermore, the quality of the material might be suspect (there have been many scams with front organizations from the former Soviet Union trying to make money pawning off weapons-grade material to would-be buyers.) If Iran's aim were to have one or two token bombs in the basement, this might be the preferred route. But this is not its purpose, and it does not satisfy the desire for independent options.

Alternatively, once Bushehr is up and running Iran could try to illegally divert spent fuel and extract plutonium. But the agreement Iran has with Russia includes a clause that Russia will provide the nuclear fuel for Bushehr and will subsequently retrieve it for reprocessing or disposal in Russia. The Bushehr reactor will be inspected by the IAEA because of Iran's NPT commitments; hence, diverting fuel would be a very risky option.

That leaves the option of pursuing a completely self-contained fuel cycle. This is the most secure way of obtaining a steady supply of nuclear weapons material, but it is also by far the most expensive route. To be truly independent, Iran must develop all the components that make up the fuel cycle, including so called "front end" and "back end" activities. But this is, indeed, what Iran seems to be up to. Such suspicions were confirmed on February 9, 2003, when President Mohammed Khatami, in a remarkable public announcement, stated that Iran is developing facilities that enable it to produce its own nuclear fuel. Khatami said that Iran has mined uranium ore near the city of Yazd and was constructing a uranium conversion facility as well as fuel fabrication plants. Meanwhile, the IAEA concluded that Iran is also building a uranium enrichment plant at a secret site at Natanz. Another site at Arak is believed to be a heavy water plant. The

uranium enrichment plant will be based on gaseous centrifuges and will provide Iran with the ability to produce both low enriched uranium for use in light water nuclear power reactors and also highly enriched weapons-grade uranium. According to IAEA inspectors, the gaseous centrifuges at Natanz are second generation. Iran has the skills and facilities to eventually make thousands of them. If Iran has used its pilot centrifuges to conduct uranium enrichment tests, it could already be in violation of the NPT. The heavy water plant will be based on gaseous centrifuges and has direct applications for plutonium production from natural uranium.

Iran does not admit, however, to having weapons ambitions. To the contrary, it has long claimed that it needs an independent fuel cycle to assure that it will always have access to low enriched uranium and plutonium for nuclear power reactors. Its government never ceases to point out that it is a State's party to the NPT and has cooperated with the IAEA, including signing an Additional Protocol, which entails more rigorous inspections.

Continued suspicion of Iran's weapons intentions, however, focuses on several points. First, Iran argues that the sole purpose of this massive investment is to insulate it from suffering a cut-off in access to nuclear fuel for civilian nuclear power reactors. But Iran has access to nuclear fuel from Russia, and since this fuel will be safeguarded, stored, and recycled by Russia, it will be much cheaper to purchase than any homegrown product. Moreover, since Iran has the world's second largest natural gas reserves and fifth largest oil reserves, it does not really need nuclear power projects for electricity generation. The Iranians reply that they are not the first country well endowed with oil and gas reserves to consider nuclear power as a source of energy; Russia, the United States, and China all fit that description. Nevertheless, Iran's fossil fuels are key foreign exchange earners and should be kept for export. Most troubling, Iran's domestic consumption of oil and gas is growing at about 8 percent a year, and Iran faces horrendous pollution problems caused by fossil fuels in its big cities.

What this all adds up to is that, even under the most benign interpretation, Iran is embarked on a large-scale, long-term and very sophisticated project to become independent in the nuclear business. Even if their capabilities are all declared and inspected by the IAEA under the more intrusive 1993 protocol, its scientific and engineering skills will be such it would be able to fairly rapidly adapt its technology to produce nuclear weapons. If Pakistan India, Israel, and South Africa could undertake such projects, so can Iran. It has the money and the skills.

Iran's Role in Terrorism

Iran cannot achieve these goals overnight, however, which gives the United States and likeminded countries a window to delay Iran's ambitions. This has become a matter of high priority not only because of the rapid progress Iran appears to be making toward a nuclear weapons infrastructure, but also because the regime continues to support terrorist groups hostile to the United States and its allies. Iranian support for Hezbollah, in particular, puts Iran in direct opposition to vital U.S. interests. The U.S. government considers Hezbollah to be on the A-list of dangerous terrorist organizations, and there is no question that while Hezbollah has so far concentrated its military activities against Israel, it does have a global reach, as illustrated by the July 1994 attack on a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires that killed over 80 people – the worst act of anti-Semitic violence outside the Middle East since World War II. Hezbollah is clearly capable of attacking U.S. targets both abroad and inside the United States. Some U.S. officials are particularly concerned about the activities of Imad Mughaniya, the mastermind of the October 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine compound in Lebanon and other deadly assaults, in making common cause between Sunni and Shia terrorist organizations from his redoubt in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

Hezbollah is clearly now considered one of the key groups the United States will likely take action against at some point in the future. As Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage put it on September 5, 2002:

Hezbollah's... on the list and their time will come. There is no question about it. They have a blood debt to us...; and we're not going to forget it and it's all in good time. We're going to go after these problems just like a high school wrestler goes after a match: we're going to take them down one at a time.

The U.S. government is well aware that Iran provides by far the most significant financial and military support to Hezbollah, estimated to be at over \$100 million annually. Iran conducts paramilitary training for Hezbollah at camps in Lebanon and Iran; it hosts conferences on "resistance" and has members of its own intelligence services and the Revolutionary Guard operating out of camps in Lebanon; it provides large quantities of arms to Hezbollah, including Katyusha rockets and longer range rockets that could reach Haifa from south Lebanon; it has allowed its embassies to facilitate Hezbollah operations

and has provided them with explosives for terrorist attacks. Hezbollah has provided assistance to both Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Many Iranians regard their support for Hezbollah to be one of the great successes of their foreign policy, at least with regard to their relations with the Muslim world. They are proud of their Islamic credentials and regard resistance to Israel as one of their prime calling cards in the Arab world where they have considerable support among radicals. But if Iran does not end its support of terror directed against Israel and the United States, it will – sooner or later – be subject to further American action, including the use of force. This will become a matter of priority the closer Iran gets to having nuclear weapons.

Can the Regime Change Its Policies?

The ability of the Iranian regime to change its policy on terrorism and nuclear weapons is a function of its own intense internal conflicts and the evolving regional environment. Iran's leaders understand the price they pay for their anti-Israel and anti-American actions. Sophisticated Iranians, especially those involved with the economy and energy development, are aware that Israel is a "third rail" issue in terms of U.S. politics and that Iran's anti-Israeli behavior will continue to poison the relationship. They know they have to come to grips with this problem, but the domestic political turmoil now roiling the country makes it impossible for them to do so.

Since Mohammed Khatami was elected President in May 1996, day to day conditions for most Iranians have improved. The society is more open and pluralistic than at any time since the revolution. However, in parallel, frustration levels may well be at an all-time high, precisely because rising expectations have been largely frustrated. The vast majority of Iran's educated youth is disillusioned with the government and their future opportunities in Iran; if they could afford to immigrate to the West, most probably would. Government leaders, conservatives and moderates alike, know this. But they do not know how to resolve the structural problems facing the country without touching off a severe and possibly lethal backlash. What is clear is that everybody involved with Iran—be they insiders, outsiders, monarchists, anarchists, communists, fundamentalists, or pragmatists – all agree that the current system is headed for a crisis. The regime has become more repressive in the past year. The closure of newspapers has continued, right-wing thugs have been enforcing with greater vigor dress and social codes (no hand holding between the unmarried sexes), and the endless battle against satellite television continues. But

absent some new catalytic event, conservatives can continue their reign of repression because they control the guns and the courts. In the long-run, the smarter ones know that their tactics will lead to the regime's demise. In light of this, they will probably compromise on a sufficient range of issues in order to assure their personal survival, and to retain their considerable wealth.

This leads some Iran watchers to conclude that a subset, at the least, of pragmatic conservatives will adapt to new realities, including an accommodation with the United States on terrorism and Israel. When that time comes, it will be the end of the Islamic Republic as configured since 1979, but it will not necessarily herald a new era of reform. Indeed, many Iranian reformers worry that the conservatives will make a deal with the Americans, changing their foreign policy in return for Washington's silence about Iran's democracy and human rights deficits. Iran's reformers have reason to worry about such a scenario. They note that the U.S. government was able, after September 11, to rapidly shift policies toward Pakistan and Uzbekistan once it became clear these countries would support the U.S. war on terrorism.

It is also simply logical that conservatives would consider such a deal. They know it is a vital U.S. interest that the terror against Israel stop. If Iran, in effect, "walked away" from the Arab-Israel conflict, it would be easier for the Bush Administration to adopt a new policy of engagement. This would be a major breakthrough for the United States, since the Iranian involvement in the Arab-Israel conflict has been the most debilitating element of the relationship in recent years. But a less aggressive U.S. attitude toward Iran could also deflate pressures to weaponize its nuclear infrastructure, and here is where an additional positive payoff for the United States may materialize.

Of course, such a deal is a matter of speculation. It is easier for the U.S. government to change its position on Iran than vice versa. If President Bush decided to make a new overture to the Islamic Republic, he would face some opposition within his administration and on Capitol Hill, but he would be able to proceed without fear of impeachment or worse. The situation in Tehran is very different, especially concerning the first moves toward an official dialogue. All the competing factions in Tehran know that the group which first establishes better relations with Washington will gain political advantage. They will be the ones praised for common sense and for doing what is best for Iran. Consequently, their opponents can be counted upon to do all they can to prevent such a thing from happening, including strategic leaks designed to undermined any diplomacy in

prospect. This can only be prevented if the Supreme Leader and the President, together, decide to change policy, and do so in such a way that neither can easily renege on the effort.

It will be difficult for them to do this, except in an emergency. Perhaps such an emergency will be generated domestically. The point, however, is that the regime can and might change its policies, and the United States should be ready to take advantage of those changes if and when they occur.

Reassessing U.S. Policy

It is not at all clear what the administration plans to do now that the Iraqi Ba'ath is no more. What it will not do seems more evident; it will not invade Iran. Several administration officials and high-level supporters have said that there are no cookie-cutter solutions for "axis of evil" members and other countries whose behavior makes them problems in the war against terrorism. They have stressed that positive developments are taking place within Iranian society, and they know that U.S. pressure, especially military pressure, could be counterproductive. But knowing what not to do, while important, is not enough. Indeed, how the administration handles Iran in a post-Saddam environment will be of critical importance.

Short of invasion and occupation of Iran, there is no sure way to stop its terrorist activities or its bomb program. Both activities, however, can be slowed down – perhaps stopped altogether. Since the summer of 2003, the Bush Administration has shown considerable pragmatism and has edged away from the harsh rhetoric it used earlier in its term.

The chronology of actions at the IAEA in the summer and fall of 2003 and the American role during these deliberations are part of this new pragmatism. On June 6, 2003, Mohammed El Baradei, the Secretary-General of the IAEA, submitted to the Board of Governors a report that stated "Iran has failed to meet its obligations under its safeguards agreement with respect to the reporting of nuclear material imported into Iran and the subsequent processing and use of the material and the clearing of facilities and other locations where the material had been stored and processed."² Despite the nuanced language and the bureaucratic jargon used in the report, the substance of El Baradei's

² Report by the Director General of the IAEA Board of Governors, "implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran," GOV/2003/75, November 10, 2003.

charges against Iran was very consequential. In the responding to the report, the Board of Governors “urged Iran to rectify promptly all the safeguards problems identified.”³ El Baradei submitted the report on August 26, which included a summary the IAEA’s analysis of the Iranian nuclear program, as well identifying further Iranian failures to report nuclear activities. On September 12, the Board of Governors, by a unanimous vote, adopted a tough resolution that demanded Iran “remedy all failures identified by the IAEA and cooperate fully with the agency by taking specified actions by the end of October 2003.”⁴

During the fall of 2003, the IAEA conducted a number of inspections of Iran’s nuclear facilities and, on October 16, El Baradei met with Dr. H. Rohani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran. On October 21, the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and Germany, visited Tehran to meet with Rohani and present him with a diplomatic ultimatum concerning Iran’s nuclear activities. As a result of this quite unprecedented intervention by the Europeans and the unanimous decision of the IAEA Board of Governors, Iran agreed, on November 10, to sign the Additional Protocol and stated that it would voluntarily “suspend all activities on the site of Natanz, not produce feed material for enrichment processes, and not import enrichment-related items.”⁵ Iran eventually signed the Additional Protocol on December 18th, 2003, but the agreement has not been ratified by the Iranian Parliament as of February 2004.

These events were quite dramatic. The disclosures of Iran’s nuclear activity both shocked and motivated the international community into a rare display of unanimity. The fact that the IAEA’s Board of Governors was prepared to issue a unanimous ultimatum to Iran suggests the magnitude of the problem. Equally surprising was the cooperation shown by the Bush Administration, working with both the IAEA and the European Union to ensure Iran’s transgressions were addressed. Initially, some in the Bush Administration wished to use the occasion to press the IAEA to find Iran in noncompliance with its NPT obligations. Should this have been a unanimous decision, it would have been referred to the UN Security Council for action, which could have led to economic sanctions and other negative actions against Iran, including the suspension of all nuclear-related export and import activities – a step that would have required Russia to put a hold on its involvement in the Bushehr power reactor.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

However, it was clear early in the summer of 2003 that there was little likelihood the U.S. position would prevail, so a compromise position was agreed upon. One reason for the change in the American position was the need to sustain a common policy with the EU. The other reason was that the postwar occupation of Iraq was running into trouble, and the Bush Administration did not need another Middle East crisis where it would be seen to be taking a unilateral stand. Whatever the reasons, the compromises at the IAEA led to the events in the fall and the subsequent decision by the Iranians to sign the Additional Protocol and suspend enrichment and nuclear technology import activities.

The success of the IAEA is, however, a very transitory one. The challenge now is to persuade Iran that it must either abandon its fuel cycle capacity or put it under such tight international supervision that it will be difficult, if not impossible, for it to proceed with a nuclear weapons program. The problem is that none of the possible nuclear deals are likely to be acceptable to the most important actors: Iran and the United States. For Iran, suspending its nuclear activities may well be a price worth paying, because it buys time and removes Iran from the top of the IAEA's watch-list. However, it is hard to envision the circumstances under which Iran would end all its nuclear activity absent a wider agreement, or "grand bargain," on other matters vital to the state, including the end of U.S. economic sanctions, which have had a serious impact on Iran's economic development, especially in the energy sector.

To put the most effective pressure on Iran, it is essential that the U.S. work in tandem with the UN, EU, and hopefully Russia. With a united front insistent that Iran keep its pledges to refrain from developing a weapons program and, more specifically, an enrichment program, there is a greater likelihood that Tehran will comply. In the aftermath of Iran's rigged parliamentary elections in February 2004, the hardliners now control all instruments of government, including the Parliament. Ironically, it might actually be easier for them to make such compromises on foreign policy and national security agendas, but they will have to convince skeptics in the United States and Europe that they can be trusted with international pledges when their domestic record shows a total disregard for the freedoms most of their citizens are seeking. For this reason, it will be difficult to sustain a lasting agreement with any hardline regime but certainly not impossible.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for both the U.S. and Iran will be to reach a "grand bargain," which addresses the key concerns of both parties. For the U.S., it is essential that Iran severely limits support for Hezbollah and ends economic and military support for

Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, in addition to abiding by its nuclear pledges. For the hardliners in Iran, it is essential that the U.S. stop interfering in Iran's domestic agenda and end economic sanctions. These are very bitter pills for both sides to swallow, and it is too early to tell whether there is any hope for a deal. But it can surely be predicted that if there is no end to Iranian support for terrorism, then reaching a deal on the nuclear issue, however desirable, will unlikely meet the wishes of those in Washington, who believe that a hardline Iranian regime with access to nuclear technology and close ties to terrorist organizations is too dangerous, not only for the region, but for the global nonproliferation agenda. It is ironic that on this issue, both neoconservatives who wish to see the regime in Iran removed and dedicated arms control specialists, who are usually liberal, have a common agenda, namely nothing must be left to chance when it comes to Iran's bomb and, hence, Washington must be exceptionally persistent on the subject.

The big question is whether the Europeans will share this American view. There are indications that France, in particular, has an equally tough position on Iran's nuclear program. Britain is likely to share this view as well. Furthermore, the EU now has its prestige on the line. Countries outside Europe, such as Japan, will be extremely troubled if Iran is let off the hook. What happens with other key players, such as Russia, China, and other EU members, remains an uncertainty. There will be a number of very important benchmarks in the coming months that will test the resolve of the EU, U.S., and IAEA. So long as the key players on the IAEA Board stay united, Iran will find it difficult to cheat. But if public differences emerge, especially between Brussels and Washington on the matter, Iran will be in a stronger position to continue its overall nuclear program without blatantly violating its safeguard agreements. This could be a very dangerous state of affairs.

Geoffrey Kemp is Director of Regional Strategic Programs at the Nixon Center. He was Special Assistant to the President for the Middle East during the first Reagan Administration.

Delay, Deter and Contain, Roll-Back: Toward a Strategy for Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Ambitions

Michael Eisenstadt

Recent revelations regarding Iran's nuclear program have reinforced suspicions that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons option, and may be a few short years away from acquiring 'the bomb.' While senior Iranian officials have repeatedly stated that Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons and that the possession and use of such weapons would be contrary to Islam,¹ Iran's efforts spanning nearly two decades to acquire the means to produce both plutonium and enriched uranium would seem to cast doubts on these claims.²

Estimates of when Iran could acquire nuclear weapons vary from 2-3 years, to "within the decade."³ The range of these divergent estimates underscores the uncertainty regarding the actual scope, nature, and status of Iran's nuclear program. What is clear, however, is that in light of this uncertainty, Iran's neighbors and adversaries are increasingly likely, in the coming years, to see Iran as a "threshold" nuclear weapons state (i.e., capable of acquiring nuclear weapons in short order), if not a *de facto* nuclear weapons state, and to treat it with the caution and deference that such status merits.

Accordingly, U.S. efforts to delay Iranian progress toward acquiring nuclear weapons should be complemented by efforts to prepare for the possible emergence of a nuclear Iran. To deal with such an eventuality, the U.S. will need to bolster its ability to deter the use of nuclear weapons by the Islamic Republic, and enhance its ability to contain a nuclear Iran. Finally, though circumstances may not yet be right, the U.S. should work toward establishing conditions for nuclear roll-back in the Islamic Republic (i.e., the

¹ See for instance, the speech by President Mohammad Khatami to senior politicians and military officials on 6 August, carried on the Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and translated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), 7 August 2003.

² These efforts are described in a series of detailed reports published in 2003 by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). See: Report by the Director General to the IAEA Board of Governors, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, GOV/2003/40 of 6 June 2003, GOV/2003/63 of 26 August 2003, and GOV/2003/75 of 10 November 2003.

³ The former estimate is that of several respected proliferation specialists. See, for instance, David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, "Iran, Player or Rogue?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September/October 2003, 52-58, and "Iran: Breaking Out Without Quite Breaking the Rules?" A Nonproliferation Policy Education Center analysis at <<http://www.npec-web.org/projects/iranswu2.htm>>. The latter estimate apparently reflects the consensus of the U.S. intelligence community. See Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, USN, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, Statement for the Record, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 11, 2003 and Senate Armed Services Committee, February 12, 2003.

voluntary abandonment by Iran of its nuclear ambitions or nuclear weapons). Libya's decision in December 2003 to abandon its weapons of mass destruction programs offers a glimmer of hope that a similar policy turnabout in Iran may someday be possible—even if the latter eventuality seems highly unlikely at present.

In light of these developments, the disarray in U.S. policy toward Iran is especially disconcerting. As with many other foreign policy issues, the Bush Administration is deeply divided over how to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions, and by all appearances, it has yet to formulate a long-range approach for dealing with this challenge. This paper thus suggests the broad outlines of a strategy for dealing with Tehran's nuclear ambitions and the consequences of nuclear proliferation by Iran.

The Challenge

Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could alter regional political dynamics, promote further proliferation of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons in the region, and lead to more assertive or aggressive policies. It could also embolden those working to block the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, strike a heavy – perhaps fatal – blow to the international nuclear nonproliferation regime, and increase the long-term prospects for nuclear terrorism or nuclear war in the Middle East.

For these reasons, preventing the emergence of a nuclear Iran is a key U.S. policy objective.⁴ Success, however, is not assured, and the U.S. has to prepare for the possibility that Iran could have nuclear weapons within a year or two if it were to acquire fissile material from North Korea or elsewhere, or within 3-10 years if it were to produce fissile material on its own. A long-term strategy that seeks to preclude the emergence of a nuclear Iran, to mitigate the impact of such an eventuality should these efforts fail, and to pursue the seemingly quixotic goal of putting the “nuclear genie” back into the bottle, before or after Iran has proliferated, should consist of the following elements:

- **Delay:** The U.S. should seek to disrupt Iranian efforts through strategies of technology denial, diplomatic efforts to influence Iran to suspend its nuclear activities, and perhaps preventive action (covert operations or military action);
- **Deter and Contain:** The U.S. should seek to reduce the utility of an Iranian bomb by developing the means to counter associated delivery means, the ability to deter

⁴ In perhaps the clearest articulation of his administration's bottom line regarding Iran's nuclear program, President Bush stated last June, that “the international community must come together to make it very clear to Iran that we will not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon.” David Sanger, “Bush Says U.S. Will Not Tolerate Building of Nuclear Arms by Iran.” *New York Times*, 19 June, 2003, A1.

the deployment and use of such weapons, and through organizing multilateral efforts to militarily contain Iran;

- **Roll-Back:** Finally, the U.S. should seek to create the conditions for nuclear rollback in Iran, whereby Tehran may come to see that it is more advantageous to abandon its nuclear ambitions and dismantle any nuclear weapons it has acquired than to keep them.

Each of these should be pursued simultaneously while synergies among them exploited: delay should buy time to strengthen the U.S. ability to deter a nuclear Iran and to create a regional coalition to contain it. The deterrence and containment of Iran should drive home the point that nuclear weapons have little practical utility for the Islamic Republic. And the international community should miss no opportunity to stress to Iran that the acquisition of nuclear weapons could lead to the deterioration of its political, economic, and security situation, thereby weakening, rather than strengthening, the Islamic Republic.

Delay: The Value of “Buying Time”

Delaying the expansion of Iranian military capabilities has been an important element of U.S. policy toward Iran, and should remain so. Delay buys time for efforts to alter the political environment inside Iran and internationally, and to create conditions whereby Iran’s nuclear program or capabilities may be abandoned in response to international pressure, or traded away in exchange for political, economic, or security inducements. Delay may also facilitate a diplomatic solution, as it would be easier for Tehran to trade away capabilities that are under development and that have not yet been deployed than to trade away capabilities that are already integrated into Iran’s force structure and doctrine. Delay also buys time to develop countermeasures to the various delivery means that Iran might use, and for the U.S. and its regional allies to lay the foundation for enhanced military cooperation against a nuclear Iran. Finally, delay is a hedge against Tehran’s adoption of more aggressive policies. With the reformists stymied, conservative hardliners ascendant, and Iranian intentions with regard to Al Qaeda and the U.S. presence in Iraq unclear, U.S.-Iran relations may get worse before they get better. It would be preferable that a more hostile and aggressive government not have access to nuclear weapons.

Technology Denial

The U.S. has, until now, rather effectively relied on export controls, diplomacy,

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and sanctions to deny Iran the technology and finances needed for its nuclear program.⁵ Nonetheless, despite numerous delays, Iran has made gradual progress in the nuclear arena. This is consistent with the nonproliferation experience of the past fifty years, which shows that stratagems of denial can delay, but not halt, determined and resourceful proliferators such as Iran.

Opportunities remain for delaying parts of Iran's known nuclear program. The VVER-1000 reactor at Bushehr, though not ideally suited for fissile material production, could produce enough plutonium for scores of nuclear weapons a year and could serve as an alternative source of fissile material, should Iran's gas centrifuge program falter or fail. The U.S. should continue to encourage Russia to delay or halt work on the reactor and hold off on the transfer of reactor fuel to Iran.

Iran reportedly plans to start construction in 2004 of a 40MWt heavy water research reactor at Arak that could greatly abet a weapons program, though not much is known about the reactor design at this time. Iran has stated that it is an indigenous effort, though it is possible that Iran obtained plans and advice from abroad. It is not clear whether a halt in foreign assistance would affect this effort. At any rate, it will be 5-7 years (if not longer) before the reactor is completed and can contribute to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

On the other hand, technology denial may no longer be a viable option with regard to Iran's centrifuge enrichment program, which reportedly has benefited from help by Pakistan and perhaps North Korea. Iran is believed able to produce centrifuges indigenously, though it may remain reliant on foreign suppliers for special materials and certain components. When the gas centrifuge plant at Natanz comes on line, Iran will be able to produce enough highly enriched uranium for dozens of bombs a year.

Nuclear Diplomacy

Given diminishing returns from technology denial, diplomacy to constrain or halt Iran's nuclear program is an increasingly attractive option. Diplomacy may be bilateral (U.S.-Iran) or multilateral (EU and Iran) and aim at an agreement focusing narrowly on nuclear concerns, or a "grand bargain" that deals with the entire range of issues that divide

⁵ For a list of thwarted technology transfers, see Michael Eisenstadt, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions*, (Washington, D.C., The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996), 110-111.

Iran from the international community: weapons of mass destruction (with emphasis on nuclear weapons), terrorism, the Arab-Israeli peace process, and human rights/democracy.

On October 21, 2003, the foreign ministers of the UK, France, and Germany, struck a deal with Iran that requires the latter to resolve all outstanding issues raised by the IAEA regarding its nuclear program, and to sign the Additional Protocol with the IAEA. As part of the agreement, Iran also undertook to voluntarily suspend all uranium enrichment and processing activities.⁶ While it is too soon to judge whether the agreement will stick, or whether it will suffer the fate of the U.S.-North Korean “Agreed Framework” of 1994, it demonstrates the current limits of diplomacy with Iran.

The agreement does not require Iran to abandon its reactor at Bushehr; in fact, the agreement holds out the possibility for “easier access to modern technology and supplies” by Iran, which may pave the way for the completion of Bushehr and the subsequent sale of additional nuclear power plants to Iran (if it can afford them). Moreover, it is not clear what Iran’s decision to “voluntarily...suspend all uranium enrichment and processing activities” means: does it also require a halt to the construction of gas centrifuges and centrifuge facilities? And how long might Iran abide by this ‘voluntary’ commitment.⁷

Iran has subsequently signed – though no ratified – the Additional Protocol of the IAEA (alternatively known as Program 93+2), which will permit far more intrusive monitoring of Iran’s nuclear activities. Assuming it is implemented, 93+2 will not necessarily prevent Iran from further expansion of its nuclear infrastructure, providing it with the wherewithal to produce nuclear weapons should it withdraw from the Treaty for the NPT.

While 93+2 could constrain clandestine nuclear activities in Iran, it might not prevent proscribed activities from occurring. As Iraq demonstrated in the 1990s, banned facilities or activities (e.g., the biological weapon production facility at al-Hakam – destroyed by UN weapons inspectors in 1996 – and research and development pertaining to missiles of proscribed range) have been hidden from inspection and monitoring regimes that are more intrusive than 93+2. Even were evidence of proscribed activities to emerge, the politics of the UN Security Council might result in the peremptory dismissal of the

⁶ For the text of the declaration, see:

<http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/IaeaIran/statement_iran21102003.shtml>.

⁷ Thus, in the words of Hassan Rowhani, secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, “We voluntarily chose to do it, which means it could last for one day or one year, it depends on us.” U.S. Wary over Iran Nuclear Deal, CNN.com, October 21, 2003, at: <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/10/21/Iran.nuclear>.

results of lab tests or environmental monitoring (as happened following the detection of VX decomposition products on Iraqi Scud warheads in 1998).

Thus, it is not clear whether the quadripartite EU-Iran agreement is the culmination of — or just the beginning of — a protracted negotiating process regarding Iran's nuclear program, in which Iran will try to counter pressure for greater transparency, with threats to cease cooperation with the IAEA and/or withdraw from the NPT.⁸

What seems clear, however, is that Iran is committed to retaining its nuclear program. Tehran has invested significant resources into this effort over a period spanning nearly two decades and has repeatedly declared its determination to retain its existing nuclear infrastructure. It would be difficult for the Islamic Republic to retreat from these public pronouncements.

A strong case can be made that Iran's pursuit of a nuclear option is firmly rooted in realpolitik, and that key decision-makers consider Iran's nuclear program as a key component of the country's national security strategy. In light of Iran's economic circumstances and its conventional military weakness, it is the only affordable route to regional power status. Moreover, Iran is unlikely to surrender what it perceives to be its trump card at a time of heightened perceived threat from the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

U.S. security assurances to assuage Iranian fears regarding U.S. intentions are unlikely to have much credibility or appeal. The U.S. is perceived by many Iranian decision-makers as an implacable foe. The U.S., moreover, has a limited ability to alter Iran's threat environment and cannot address the full range of Iranian security concerns pertaining to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. (Indeed, it cannot resolve its own security concerns there.) Finally, Iran's motivations for acquiring nuclear weapons are not just related to security concerns, but also to issues of self-reliance and national pride. Foreign security assurances would run contrary to the Islamic Republic's ethos of self-reliance—which is a key tenet of the revolution—and undermine Iran's efforts to portray itself as a fiercely independent regional power.

The prospects for U.S.-Iranian nuclear diplomacy are slim. For political reasons, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for both sides to limit negotiations to the

⁸ According to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, "If we reach the point where our national interests and the regime's values are tarnished, we will have no doubts about cutting off this process. The regime's enemies should not imagine that the Islamic Republic is trapped." AFP, "Iran's Supreme Leader Says Nuclear Deal is No Climbdown," 3 November, 2003.

nuclear issue. No U.S. administration could afford to negotiate with Tehran concerning nuclear matters while the latter continues to support terrorism, encourage Israeli-Palestinian violence, and engage in human rights abuses. Conversely, a package deal or “grand bargain” that covers all the major issues that separate the U.S. and Iran is probably unachievable at this time, due to the complexity of the issues, and political constraints in both countries.

Nonetheless, the only way to really assess the prospects for diplomacy is by talking to Tehran. Diplomacy, however, should not be allowed to become a means by which Iran plays for time as it works on its nuclear infrastructure.

Preventive Action

In light of the diminished efficacy of technology denial and the uncertain – if not dubious – prospects offered by diplomacy, preventive action (both covert operations and overt military action) might prove tempting as a means of imposing additional delays on Iran’s nuclear program and buying more time. Preventive action, however, would face formidable intelligence, technical, and political challenges. Effective preventive action will require detailed, accurate, and comprehensive intelligence regarding Iran’s nuclear program. The U.S. track record with regard to its ability to follow nuclear developments in Iraq, North Korea, and Iran is not particularly reassuring and raises doubts as to whether it can meet the high bar required for preventive action in Iran. It is also likely that significant portions of the Iranian program have been dispersed and remain hidden, complicating preventive action. Finally, the U.S. would have to deal with the possibility of international censure, an anti-American nationalist backlash in Iran (whose population has, until now, been generally friendly to the U.S.), and Iranian retaliation, which might take the form of a protracted and far-flung campaign of terrorism against U.S. interests around the world.

Given these concerns, covert action is particularly tempting; by creating ambiguity about responsibility for the murder of key Iranian scientists, acts of sabotage or direct action against nuclear facilities, covert action would complicate retaliation and thereby avert many of the drawbacks of overt military action. Covert action, however, is likely to have only a modest impact on Iran’s nuclear program. Obtaining access to and sabotaging one facility would be hard enough. Duplicating this feat at a number of locations might prove beyond the means of the intelligence and special operations community of any country. Thus, although covert action has a role to play, it is unlikely to

have a decisive impact on Iran's nuclear program and is unlikely to obviate the need for overt military action.⁹

Overt military action (e.g. cruise missile and/or air strikes) offers the possibility of inflicting significant damage on Iran's nuclear program by allowing simultaneous strikes on multiple targets. Extraordinarily accurate intelligence is, however, a precondition to effective overt action. Unless the U.S. were to succeed in interdicting all of the critical paths to the bomb being pursued by Iran and thereby significantly delay its program, it will have incurred great risk for little or no gain. Overt action will require measures to mitigate an anti-American backlash in Iran and to deter and/or disrupt Iranian attempts to retaliate by various means, including terrorism.

The complex, daunting, and somewhat contradictory nature of these challenges (e.g., successful prevention could harm short-term prospects for political change and complicate long-term prospects for rapprochement with a new Iran) only underscores the importance of exhausting diplomatic options before giving serious consideration to military action.

Nonetheless, preventive action must remain "on the table" as an option if for no other reason than to spur diplomacy (though the U.S. must be subtle in suggesting the possibility of military action, to avoid providing Iran with a pretext for invoking its NPT Article X right to withdraw from the treaty in response to threats to its "supreme interests"). Moreover, it may always be possible that in the future, preventive action might become a viable option: should the U.S. succeed in piecing together a fairly complete picture of Iran's nuclear program (after all, details about the program keep leaking out); should sabotage/covert action become possible as a result of the recruitment of well-placed agents; or should Iran be found responsible for encouraging or commissioning an act of anti-U.S. terrorism that results in significant loss of U.S. life. Under such circumstances, the U.S. might be inclined to hit Iran's nuclear infrastructure as part of a broader retaliatory action against terrorist-related facilities in Iran.¹⁰

Deter and Contain

⁹ It is worth noting that Israel waged a covert campaign against Iraq's nuclear program in the late 1970s, involving acts of sabotage in France against reactor components destined for Iraq's Osiraq reactor, and the assassination in Europe of scientists linked with Iraq's nuclear program. These did not, however, ultimately obviate the need for preventive military action against Osiraq in 1981.

¹⁰ For more on the risks and challenges of prevention, see: Michael Eisenstadt, "Challenges of U.S. Preventive Military Action," in Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson (eds.), *Nuclear Iran: Devising a Strategy Beyond Denial* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, forthcoming in 2004).

Should Iran succeed in efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, deterring their use and containing a nuclear Iran (i.e., preventing it from translating its nuclear capability into political influence) will emerge as key challenges for U.S. policy. The aspirations and ambitions of Iran's clerical leadership, the logic of Iranian politics, and the legacy of U.S.-Iran relations since the Islamic revolution are, however, likely to complicate such efforts.¹¹

The 'Martyrdom-Seeking Nation' and Deterrence

Because Shiite religious doctrine exalts the suffering and martyrdom of the faithful, and, because religion plays a central role in the official ideology of the Islamic Republic, Iran is sometimes portrayed as an 'undeterrable' state driven by the absolute imperatives of religion, rather than by the pragmatic concerns of statecraft. This impression has been reinforced by Iran's use of costly human-wave attacks during the Iran-Iraq War, its prolongation of the war with Iraq due to its single-minded pursuit of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and its support for groups such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which have employed such tactics as suicide bombings.

The perception, however, of Iran as an irrational, undeterrable state with a high pain threshold is wrong. Iranian decision-makers are generally not inclined to rash action. Within the context of a relatively activist foreign and defense policy, they have generally sought to minimize risk by shunning direct confrontation and by acting through surrogates (such as the Lebanese Hezbollah) or by means of stealth (Iranian small boat and mine operations against shipping in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War) in order to preserve deniability and create ambiguity about their intentions. Such behavior is evidence of an ability to gauge accurately the balance of power and to identify and circumvent the 'red lines' of its adversaries – a strong indicator of an ability to engage in rational calculation. Furthermore, Iranian officials seem to use the language of deterrence as it is spoken and understood in the West. Shortly after the *Shehab-3* missile test launch in July 1998, Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani explained that to bolster Iran's deterrent capability:

We have prepared ourselves to absorb the first strike so that it inflicts the least damage on us. We have, however, prepared a second strike which can decisively avenge the first one, while preventing a third strike against us.¹²

¹¹ Parts of this section are based on Michael Eisenstadt, "Living with a Nuclear Iran?" *Survival*, vol. 41, no. 3, Autumn 1999, 132-137.

¹² Interview with Defense Minister Admiral 'Ali Shamkhani on Tehran IRIB Television Second Program, 30 July 1998, translated in FBIS-NES-98-217, 5 August 1998.

Tehran's conduct during the later stages of the Iran-Iraq War likewise demonstrated that Iran is not insensitive to costs. It is possible to argue that in the heady, optimistic, early days of the revolution – from the early-to-mid 1980s – Iran had a higher threshold for pain than did most other states. During the early years of the war, Tehran was willing to endure hardships, make great sacrifices, and incur heavy losses in support of the war effort – eschewing the opportunity for a cease-fire in 1982 to pursue the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad and the export of the Revolution. But in its final years, popular support for the war with Iraq had waned: the population was demoralized and wearied by years of inconclusive fighting, making it increasingly difficult to attract volunteers for the front, and many clerics had come to the conclusion that the war was unwinnable.¹³ This was not, as Ayatollah Khamanei was fond of saying, 'a nation of martyrs.'

In fact, Khamanei was probably the only figure with the charisma and moral authority to inspire the Iranian people to sustain the level of sacrifice required to continue the war for eight years. The double blow embodied by the unsuccessful conclusion of the war in August 1988 and the death of Khamanei in June 1989 marked the end of the decade of revolutionary radicalism in Iranian politics. With respect to its ability to tolerate pain and absorb casualties, Iran has since become a much more 'normal' state. Its cautious behavior during the 1991 uprising in Iraq and the 1998 crisis with Afghanistan that followed the Taliban victory there provides perhaps the best proof that Tehran is wary of stumbling into a costly quagmire for which there would be little or no public support. It will sooner compromise its Islamic ideological commitments and abandon endangered Shiite communities to their fate than risk Iranian national interests by entering into foreign adventures.

Such pragmatism is consistent with a basic principle of decision-making established by Khamanei shortly before his death. In a series of letters to then President Ali Khamenei and the Council of Guardians in December 1987 and January 1988, he affirmed the Islamic government's authority to destroy a mosque or suspend the observance of the five pillars of faith (the fundamentals of Muslim observance) if Iranian state interests so required. In so doing, he sanctioned the supremacy of state interest over

¹³ Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 273.

both religion and the doctrine of the Revolution.¹⁴ Ever since then, national interest has been the guiding principle of Iranian decision-making, whether with regard to social issues (such as birth control), the economy (foreign investment in the oil sector), or foreign and defense policy (restraint in pursuing efforts to export the revolution since the early 1990s).

This line of reasoning has implications for Tehran's claim that Islam prevents it from acquiring or using nuclear weapons. Aside from the fact that strong circumstantial evidence would seem to contradict this assertion (including Tehran's procurement efforts, its failure to meet its reporting requirements under the NPT, and its participation in clandestine enrichment and reprocessing activities), experience also shows that Iranian decision-making on critical policy issues is generally based on reasons of state, not religious doctrine or ideology.

The main problem posed by a nuclear Iran is thus not the putative 'irrationality' of the regime or its high threshold for pain. Rather, it is:

- The impact of factionalism among the regime's clerical leadership on decision-making and policy;
- The possibility that some Iranian decision-makers might believe that nuclear weapons could increase Iran's latitude to engage in conventional terrorism, or to pursue an "eliminationist" solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and;
- The impact of domestic instability and anti-regime violence on the security of Iran's nuclear stockpile and the behavior of hardline officials that control its nuclear arsenal.

Each of these factors could make it difficult for the U.S. or Israel to establish a stable deterrent relationship with a nuclear Iran.

The tug-of-war between different political factions pursuing conflicting agendas could make deterring a nuclear Iran an uncertain proposition. Regime factionalism has sometimes caused radical departures from established patterns of behavior, as different personalities, factions or branches of the government work at cross purposes, act to subvert their rivals, or press the government to take actions inconsistent with its general policy line. Accordingly, Iranian policy has often embodied contradictory tendencies, and has often been inconsistent and unpredictable.

This tendency has, however, diminished in recent years, as the conservative faction has fended off challenges by reformist politicians and gradually consolidated

¹⁴ David Menashri, *Revolution at a Crossroads: Iran's Domestic Politics and Regional Ambitions* (Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1997), 8.

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control over the levers of power in the Islamic Republic. Thus, while Iranian policy continues to be characterized by contradictory currents, this is less a manifestation of political pluralism than an acknowledgement by the dominant conservative faction that the détente policies preferred by many reformers serve a useful purpose by winning Iran diplomatic points abroad and providing political cover for the activities of hardliners in the security services and armed forces.

Recent examples of this tendency can be seen in Iranian policy toward Afghanistan and Iran. While, according to U.S. officials, Iranian diplomats played a constructive role at the Bonn Conference in December 2001 and the subsequent creation of an Afghan Interim Authority, Revolutionary Guard *Qods* Force operatives were working to undermine the authority of the nascent central government by arming and training the Afghan Shiite Sepah-e-Mohammad militia and cultivating the warlord Ismail Khan in Herat.¹⁵ Likewise, in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Iranian government has apparently encouraged Shiite groups such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq to cooperate with coalition forces and to participate in the U.S.-sponsored Iraq Governance Council, while seeking to hinder reconstruction efforts and supporting groups engaged in attacks on Iraqis and Coalition forces.¹⁶ Should, however, the reform movement recover from recent reverses and renew their challenge to their conservative rivals (which at present seems a distant possibility), the latter could engage in terrorism against U.S. personnel or interests, to embarrass and discredit reformist adversaries who seek better relations with the U.S., and perhaps provoke U.S. retaliation, in order to provoke a nationalist backlash against the U.S. and generate domestic support for their hardline position.¹⁷

Iran's past successes in obscuring its involvement in terrorism or avoiding retribution, moreover, might lead some Iranian decision-makers to believe that they could act again with impunity and avert retaliation, especially once they are perceived as a

¹⁵ See the comments by Special Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad to the American-Iranian Council, 15 March, 2002, at: usinfo.state.gov/regional/nea/text/0315iran.htm, and to The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2 August, 2002, at: www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubs/speakers/khalilzad.htm.

¹⁶ Patrick Bishop, "U.S. Troops Killed as Bremer Accuses Iran," *The Telegraph*, 19 September, 2003, at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2003/09/19/wirq19.xml

¹⁷ Thus, in November 1979, militant 'students' stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took embassy personnel hostage, in order to subvert the efforts of moderates in the government trying to reopen lines of communications with Washington. In November 1986, opponents of a rapprochement with Washington leaked details to a Lebanese newspaper of what was to become known as Irangate, leading to the collapse of the effort. And in February 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei issued a *fatwa* condemning writer Salman Rushdie to death, thereby undercutting months of painstaking efforts to mend relations with Europe by then Parliamentary Speaker 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and allies in the Foreign Ministry.

nuclear weapons state. Such risky behavior could initiate an escalatory spiral, and lead to a nuclear crisis.

Likewise, the acquisition of nuclear weapons could embolden Iran's leadership to engage in aggressive, even reckless behavior. Thus, a nuclear Iran may be more inclined to take risks vis-à-vis Israel, in the belief that its nuclear capability would deter major acts of retaliation. This may have been the assumption underpinning the assertion in a December 2001 Friday prayer sermon by 'Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Expediency Council chairman, that:

If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality.¹⁸

While Rafsanjani's sermon lends itself to alternative readings — as either a matter-of-fact description of strategic reality in a Middle East in which more than one country has nuclear weapons or, more ominously, as a statement of intent — it raises the disquieting possibility that some Iranians may see nuclear weapons as a means of pursuing an eliminationist solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This would not be surprising in light of the prevalence of anti-Israel vitriol in the public political discourse of both “liberal” reformers and conservative hardliners.

The dangers of a nuclear Iran go beyond the possibility of increased risk-taking or calculated use. Instability and unrest in a nuclear Iran could have dire consequences for the U.S. and the region. Should anti-regime violence escalate to the point that it threatens the existence of the Islamic Republic (unlikely in the near-term, but a possibility in the future, should popular demands for political change continue to be ignored by conservative hardliners), diehard supporters of the old order might, in a parting shot, lash out at perceived external enemies of the sinking regime with all means at their disposal, as the regime teeters on the brink.

Finally, there is the threat of nonconventional terrorism. The fact that Iran or its agents have not yet used chemical and/or biological agents in terrorist attacks may indicate the existence of a normative threshold, or it may indicate that, having achieved significant

¹⁸ Rafsanjani as quoted by Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, December 14, 2001, and translated by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, December 15, 2001.

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successes by conventional terrorism, Tehran and its surrogates perceive no need to incur the risk that use of nonconventional weapons would entail. Nonetheless, because of the importance that Tehran has traditionally attached to preserving deniability, Iran is likely to seek, when acting against more powerful adversaries, the ability to deliver nonconventional arms by non-traditional means (for instance, terrorists, boats, or remotely piloted aircraft). Because such methods offer the possibility of covert delivery, they are likely to become important adjuncts to more traditional delivery means such as missiles, and in situations in which deniability is a critical consideration, they are likely to be the delivery means of choice. The possibility of deniable, covert delivery of nuclear weapons by Iran could pose a major challenge for deterrence – particularly if the regime believed that its survival was at stake.

Strengthening Deterrence, Bolstering Containment

To deal with such threats, the U.S. needs to be able to preclude the use of nuclear weapons by Iran by means of deterrence through denial as well as punishment. It must be able to neutralize the means by which Tehran might deliver nuclear weapons, thereby raising the risks and costs of attempted use and reducing the potential utility of nuclear weapons.

To do so, the U.S. and its allies in the Gulf will have to develop or strengthen their ability to detect and track vehicles or boats carrying nuclear cargos; the ability of their ground and naval air- and missile-defenses to provide early warning of missile launch, to intercept ballistic and cruise missiles, and to deal with crude countermeasures, and; their ability to identify, interdict, and roll up terrorist cells in the employ of Tehran. Likewise, the U.S. will need to enhance its ability to hold at risk that which is important to Iran's clerical leadership: the survival of senior political clerics and their families; the efficient functioning of military and paramilitary units responsible for the security and survival of the regime (the 'special units' of the Revolutionary Guard, the Law Enforcement Forces, the Basij, and the vigilantes of the Ansar-e-Hezbollah), and; the business interests of senior clerics or their relatives. The U.S. also needs to understand Iran's "red lines," the crossing of which could lead to a crisis or conflict, while clearly communicating its own "red lines" to Tehran, to minimize the risk of miscalculation by either side and to inject an element of predictability into the relationship between the two.

Tehran needs to understand – and the international community must assist the U.S. in conveying this message – that if it does acquire nuclear weapons, it will harm, rather than enhance its security, by prompting additional proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region – most of which will be pointed at Iran. Tehran will also bring upon itself political isolation and economic sanctions and, by its actions, may bring about the formation of a military containment regime organized by the U.S. that might include many of Iran’s neighbors and involve the deployment of many of the military enhancements and implementation of the counter-terror measures mentioned above. Likewise, Tehran needs to understand that its acquisition of nuclear weapons will deepen the U.S. role in the security of the region, thereby undermining the key Iranian objective of getting U.S. forces out of the Gulf and ending U.S. influence there.

Finally, though, there is not a lot that Washington can do to alter those aspects of Iranian politics that make establishing a stable deterrence relationship with Tehran potentially problematic, it should continue to encourage those Iranians working for political change in their country. Hopefully, through these efforts, a more moderate leadership may come to power, one not wedded to the use of terrorism or to the acquisition of nuclear weapons, and more likely to act responsibly should Iran acquire nuclear weapons.

Roll Back¹⁹

Although it may not be feasible now or in the near future, the U.S. should not exclude the possibility at some distant future date of nuclear roll back (i.e., the voluntary renunciation of the pursuit or ownership of nuclear weapons) in Iran – particularly in light of Libya’s recent surprise decision to scrap its nuclear, chemical, and ballistic missile programs. Setting the conditions for nuclear roll back in the Islamic Republic, as implausible as it may now seem, should be a long-term goal of the U.S.

Since World War II, there have been nine cases of nuclear roll back: Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. (If Libya follows through on its recent commitment, there will be ten.) Argentina and Brazil abandoned their nuclear weapons programs following the transition from military to civilian rule in both states. South Africa, despite a significant investment in nuclear weapons, gave them up with the end of the Cold War and apartheid. And Belarus,

¹⁹ This section was inspired by a similar previous exercise by Seth Carus, “Iranian Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons: Implications and Responses,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1998, 8-10, at <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/meria/journal/1998/issue1/jv2n1a3.html>.

Kazakhstan, and Ukraine – successor states of the Soviet Union – gave up their nuclear inheritance in return for political and economic blandishments by the U.S. and others. In light of these successes of the past decade, it is worthwhile assessing the various factors that have led to roll back elsewhere and consider their relevance to Iran.

Studies of roll back have identified five key factors critical to roll back decisions: political change, altered perceptions of the military utility of nuclear weapons, external pressure and inducements (such as financial blandishments, and positive or negative security assurances), economic constraints, and the lack of a public commitment to the possession of nuclear weapons.²⁰

Political Change: Roll back may come about as a result of a change in policy by the country's leadership, a change of governments, or as a result of regime change.

It is possible that the current government in Tehran might abandon its nuclear ambitions in response to foreign pressure; indeed, some claim that the October 21st Agreement signals just such a change in course. Others, however, believe that this was a tactical move reminiscent of dramatic policy reversals by other regional leaders forced to bend by external pressures (e.g., Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, Yassir Arafat after the 1991 Gulf War), that were undone once circumstances changed or external pressures abated. It remains to be seen whether Iran's current leadership will go beyond the October 21st Agreement. Initial signs are not very promising.

Fundamental political change in Tehran may be a necessary condition for nuclear roll back in Iran. Such change seems inevitable, given that the overwhelming majority of Iranian youth are alienated from the political system, want change, and will someday likely be in a position to achieve it. It is not clear, however, that political change would be sufficient for roll back. To the degree that it is possible to assess elite and popular opinion in Iran on such matters, support for the country's nuclear program appears to come from across the political spectrum,²¹ and a new government or regime might remain wedded to the pursuit of 'the bomb.'

Thus political change might not alter Iran's nuclear ambitions. It could, however, bring to power a leadership that is more sensitive to the potential costs of nuclear

²⁰ See the path-breaking works of Joseph A. Yager, "Prospects for Nuclear Proliferation Rollback," a discussion paper for the Science Applications International Corporation, July 6, 1992, and Mitchell Reiss, "Nuclear Rollback Decisions: Future Lessons?" *Arms Control Today*, July/August 1995, 10-15, and *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995).

²¹ Karl Vick, "Iranians Assert Right to Nuclear Weapons: Issue Unites Conservatives, Reformers," *The Washington Post*, 11 March 2003, A16.

proliferation in terms of Iran's relations with the West and its ability to attract foreign investment, and that might choose differently if given the option. What can the U.S. do to encourage such an outcome? For now, the U.S. must – at the very least – continue to offer rhetorical and moral support to those seeking change in Iran.

Altered Perceptions of Military Utility: Iran's nuclear ambitions are rooted in a powerful drive for self-reliance; for power, prestige, and influence; and for the ability to deter potential adversaries. Though the U.S. and the international community cannot influence Iran's ideology of self-reliance, nor significantly alter Iran's desire for power and prestige, it might be able to make a strong case that nuclear weapons will diminish, not enhance Iran's security. Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons might result in Iran's political isolation, harm its economy through new sanctions and reduced investment, and undercut its military position by prompting additional proliferation, deepening the U.S. security role in the Gulf, and perhaps even prompting preventive military action by Israel or the U.S. The U.S., Europe, and the Arab Gulf states must not miss an opportunity to convince Tehran that nuclear weapons will greatly complicate its threat environment and undermine Iranian security.

External Pressure/Inducements: External pressures have had a mixed impact on Iran and its nuclear program: while they have forced Tehran to become more forthcoming with information regarding its nuclear program, they may have also strengthened Iran's commitment to pursuing its nuclear option. To succeed, external pressures probably need to be combined with inducements. It is not clear, however, that the international community is willing to bring sufficient pressure to bear or can offer sufficiently credible inducements to influence Iran to rethink its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Outside powers are limited in their ability to influence the complex and dynamic threat environment of the Gulf and South Asia, while Iran is unlikely to seriously consider security assurances offered up by countries, such as the U.S., that are seen as hostile to its basic interests.

Economic Constraints: U.S. economic pressures and sanctions have imposed opportunity costs on Iran, and remain a drag (though hardly the most significant one) on Iran's economy. Even so, Iran's economy has done reasonably well in recent years, due to relatively high oil prices, economic reforms, and fiscal discipline. Barring a major misstep by Tehran, there is probably not much international support for broader and tighter sanctions on Iran, should it fail to be more forthcoming regarding its nuclear program; at most, some countries might halt new investments or business deals. As a result, Iran is

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likely to continue to muddle through economically. And a tightly focused, well-run nuclear program need not be prohibitively expensive; in fact, it is likely to be much less expensive than a major conventional military build-up. For these reasons, economic considerations are unlikely to influence Iran to abandon its nuclear program.

Lack of Public Commitment to Nuclear Weapons: While senior Iranian officials have extolled Iran's pursuit of civilian nuclear technology, they have thus far avoided a similar, unequivocal rhetorical embrace of nuclear weapons. This is, no doubt, in large part due to Iran's status as an NPT signatory. Should Iran decide to acquire nuclear weapons, moreover, it might adopt a policy of nuclear ambiguity, to avoid an open breach of its NPT obligations and an adverse international reaction. In this way, it might remove from the table one factor that could diminish the prospects for successful roll back, should it decide to alter course. For this reason, the U.S. should avoid menacing words or actions that might cause Iran to openly embrace nuclear weapons.

Nuclear roll back in Iran remains a distant goal, though it is not beyond the realm of the possible. To create conditions whereby a roll back decision by Tehran may someday become possible, the U.S. should encourage political change in Tehran, convince Iran's clerical leadership that nuclear weapons would do more harm than good to Iran's national security, and avoid steps that could cause Tehran to publicly embrace to pursuit or possession of nuclear weapons.

These are, of course, by themselves, not sufficient conditions for roll back, but their accomplishment would greatly facilitate diplomatic efforts, employing both pressures and inducements, aimed at achieving this objective.

Conclusions

A Middle East with a nuclear Iran would be a much more dangerous place for the U.S. and its allies. While nonproliferation efforts aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring the bomb must continue, only by preparing for the possible failure of these efforts can Washington mitigate the risks of such an outcome and enhance the prospects for deterrence and containment.

By the same token, the U.S. should not assume that a nuclear Iran is inevitable (though if Iran continues along its current trajectory, that seems a likely outcome). It remains possible that Iranian efforts to acquire the bomb may fail, for a variety of reasons.

Thus, an alarmist stance toward Iran's nuclear program that causes American allies to proliferate or pursue accommodationist policies toward Iran would be self-defeating.

Hence the U.S. must make clear that an Iranian bomb will not stop the U.S. from meeting its security commitments to friends and allies in the region or from responding to Iranian-sponsored terrorism or use of nonconventional weapons. And it must find ways to strengthen its deterrent capabilities and reassure allies, without frightening them and contributing to regional tensions.

Finally, while continuing its nonproliferation efforts and taking steps to deter and contain a nuclear Iran, the U.S. must shape the regional environment to maximize the prospects for a future Iranian decision to abandon its nuclear ambitions and nuclear weapons. Such an outcome seems highly unlikely at this time. But rollback has occurred elsewhere, with other 'hard cases,' and might someday become possible in Iran – if the U.S. and others actively work toward this goal.

Michael Eisenstadt is a Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

To Sign or Not to Sign? Iran's Evolving Domestic Debate on Nuclear Options

Farideh Farhi

Iran's complex decision-making apparatus has faced many challenges in the months since Mohammad El Baradei, the head of International Atomic Energy (IAEA), called on Iran, in the June 16, 2003, meeting of IAEA's governing board, to allow for the inspection of nuclear facilities without any preconditions. Diplomatic tensions with Canada regarding the murder of the Iranian-Canadian journalist, deteriorating relations with the UK over the arrest of the former Iranian diplomat, Hadi Soleimanpour, attacks against the British Embassy in Tehran, disputes with the EU over Iran's nuclear program and human rights, and American pressures on the IAEA to refer the case against Iran to the UN Security Council have created a sense of embattlement in Tehran in face of what is seen as coordinated and concerted external pressures to bring about a change in Iran's behavior in the international arena.

But the past few months have also been highly contentious months in Iran, itself, as various political competitors and factions within Iran have jockeyed to influence public discussions over how to deflect the international pressure Iran is facing. They have, in particular, engaged in a lively debate over what to do about international pressure, pushing to ensure Iran's adherence to the enhanced safeguards system contained in the IAEA's Additional Protocol and halt its uranium enrichment program that came into full focus with the October 31, 2003, deadline set by the IAEA. In fact, it can be argued that, more than ever, the question of Iran's nuclear program has become part and parcel of the overall factional conflict that has gripped the nation for the past few years. This was not the case before. It is interesting to see how it happened and the manner in which the debate has evolved, opening the way for the declaration of October 21, 2003, which acknowledged Iran's intent to sign the Additional Protocol and temporarily halt its uranium enrichment program in exchange for the promise on the part of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, to respect and perhaps even give future support for Iran's civilian nuclear energy program.¹

¹ For the full text of the declaration see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3211036.stm.

As astute Iran observers have pointed out, the particular experience of Iran with revolution, war, sanctions, and estrangement from the international community, has always been the source of a shared sense of embattlement in a hostile environment, allowing the Iranian hardliners to portray themselves as the “true” guardians of Iranian security and shut off debate on foreign policy and security issues.² The situation has changed in recent years as the costs of hardliners choices in foreign and security policies have mounted, affecting Iran’s economic and political well-being as well as its internal drive towards more popular participation. The seemingly united stance taken by Europe (including Russia) and the United States on the nuclear issue initially surprised many across the political spectrum and, in effect, opened the floodgates for domestic discussion about why Iran finds itself in the current situation and what to do.

As an important foreign policy concern, the issue of Iran’s nuclear program is a particularly interesting one to examine since, given the specific nature of the international demands on Iran, it offers a good case for understanding how international pressures work their way into Iranian domestic politics. On the one hand, they encourage public scrutiny of Iran’s international predicament. But given the punitive approach of external pressures, pressures can strengthen the hardliners and isolate Iran’s diplomatic apparatus, which is accused by all sides of the political spectrum as ineffective. However, as the possibility and the need for a compromise with Europe became part of the Iranian discourse, the voices of those pushing for more integration in the international community—using the signing of the Additional Protocol as “a step in confidence building,” turned more assertive, bolstered by the possibility of improved relations with Western Europe, and a realistic assessment of the necessity to work and negotiate with forces and countries that do not necessarily accept the “axis of evil” assessment of the Iranian regime forwarded by the Bush administration.

In this context, the decision to take initiative and enter into agreement with the three European states must be seen as a culmination of a heated internal debate – a national conversation so to speak – that, at least in its first round, was won by those who argued that the signing of the Additional Protocol is a necessary affirmation of Iran’s commitment to international obligations and not an abridgement of sovereignty. This debate is far from over, however. In fact, as the October 21st agreement with Europe works its way through

² On this point see Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litvak, “Debating Iran’s Nuclear Aspirations.” *The Washington Quarterly* 26, 4 (Autumn 2003), 99-114.

the Iranian political system, particularly as the debate over ratifying the Additional Protocol moves to the Iranian parliament and as the implications of “intrusive inspections” become more evident to the Iranian polity, the internal debate and conflicts are bound to intensify. The reality is that a first step has been taken – a step that many thought too difficult for Iran’s contentious and bickering political system. The decision on the part of the multi-vocal Iranian leadership to remain engaged in discussions with the international community over its nuclear program will depend as much on the continued resiliency of the Iranian political system to adjust to external pressures as on the European countries’ desire and intent to approach the contentious internal dynamics of Iran with enough care so as to strengthen the hands of those who convinced Iran’s important players that entering into an agreement with Europe was the prudent thing to do.

The Context

In order to make sense of the evolving nature of public debate on the nuclear issue, a few points are important to understand regarding the history of public debate over Iran’s nuclear options.

1. Public debate about nuclear options is not new in Iran, but the intensity and prevalence of the current round has led to a much more widespread and transparent debate about Iran’s foreign policy options. Furthermore, it has served to deflect from perhaps the more urgent debate in Iran, which is the kind of posture and policies Iran should pursue in Iraq, given its occupation by American and British forces.
2. The more limited public debate of the past was underscored by the premise that Iran was not pursuing a nuclear weapons program, fully accepting the repeatedly stated position of the Iranian government that nuclear weapons are un-Islamic and do not constitute a part of Iran’s military and strategic doctrine.³

³ This is a point worth examining. The fact that newspapers and other forums accept the government’s position on this issue is perhaps not surprising given the sensitivity of the issue and the fact that a public claim coming from the inside that Iran is indeed pursuing a nuclear weapons program would undoubtedly face severe governmental sanctions. What is most interesting, however, is that even in the very vibrant and open oral culture of Iran, there is almost a total acceptance that Iran is not pursuing a nuclear weapons program. While no scientific surveys have been conducted in this regard, in my research I could not find a single person, among the hardliners, reformists or even opposition leaders, who thought that Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapons program. Even within the scientific and engineering circles in Iran, I could not trace any rumors or leaks that suggest the existence of a

The debate did, nevertheless, mull over the costs and benefits of pursuing such a program in the future, in the light of events that were occurring in Iran's neighborhood, particularly Pakistan's nuclear testing in 1998.⁴

3. This debate, however, was rather limited and not based on a clear or serious military-strategic doctrine to make nuclear weapons an indispensable requirement for Iran. Few analysts inside Iran, if any, considered in detail whether and how nuclear weapons actually would reduce security threats to Iran compared, for instance, to a strategy of trading Iran's nascent fuel-cycle capabilities for security guarantees and economic linkages to the West. Few, if any, discussed the implications of a nuclear weapons capable-Iran for the arms race in the region.
4. It is true that until the pressure to sign the Additional Protocol escalated, a few intellectuals and pundits from different sides of Iran's political spectrum did seem somewhat attracted to nuclear weapon capability as a means to narrow gaps in power and status between Iran and Pakistan, Israel, the U.S. and previously Iraq. It is also true that these nuclear calculations were not derived from irrational designs but rather from an attempt to create a viable deterrent capability against a range of regional threats, on top of which used to be Saddam Hussein's Iraq. However, it is again important to note that this attraction was vague and not generated from strategic thinking; rather it was subsumed under political-economic issues that preoccupy the elite, followed by

nuclear weapons program or even a sophisticated nuclear energy program. In fact, in a statement released by Iran's Physics Society immediately after Iran's agreement with the European countries the whole notion of Iran's advancement in the area of nuclear technology is contested: "The claim of Iran's achievement of nuclear technology and its peaceful is worth pondering. Nuclear technology and sciences are very diverse and multidisciplinary and access to technology in one context cannot be extended to other contexts. Lack of attention to the diverse contexts of nuclear technology and its peaceful use, lack of support for the existing weak infrastructure and even at times its destruction, lack of attention to the training of human expertise in nuclear technology and sciences, lack of support for research in this area, and lack of a necessary future vision all suggest the weak foundation of this claim and make us worried about the consequences of making claims about achievements that we do not have... We declare that in isolation the necessary infrastructure for the development of peaceful nuclear technology cannot be created. Our concern is the closure of all international paths for the country's scientific development." The statement in Persian is reproduced at <http://www.rouydad.ws/Htmlfile/1382/08/05/News05.htm>.

⁴ For an elaborate discussion of the earlier debate see Farideh Farhi, "To Have or Not to Have? Iran's Domestic Debate on Nuclear Options," in *Iran's Nuclear Weapons Options: Issues and Analysis* edited by Geoffrey Kemp, The Nixon Center, January 2001, <http://www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/pdf/nixoniranwmd.pdf>. Also see Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Nuclear Calculation." *World Policy Journal* (Summer 2003), 21-28.

broader foreign policy considerations having to do with Iran's role in the world, and the possible relations with the U.S. and the West.⁵

5. What this means is that the nuclear option was discussed either as a deterrent or as a bargaining lever in possible future negotiations in the same way, for instance, North Korea managed to do in 1994 and perhaps in the next few months. In this way, nuclear weapons were seen as an asset by a few people when dealing with Washington—the only way of forcing the United States to adopt a more cautious approach accompanied with respect.⁶ It is also important to note that those opposing the nuclear option did not generally do so out of strategic considerations but for political reasons, pointing out the tensions and international acrimony that the pursuit of the nuclear option will heap on Iran.
6. This tendency to speculate on the nuclear option as a deterrent or a bargaining lever became intensified with President Bush's "axis of evil" speech. The well-noted tension that exists in American foreign policy between the twin objectives of near-term change in behavior and eventual regime change, in effect, undercuts incentives to change behavior. The Bush Administration's statements accentuating regime change, deliberately or not, intensified fear of impending aggression from a U.S.-Israeli axis, leading a few Iranian pundits and analysts from opposing sides of the political spectrum to argue that they

⁵ Lack of strategic thinking is noted in Iran as well. For instance, in an op-ed piece in *Shargh* (9 October 2003), Sadeq Zibakalam, a University of Tehran professor, argues that the fact that there is now quite a bit of discussion about whether to sign the Additional Protocol should not be seen as a sign of strategic thinking. He suggests that the debate has in fact been completely devoid of such thinking and questions the usefulness and depth of the current debate on the signing of the Additional Protocol.

⁶ In a 15 September 2003 article reprinted in Beirut's *Daily Star*, Abumohammad Asgarkhani, a professor of international relations at the university of Tehran, explains his support for development of nuclear weapons in this way: "If you ask me as to whether or not Iran will live up to its NPT commitments, I would say yes. If you ask me if Iran needs to nuclearize itself, I would say this is a must for Iran's strategy of survival. A nuclear Iran must not be seen as a threat to its neighboring countries or to Israel. The weapons would serve as a minimum deterrence for self-defense in a world of uncertainty. It is necessary not only as a substitute for fossil energy but also for Iran's social cohesion and prestige. Six years ago, I warned that internally Iran is in a state of disarray. That argument still holds water. I would now argue that, only by becoming a nuclear weapons state, can Iran consolidate its social coherence. Iran needs both soft and hard power to regain its national identity and prestige. I strongly believe that if the underlying cause of conflict between Iran and the US, the Palestinian-Israeli issue, is resolved, those three outstanding issues would be irrelevant in the eyes of Americans. Sept. 11 militates against all forms of radicalism, including radicalism in Israel. The solution can hardly be located in arms control regimes such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and NPT. It must start within the ambit of Alternate Dispute Resolution. Sept. 11 is driving Iran and Israel toward that resolution."

need nuclear weapons to “equalize” or deter the U.S. acting alone or in concert with Israel.⁷ With Saddam Hussein’s demise, the U.S. has further emerged as Iran’s most important concern. The Bush Doctrine, along with the increasing presence of U.S. military power in the neighborhood, has intensified Tehran’s fears that the Islamic Republic will be the next U.S. target.

7. At the same time, it is important to note that the overall tenor of public debate in Iran has always heavily favored the argument that crossing the nuclear threshold (whatever that means, given the ambiguity associated with the idea of threshold these days) will only exacerbate Iran’s strategic vulnerabilities. It would harm relations with the Persian Gulf neighbors, possibly trigger the imposition of multilateral sanctions, further exacerbate Iran’s economic and security problems, and of course provide further fuel or pretext for increased American projection of power in the region, which is precisely what the Iranians would like to avoid.

Having laid out the basics of the nuclear debate in the past, the next section deals with the content of the present debate. The international pressures that have recently been imposed on Iran under the auspices of IAEA have impacted the discussion of Iran’s nuclear program in significant ways. They have changed the debate from a limited discussion among a few pundits about the benefits and costs of having a nuclear weapons program to a much more lively and widespread discussion about whether or not to sign the Additional Protocol in the light of international pressures. This shift has given the hardliners in Iran the opportunity once again to frame the issue in terms of questions of national sovereignty, accusing the proponents of political change of giving in to foreign pressures. In other words, international pressures have steered the discussion further away from strategic

⁷ A *Washington Post* article by Karl Vick (March 11, 2003) quotes two Iranian political commentators, Mostafa Tajzadeh and Amir Mohebian, as suggesting the role of nuclear weapons as equalizers in the region. Amir Mohebian, a conservative commentator, but in the article identified as adviser to Iranian leader Ali Khamenei, is quoted as saying: “Are nuclear weapons bad? Why don’t you make the same protest against Israel?” Mostafa Tajzadeh, from the reformist side of the political spectrum is quoted as saying: “It’s basically a matter of equilibrium. On the one hand Israel says, ‘If I don’t have it, I don’t have security.’ And we say, ‘As long as Israel has it, we don’t have security.’ We believe the way to deal with Israel’s expansionism is to democratize the region. But while things are the way they are, public opinion in Muslim countries, and in Iran, is not going to be against having nuclear weapons.” Neither of these commentators has made an open, detailed case in favor of Iran going nuclear in the Iranian media. To argue that their views can be considered a significant change of position in favor of nuclear weapons in Iran in general, instead of a common Iranian complain about the unfairness and double standards of the nonproliferation regime, is far-fetched particularly since neither of these commentators are policy makers.

concerns and whether nuclear weapons should have a place in Iran's military doctrine or, even more innocuously, whether or not nuclear energy is a desirable route for addressing Iran's energy needs. They have instead focused on the ways in which Iran ought to define its relationship with the world. Despite the hardliners' framing of the issue, however, as will be shown below, the possibility of Iran gaining acceptance for its civilian nuclear energy program gave the proponents of signing enough ammunition to disregard intimidation by the hardliners and to tow a line that ultimately led to the an agreement with the European leaders and the *Sa'dabad* Declaration on Nuclear Program on October 21, 2003.

The Debate: To Sign or Not to Sign?

With the increased international pressures, the debate over Iran's nuclear options became like everything else in Iran, both ideological and political; ideological, reflecting different policy positions regarding the same issue, and political, as different players jockeyed to gain politically from their positioning.

As to policy positions, while Iran's diplomatic apparatus, with the exception of a couple of days around when the October 31st deadline was set by the IAEA's governing board, signaled its willingness to continue cooperating with the IAEA, a few well-known and well-placed hardliners, to whose actions and words many in Iran and the outside world are particularly sensitive, made a coordinated effort in public to threaten the possibility of "pulling a North Korea" and leaving the NPT.⁸ At precisely the same time, they made every effort to muddy foreign ties laboriously nurtured by President Khatami's administration, particularly with the British, whose embassy was even attacked by vigilantes suspected to be on the payroll of hardliners. Leaving the NPT is necessary, these well-placed hardliners argue, in order to avoid the fate of Iraq, which they see as having been made possible by an encroaching inspection regime. If Iran does not withdraw, the U.S. will pocket concessions from Tehran as a prelude to making further demands. In the words of Hossein Shariatmadari, the intractable editor of *Kayhan* newspaper:

⁸ The most noteworthy of the outright opponents have been Ayatollah Hashemi Shahrudi, the head of the judiciary, Ali Larijani, the head of the Iranian radio and television, and Ahmad Jannati, the secretary of the Guardian Council, all hardliners and directly appointed by leader Ali Khamenei. The leader himself did not take a clear stance on the issue prior to the agreement with the European countries but did not denounce the agreement afterwards. Several newspaper editorials, including in *Kayhan*, *Resalat*, *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, and *Jam-e Jam*, all connected to the hardliners, opposed signing on grounds that the way it is being demanded is based on a double-standard, humiliates Iran, and opens the way for future external interference in Iranian affairs. Once the agreement was reached with the European countries some of the previous opponents have lowered their rhetoric while others such as *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* have continued to oppose the deal.

Although the Islamic Republic of Iran, in its nuclear fuel cycle, has no plans to pursue nuclear weapons, the acceptance of this Protocol, in addition to humiliation in the face of an arrogant power, is also suicide for the fear of death. Why? Since 1997, when this Protocol was presented until now, only 32 countries have signed it and other countries, despite their extensive nuclear activities, have refrained from signing. So why should there be an insistence on the Islamic Republic accepting this protocol? In similar treaties, such the Chemical Weapons Convention, inspection of a member country would only take place if one of the member states, with acceptable evidence and reason, requests an inspection and this request will only be pursued after discussion on the central council and the high probability of the truth of the claim. Therefore, if a country is intent on making noise and conspiring against another country, first it cannot do so without solid evidence and second it has to consider the possibility that the accused country will do likewise and make a counterclaim and this logical formula has been devised to prevent political and propagandistic abuses. However, on the basis of the 93+2 Protocol and its supplements, the request for inspection not only has no need for evidence, but article Articles 2, 6, and 9 the IAEA operate on an open source basis and even information that has come about through spying or unnamed reports can become the source of inspection at any time and point! In other words, with the signing of the Protocol, and in the light of the avowed enmity and hostility on the part of America and its partners, a mere false report is enough for the invasion of the agency's inspectors to any desired place, making possible the collection of information at any time and in any place. And this has no other meaning but the enemy's access to all of Iran's secret information in all areas, including military, economic, political, security... This is because, with one false report, all sensitive and strategic centers can be inspected and no secure site will remain.⁹

The rejectionist policy stance of the hardliners can be summarized as being based on three main objections to the Additional Protocol: 1) The double standards used in pressuring Iran to sign the Protocol, 2) The unlimited nature of the inspection regime and the threat of Iran's "Iraqization," and 3) The consequent undermining of Iranian sovereignty. The existence of three different objections prompted the proponents of signing to tackle the issues one by one. However, proponents of signing the Additional

⁹ Hossein Shariatmadari, "What Have They Dreamt for Us?" (In Persian) *Kayhan*, 9 July 2003. Similar rejectionist position has been taken by editorials in *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, *Jam-e jam*, and *Harim*. A more non-partisan case for what an intrusive inspection regime would mean for Iran in the light of Iraq experience is laid out in Kazem Gharib-abadi, "The Additional Protocol and Its Influence on the Islamic Republic of Iran" (in Persian), *Majale-ye Etela'at-e Eghtesadi va Siyasi* (September 2003). While Gharib-abadi does not make a recommendation for either accepting the protocol, he concludes "while joining the protocol may prevent the IAEA and EU from accompanying the US in this regard, it will definitely not end the American accusations, pressures, and threats against the regime." He also lays out the extent of "weakening in national sovereignty" entailed in the intrusive inspection regime.

Protocol fought back. For instance, in a far ranging interview in Iran Daily, Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran's representative to the IAEA and a proponent of signing, responded to the first objection in the following manner:

As far as the Additional Protocol is concerned, I must say that the Protocol has not been properly introduced to our society. The Protocol has not been drawn up only for Iran or Third World countries. This is an international protocol and all the countries that are members of the agency will accede to it sooner or later. Of course, as far as the political lexicon is concerned, the word, "must", is not used when talking about protocols. The international climate is such that everyone will move in this direction in the future. Now, 80 countries have accepted the Additional Protocol and 33 countries have managed to get their parliaments to ratify it. In fact, they are implementing the protocol. The agency has 135 members altogether. I mean, if a number of key countries accede to the Additional Protocol, then international pressure will increase on the issue and this will definitely lead other countries to accede to it as quickly as possible. Indeed, the American Congress is currently studying the issue...

On the question of intrusive inspections, Salehi goes on to say:

Another incorrect statement about the Additional Protocol is that inspectors can go wherever they like to go. In my view, such remarks are rather superficial. The Additional Protocol has 18 clauses. Therefore, studying it will take a little time. However, studying the text of the Protocol will clarify everything. The Protocol states that only nuclear installations, or those installations which have something to do with obtaining nuclear material, are subject to inspection. Such installations can be inspected under certain conditions. Therefore, one cannot deduce that the Protocol can be used to inspect a hospital or someone's house or the basement of the Majles. I don't now how they got the idea that everything and everywhere can be inspected...No inspections will be carried out with prior warning. Now, a warning may be issued 24 hours before the inspections. There is a definition for any time and place. Secondly, in accordance with the Protocol, every country can say that it does not want a certain place to be inspected. However, it can ask them to come and take samples from an area nearby. Another issue, which our critics are unaware of, is that visual observation is not particularly important in the inspection process any more. Scientific observations are quite commonplace. In other words, there are benchmarks for the observation process, such as taking samples or carrying out DNA tests or using other such scientific observations. As Mr. El Baradei has said, the Additional Protocol does not permit irresponsible inspections. There are rules and regulations governing the inspection process....

Finally, on the question of sovereignty, Salehi points out:

Any protocol or treaty limits the sovereignty of the countries involved in them. We have already accepted the treaty banning the proliferation of chemical weapons. We have signed a protocol, which is rather similar to the Additional Protocol. There is also an organization that can inspect installations in accordance with the intelligence in its possession. However, chemical compounds present simpler problems. In fact, chemical compounds can be placed in a barrel and transferred under ground. However, nuclear issues are far more complex. In any case, when countries accept international treaties they also accept certain restrictions, but they also further their own interests at the same time. One cannot deduce that the sovereignty of one's country has been infringed as a result....Those friends of ours who are involved in the debate as proponents or opponents of Iran's accession to the Additional Protocol are all well-intentioned individuals who have taken into consideration the sovereignty of our country. This is praiseworthy indeed. Only a few days ago, an esteemed figure expressed his opinion in an evening daily [reference to Hossein Shariatmadari's article in *Kayhan* cited above]. He wrote a detailed article and it is clear that he has also received assistance from some experts in the field. He argued that we should not accept the Additional Protocol and that we had better leave the NPT as well. On the whole, it was a pertinent and good article. However, it is good for 25 years ago. I mean if we were thinking about accepting the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) 25 years ago, then it would be a valuable article. However, it is not appropriate for the present time. The rationale behind the article is 25 years old. Of course, every one is free to express their opinion. In fact, we should welcome such articles by opinion-makers. However, our statesmen should make decisions that are based on national interests and they should take account of expert analysis. Moreover, they should also deal with the existing realities and focus on the present situation.¹⁰

The point about the opposition to signing not being in line with the time and extant circumstances in which Iran finds itself is echoed by other commentators and politicians. Mohsen Mirdamadi, the deputy director general of the reformist Islamic Iran's Participation Front and the chair of the Majles' National Security and Foreign Relations Committee, says:

The reality is that our recent achievements in the area of nuclear technology have been a point of strength and created a new opportunity for us in the international arena, but we should not turn this into a new threat. We should be careful not to do something that, in effect, brings Europe and the US closer. We should not increase the suspicion of others towards us in a way that they feel we are not speaking honestly with them... We either should not accept a treaty like the NPT or if we

¹⁰ Interview with Ali Akbar Salehi, *Iran Daily*, 27 July 2003.

accept it, we have to accept its limitations. If not, we cannot expect the world to trust us.¹¹

Responding to the charge that the proponents of signing are caving in to unjustified external pressure, Mohammad Reza Khatami, the director general of the reformist Islamic Iran Participation Front and deputy speaker of the Majles, says:

Our view about the international system has not changed at all. We believe that in the international system, the U.S. is in any case a great power and can do anything it wishes. [It could] even pull the UN and the EU behind it and neutralize the efforts of its opponents in the world. This is not a just system, but the change that has taken place among the reformists is that they now consider this a reality and are trying to prepare themselves in a way that our interests are best guaranteed...Let me reiterate. We believe the world is not just but this is a reality and we have to defend our interests within this context.

In terms of the implications of this newly found realism among the reformists, Khatami goes on to say:

The global system is really concerned about whether we have atomic weapons. We think we don't have nuclear weapons and are not after them either. When we have such a view, we have to pursue confidence-building. Now we are doing this through negotiations with the IAEA...We don't say that it [the international community's concern] is justified, but it exists. We have many friends in Europe, Asia and among Islamic countries. They are all concerned. In the past and before May 23, 1997, we have behaved in such a way that confidence eroded. We have engaged in activities that have made us known as an unpredictable regime. This is something we have done ourselves. We now have to change. In the past few years, we have made important steps in the direction of confidence-building. But we have never been able to build total confidence regarding our nuclear energy program and now it is natural for the U.S. to lead the efforts to pressure Iran, but other countries are seriously concerned as well. Now I am not saying that their concern is justified, but, if we are not after nuclear weapons, what's wrong with them coming and making sure that we are not after nuclear weapons and we develop better relations to benefit from better opportunities to develop Iran.¹²

¹¹ *Shargh*, 9 October 2003.

¹² <http://www.isna.ir/news/NewsCont.asp?Lang=P&id=294267>, Mehr 20, 1382

Political Dynamics of the Debate

The differing policy positions are clear enough, in favor or against signing. One side worries about infringement on national sovereignty, based on mistrust of the inspectors, who are considered to be relying on the example of Iraq and manipulated by the U.S. The other side argues that, since Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons, intrusive inspections do not constitute limitations; rather, they provide Iran with steps to enhance its global standing. What is significant is the clear delineation of the debate along the factional divide between the reformists and hardliners. While in the past, the limited debate over the pursuit of the nuclear weapons option did not seem to fall along the factional divide, the new, wider debate has indeed been extremely partisan. To be sure, there are many across the Iranian political spectrum who have attempted to maintain an ambiguous position.¹³ Still others have remained rather abstract, taking what can be considered a middle position and arguing that Iran should sign only if the nature of inspections is clarified or criticizing the inadequacies of the foreign ministry in exacting concessions in its dealings with foreign powers.¹⁴ But the realities of the October 31st deadline, and the desire on the part of an important segment of Iran's political class to reduce the escalating tensions with the international community, shaped the debate in terms of the stark and contentious choice between signing and not signing the Additional Protocol.

Contentious politics is not something new in post-revolutionary Iran. Various issues and policy positions have periodically become highly controversial in Iranian public discourse as a means for various players to jockey for more power and influence. These issues have ranged from the direction of the economy to disagreements over electoral oversight by non-elective institutions.¹⁵ This is the first time, however, that a foreign

¹³ Ambiguity or even relative public silence on the question of signing can be considered to be the position of both the leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and head of Expediency Council, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

¹⁴ Such a critical approach can be seen particularly in the website www.baztab.com associated with Mohsen Rezaie, the former head of the Revolutionary Guards and current member of the National Security Council. However, very little constructive comments are offered here on how to get around the October 31st deadline set by the IAEA. Another person who has made a similar argument is Ali Akbar Mohtashami, previously involved in the establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon and now a Majles deputy in the reformist bloc.

¹⁵ Two other foreign policy matters, i.e., how to end the hostage crisis and how to end the war, have been critical in the history of post-revolutionary Iran. However, both of these foreign policy matters were resolved with the intervention of Ayatollah Khamenei, the founder of the Islamic Republic and its undisputed leader. The acceptance of Resolution 598 did raise many questions among those who had been prodded to support the war

policy issue has become so contentious publicly. The question is why and how Iran's obligations under the non-proliferation regime set up by NPT guidelines – an issue that did not constitute a partisan divide – became so contentious.

If the Iranian public discussions in the newspapers and the parliament are to be taken seriously, the answer to this question must undoubtedly be found in the threatened position the Islamic Republic of Iran has discovered itself in recent months and the fact that, through an international institution, the IAEA, Western powers have found a process through which they could exert coordinated leverage against Iran. This combination transformed the discussion in Iran from a technical debate over the merits of signing an international protocol into a much wider and fundamental debate about what the Iranian leadership needs to do in order to survive in a world in which its leading player, the United States, is hostile to the survival of what it calls the Islamic “regime” in Iran.

From the point of view of those calling for the signing of the Additional Protocol, as the quotes from Mohsen Mirdammadi and Mohammad Reza Khatami above make clear, a compromise with Europe was a must, breaking the united stance that had made the IAEA ultimatum possible. Given the European economic presence in Iran, assuring the European engagement also provided the reformists with continued leverage that could be used in domestic political struggles. In any case, moving in the direction of calling for full engagement with the international community was a natural move for Iran's so-called reformers, since it made their open and non-confrontational foreign policy stance consistent with their call for domestic opening and democratization.¹⁶

The positive connection between a non-confrontational foreign policy, domestic opening, and national security, is clearly laid out in a statement by the reformist Islamic Iran's Participation Front entitled “Acceptance of the Additional Protocol Is Not against National Interests.” In the statement, the Participation Front declared:

We see interaction with the world and respect for international commitments to be a necessity for an acceptable, persistent, and stable government in today's world. This is why we point to the commitments of the Islamic Republic of Iran and their application in full, not beyond,

until definite victory. But Ayatollah Khamanei's decision to accept the responsibility for ending the war and his promise to explain his decision later, when time was more suitable, dampened the public debate and open partisan divide on the issue. For an enlightening discussion of contentious issues and factional politics in Iran see Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khamanei Iran*. Syracuse University Press, 2002)

¹⁶ This reformist move towards a non-confrontation foreign policy obviously begun several years ago and stands at the core of Mohammad Khatami's policy of détente. What changed with the debate over the signing of the protocol was the frankness of it and the willingness to talk about the details of what a non-confrontational foreign policy means without fear of intimidation.

including [the commitment to] the NPT. In this path and given that we consider transparency and confidence-building as necessary for the progress of nuclear knowledge and its peaceful use, we do not consider the acceptance of the Additional Protocol (93+2) and the transparency of the country's nuclear activities to be against national interest and occasionally see it in the direction of confidence-building with other countries...The situation that our country finds itself in the international arena at this point is the result of mistaken decisions taken in close and limited circles against the constitution and now has placed the country in crisis...Islamic Iran's Participation Front, while insisting on the absolute legal right of the parliament and government in all decision-making arenas, including foreign policy issues, considers the only path of exit from the [current] situation [to be] change in the incorrect decision-making processes and the placement of affairs in their legal path with full transparency. Islamic Iran's Participation Front continue to insist that the country's foreign policy is in continuation of its domestic policy...Once again we announce that, when a government does not have the support of the people, such confrontations with dominant world powers are not unexpected.¹⁷

Dealing directly with the question of nuclear weapons and whether they can enhance Iran's security, Mohsen Aminzadeh, Deputy Foreign Minister for Asia and Oceania and a reformist, also ties national security to domestic dynamics using a comparative perspective:

Those with nuclear weapons capability are not necessarily more powerful than the ones without. In the past century, when military capability was considered the main basis of power, this was true. But today such a view has no meaning. Pakistan has accomplished a nuclear weapons test. But this test has done nothing to enhance Pakistan's position in the world. Instead it has created problems for this country. If India had not tested, Pakistan would not have tested either, given the great problems associated with [nuclear testing]. India's nuclear testing did not lead to its enhanced [global] position either; rather it has implied a kind of extremist and baseless competition. If India's standing in the world is improving, this is due to her rapid economic, scientific, industrial progress and her political and social situation. This is also true of Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Australia and other countries that do not have nuclear weapons...The Cold War and its military competition is over. Military balance no longer has the same strategic position as before and having [nuclear] weapons does not bring immunity for us. The Soviet disintegration showed that a superpower armed to the teeth with the best arms, if without superior economic and social indicators, will move towards total disintegration and military capability can be of no help.¹⁸

¹⁷ A similar statement was released by another reformist organization, the *mujahideen* of Islamic Revolution.

¹⁸ *Iran Daily*, 23 September 2003.

If the reformers' argument on the nuclear issue attempts to buttress their stance in the domestic arena, the hardliners' rejectionist stance must also be seen as consistent, involving both a posturing and maneuvers against external (i.e. the U.S.) and/or domestic enemies (i.e. proponents of political change inside Iran). In terms of posturing against the U.S., by threatening to leave the NPT, it could be argued that the hesitancy and insecurity the Iranian hardliners felt in the immediate aftermath of U.S. military victory in Iraq gave way to comfort with what they consider to be, rightly or wrongly, American difficulties in Iraq. With the continuation of these difficulties, the hardliners became increasingly, even if not fully, confident that events in Iraq have dampened the American appetite, if not will, for similar operations. Given the long-standing links to major players in Iraq (including Shiite organizations such as the Supreme Council for Islamic Resistance in Iraq), while they do not see long term instability in Iraq as a good thing, knowing that problems in Iraq will ultimately spillover into Iran, they have not minded a deflation of American hubris. Meanwhile, using the formidable resources they have under their control, particularly national television, they have not missed a chance to show Iranians the misery of everyday life in Iraq; a highly effective response to the yearning some Iranians might have expressed early on for a similar operation and also an effective political strategy against domestic opponents who have been accused of promoting disorder and "Iraqization" of Iran, in the face of an insatiable international enemy. Within this context, the threat of military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, as well as what can be considered the Pentagon's on/off flirtations with the much despised *mujahideen* and practically unknown ethnic dissidents, acted as a godsend for hardliners who know that such attacks and support for *mujahideen* or ethnic separatism will unite many forces behind them, including supporters of political change and even dissidents.

Despite the consistency of the hardliners' argument, there is a puzzling aspect to their very vocal rejection of the Additional Protocol, which entails the following: given the fact that the Iranian leadership was placed in a bind by the IAEA and the united stance taken by Europe and the U.S., necessitating some sort of a compromise to deflect the possibility of multilateral sanctions in the future, why did some well-known hardliners decide to take an openly rejectionist stance when they knew that some sort of compromise had to come in the future? In other words, why did they choose to place themselves knowingly on the losing side? Several possibilities can be entertained in answering this

question. One obvious answer is real disagreement in the nature of the threat Iran faces and what can be done about it. Another answer could be the total fluidity of the Iranian situation and the possibility that the hardliners had no intention to lose. But the hardliners' discussion of leaving the NPT can also be seen as part and parcel of a political game cloaked as a threat, trying to accomplish one or more of the following goals:

1. To shift the debate away from a discussion of Iran's nuclear program, its pluses and minuses, to a discussion of national sovereignty and the right to independence; something that, given the international double standards on the issue, resonates well among the population and of course is a favored territory of the hardliners. This strategy was partially effective in so far as it forced the proponents of political change on the defensive, making them sound and look as though they support signing the Protocol in fear of deteriorating relations with the EU, Russia, and Japan. Understanding this predicament, even the reformist *Yas-e No* had a warning for the Europeans in its editorial: "don't push us too hard. Europe must bear this important point in mind: no faction in Iran believes in demands and requests that go beyond international agreements and accords."¹⁹
2. To show that Khatami, along failures in the domestic arena, has also been ineffective in the international arena with his policy of détente. The "beating on the drum of withdrawal from the NPT," may be a dangerous policy internationally but not in the minds of certain factions in Iran who, in the light of U.S. problems in Iraq, as mentioned above, are convinced that, while the international community can pressure Iran, it can do very little to loosen the hardliners' grip on power.
3. To place the blame for the compromise that they knew had to come on the "softness" of the reformist administration of Mohammad Khatami while maintaining the upper hand in the future for their "nationalist" stance. By sounding hard and ideological on the issue, the intent was to share the benefits of the compromises to come, if any, without paying the cost for it. This approach makes perfect sense if the pressures on Iran continue even if Iran signs of the Protocol. If pressures on Iran do not let up, the hardliners can use their criticism of the signing of the Protocol as leverage in later competitions and conflicts with

¹⁹ *Yas-e-No*. 12 September 2003.

the reformers. In this way, the hardliners believe they are positioning themselves to benefit from signing or not signing, because they are betting that the hawk/dove dynamics in the U.S. will prevent the emergence of a creative policy vis-à-vis Iran that is intent on strengthening the hands of those opposing the hardliners in a systematic fashion.

Given Iran's fluid political dynamics, however, the hardliners strategy, while seemingly clever, has not been totally cost-free. In fact, the way the October 21st agreement was reached with the European powers, under the auspices of Iran's National Security Council, has revealed more disarray among the hardliners than cleverness. By insisting that the decision to join has to be made by the highest decision-making body on national security issues, the National Security Council, before going to the parliament for approval, the proponents of signing have managed to make the point that those who have placed Iran in a confrontational path with the world or harm's way should also take the responsibility for compromises that have to come.²⁰ Noting that all factions have to take part in the decision, a member of the parliament publicly pointed out that the question of accepting or not accepting the protocol is in effect a matter of expediency (or national interest in face of foreign pressures) and, as such, it is the responsibility of the Expediency Council, a non-elected body headed by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, on the basis of a referral by Ali Khamenei, to make the decision on the issue, hence preventing it from further becoming fodder for factional conflicts.²¹

Ultimately, the National Security Council made the decision under the guidance of Hassan Rohani, the secretary of the council, who, after the agreement was reached, was publicly revealed to be Ayatollah Khamenei's point man on the issue. Upon prodding, important conservative players, including Rohani, himself, and Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, the conservative presidential candidate in the 1997 election, had to assure skeptical crowds of hardliners that Ayatollah Khamenei had indeed been involved in all the stages of decision-making. The apparent split between Khamenei and his closest advisors has led to confusion among the hardliners' base, leading some to question and protest the agreement in public while others have remained mum.

²⁰ The alternative option would have been the sending of an agreement by the Khatami administration on the Protocol to the parliament for ratification. This path would have opened the door for the rejection by the Guardian Council and a long-run referral to the Expediency Council, which would have presumably bought time and delayed the ratification; a situation neither acceptable to the Europeans nor the proponents of signing.

²¹ See an op-ed piece entitled "National Consensus, Today's Vital Necessity" by Mohammad Ali Kouzegar, a member of the parliament, in *Aftab-e Yazd*, 9 September 2003.

On the other hand, the reformists and reformist political organizations, such as Islamic Iran's Participation Front and *mujahideen* of Islamic Revolution, that pushed for the agreement and made the push part of their organization's official position have unanimously celebrated the decision while acknowledging that this is just the beginning of long road. In this way, they have been able to record the agreement as a victory for the reformists, even if those who ultimately made the decision are not generally identified as supporters of reform.

Conclusion

The agreement that was reached with the European foreign ministers on October 21st was stunning both in terms of content as well as the manner it came about. While in Iran there was much talk that the Iranian leadership will ultimately "buckle under" the international pressure and sign the protocol, very few expected the agreement to come about in such a dramatic manner, with at least a symbolic confirmation of Iran's importance to Europe.

The quick agreement with Europe, however, followed a long period of national conversation that was unusual in many ways – both in its frankness about Iran's difficult international position and what can be done about it. It is difficult to assess the extent to which the European offer to work with Iran will allay international concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Undoubtedly, much will depend on the direction of internal dynamics in Iran, favoring those who are pushing for a more open, globally conscious, and non-confrontational Iran. At this point, the Iranian political scene remains too fluid to allow for any definite predictions, although the recent agreement with Europe and the fact that the fractured political system of Iran was able to pull it off in such a creative manner must be seen as a positive sign.

But Iranian internal dynamics are not the only source of fluidity. What the events of the past few months have shown is that outsiders, for the first time, have had significant impact on internal debates in Iran. Given this, if the results keep moving in the direction that they would like them to go and they do not respond in positive and commensurable ways, there is no doubt that the hands of those working hard publicly for the signing of the protocol will be considerably weakened. But a coordinated, step-by-step international approach that encourages the Iranian internal dynamics and debates in the direction of Iran

To Sign or Not to Sign? Iran's Evolving Debate on Nuclear Options

honoring all its stated international commitments is bound to have a much more lasting effect on Iran's behavior abroad as well as expansion of democracy at home.

Farideh Farhi is an Independent Scholar at the University of Hawaii.

Iran's Nuclear Program: Contexts and Debates

Nasser Hadian¹

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of Iran's security environment, examining challenges and opportunities associated with Iran's nuclear program. The paper will first provide a background on the evolving nature of Iran's security environment and the historical factors affecting Iranian perceptions and policies. It will then address the contexts, sources, and factors shaping Iran's decision-making process in terms of its nuclear program and national security. Then the different Iranian points of view on the nuclear debate will be explored and a number of policy recommendations will be offered. The final section focuses on key observations pertaining to how the debate on Iran's security challenges is framed.

The Background

Iran is a country that borders seven others and is situated in one of the most strategic locations in the world. It connects the Middle East to Central Asia and Southwest Asia, between the oil-rich, and therefore strategically important, Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea.

During the Cold War, Iran maintained a border with the Soviet Union, playing an important role for the West. Its domestic stability was crucial to the maintenance of Western interests. As a result of Iran's strategic significance in blocking Soviet expansion, it became one of the pillars of the American "twin pillar policy" for the preservation of stability in the Persian Gulf and that of Saudi Arabia. However, the 1979 Iranian Revolution transformed the geopolitics of Iran, overnight, from being one of the closest and most strategic allies of the United States to being one of its most vehement opponents. At this pivotal juncture, Iran's threat perception and foreign policy priorities dramatically changed with respect to its immediate environment and the world at large.

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) deeply affected the minds of Iranians and policymakers alike. Iran felt alone in its war with Iraq, going from being a Western client-state to fighting an Iraq that had the political support of important countries in the Arab

¹ I wish to thank professor Mohiadin Mesbahi for his important contribution and Ali Ezzatyar for his assistance to the writing of this paper.

world and the West, including the United States. In terms of military supplies, Russia, China, and France sold billions of dollars of arms, the Arabs provided money, and the United States provided satellite imagery along with other kinds of support to Iraq. The most relevant analytical factor in this discussion is the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—chemical weapons in this case—against the Iranians and Iraq's indigenous Kurdish population. A number of scholars and journalists estimate that chemical weapons killed tens of thousands of Iranians during the course of the war.² The Iranians assumed that using WMD was a “red line” in combat that would not be crossed. To their dismay, they found out that the international community, and the West in particular, ignored and/or supported Saddam's regime while it continued to use chemical weapons against Iranians.³ Witnessing such horrible facts, Iranian elites concluded that Iran must rely on its own resources in order to provide security for its citizens. They also concluded that the leaders of the world's powerful nations could easily be persuaded to ignore the crossing of a “red line” for shortsighted interests or because of simple animosity toward the regime in Tehran.⁴

The next important event that greatly impacted Iran was the collapse of the Soviet Union. A new geopolitical environment emerged, which changed the balance of power around Iran. Iran found itself bordering three new neighbors, two of which were vying for Caspian Sea access. New opportunities to cooperate with these countries were blocked by the maneuverings of regional states and great powers to isolate Iran, especially in the energy sector. The eruption of a regional ethno-territorial conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia further complicated Iranian efforts to influence its new neighbors. In Afghanistan, due to the withdrawal of Soviet forces, there was a period of internal war between various *mujahideen* factions that led to instability and a serious refugee crisis for Iran. At this time, Iran also became a significant transit route for narcotics, particularly those originating from Afghanistan.

² “In a declassified report, the CIA estimated in 1991 that Iran suffered more than 50000 casualties, including untold thousands of deaths, from Iraq's use of several chemical weapons” Robin Wright “Chemical Arms' Effects Linger Long After War”, *Los Angeles Times*; November 19, 2002.

³ Dana Priest, “Rumsfeld Visited Baghdad in 1984 to Reassure Iraqis, Document Show,” *Washington Post*, Friday, December 19, 2003, P: A42,

⁴ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty-Iran Report* Vol. 5, No. 32, 26, August 2002- reported “nevertheless, Iraq, use of gas was not a secret. An anonymous ‘former U.S. intelligence official familiar with the American role’ told the Los Angeles Times that the U.S. knew that the Iraqis used chemicals in their major campaigns, and ‘we knew the intelligence we gave the Iraqis would be used to develop their own operational plans for chemical weapons.’ An anonymous former senior U.S. diplomat involved in Iraq added, according to Los Angeles Rimes ‘By 1986, Iraq had proven itself better at the use of chemical weapons than any fighting force in the world.’ Thousands of Iranian were killed when Iraq used chemical weapons in the 1988 battle of the Fao Peninsula”

These momentous events coincided with the coming to power of President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Under his leadership, Iran tried to play a more constructive role both regionally and internationally. Consequently, Iran's relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors and its ties with Europe and East Asia improved.

Iran's Nuclear Program: The Context

Two points are worth emphasizing about Iran's decision-making process. First, one person or a particular group does not make decisions on major issues; no individual or any institution in the real world has such authority.⁵ Second, Iran makes decisions on key issues through consensus. Iran's defense and security decision-making are articulated by and developed in a complex process. Numerous formal institutions, informal networks, personal relationships, and individual initiatives play a role in the formation of Iranian policy. From the outside, it may seem very chaotic, and it is often difficult for outsiders to understand who makes what decisions and how. Nevertheless, the output of the system is based on consensus. While this consensually-driven process provides policy stability, it does make reaching decisions more difficult, less predictable, and arduous.⁶ Despite elites eagerly factionalizing and politicizing major national security issues, including those related to the nuclear program, consensus ensures that sensible decisions are the final product. There is no doubt that decisions about the nuclear program are made within a relatively smaller circle but, nonetheless, a circle that is representative of the relevant and influential political factions.⁷ A consensus that is born out of a painstaking process of give-and-take, public and private maneuvering, within a maze of incredibly complex interest groups and factions, is in the end, a "democratic" process. Though the conservatives have significant power, their rhetoric is both checked by their own sense of reality and seriously challenged within their own ranks, as well as by the reformers. The ironic and positive role of the conservatives in charge should not be overlooked; they control the "true believers"

⁵ Byman, Daniel; Shahram, Chubin; Anoushiravan, Ehteshmi; Jerrold Greene (2001): Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era. National Defense Research Institute, RAND, 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ George Perkovich writes: "A small group of strategically and technologically neophyte political insiders seems to set the direction of Iran's quest for nuclear weapon capabilities. A network of scientists, engineers and procurement agents works surreptitiously to acquire capabilities under cover of a civilian nuclear program. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei, must have some say. He is the ultimate power in the state and the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. A most likely driver of nuclear policy seems to be Iran's former president and current chairman of expediency council, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Over the years Rafsanjani, more than any other figure, has pronounced on nuclear weapons-related issues. He has remained close to the two Supreme Leaders, Khamenei and Khamenei". Dealing With Iran's Nuclear Challenge, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 28, 2003.

and the hot-headed radicals, something that the reformers are not capable of doing. The difficult debate and struggle with the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) over the nuclear issue in November of 2003 was made in such a complex environment.

The Environment: The Center of Regional and Global Storms

One does not have to be sympathetic to the Iranian regime to see the incredible array of security challenges it faces. In the north, the stability of the Cold War was replaced by intense struggles (new “Great Games”) over the resources of the Caspian Sea, largely to the political, economic, and environmental detriment of Iran.⁸ In the East, Soviet-occupied Afghanistan was replaced by the hostile Taliban regime, and now Afghanistan is run by the United States.⁹ Pakistan, while “friendly” on the diplomatic surface, supported the Taliban, harbored anti-Shiite/anti-Iranian regional extremist movements, and is armed with nuclear weapons. The Eastern front has also become a grave national security concern, because it is largely the origin of socially devastating drug trafficking that affects Iran’s youth. To the west is Turkey, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), with strong military ties to the United States and – until recently – a vocal champion of the “the Iranian threat.” Turkey also supported Saddam’s Iraq, including his war and use of WMD against Iran. Now that Iraq is run by the United States, the situation still looks grim from the Iranian perspective, since the United States considers Iran a member of the “axis of evil” and openly talks about regime change in Iran. In the Persian Gulf, where Iran’s national and strategic resources are located, the country again faces the United States, which has bases in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁰

Three times in the last 25 years, events of great historical significance have transformed Iran’s national, regional, and global settings: the 1979 revolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The revolution changed not only the prism through which the external world was received and interpreted, but also how Iran was perceived and treated; Saddam’s aggression and the disruption of relations with the US were the most consequential results. The collapse of the Soviet Union changed Iran’s geopolitics, removed the limited umbrella of the Cold War, and added more vulnerabilities,

⁸ Ibid. 151-152.

⁹ For a discussion of US policy in the Caspian Basin and its impact on Iran see Bradfourth McGuinn and Mohiaddin Mesbahi “America’s Drive to the Caspian” in Houshang Amirahmadi Edited, *The Caspian Region at a Crossroad: Challenges of a New Frontier of Energy and Development*; 213-225

¹⁰ Shahram Chubin, “Wither Iran?”, *Adelphi Paper 342*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2002, p. 43.

exposing Iran's northern frontier and compiling the problems of a country already facing difficult and complex challenges with its borders and neighbors.¹¹ The tragedy of 9/11 changed Iran's regional environment once again, but its overall bleak security environment has remained.

Thus, a key characteristic of Iranian perception is its strategic loneliness.¹² Partly the result of the revolution's character and nature, and partly self-inflicted, this loneliness was most dramatically displayed during the eight-year war against Iraq, when all the major regional and global powers including the United States supported Saddam Hussein and his use of chemical weapons. This created an Iranian psychology that lacks trust in international institutions and alliances, which emphasizes reliance on its own resources, both mental and physical, for national protection and defense. While the cost and damage from this imposed self-sufficiency have been enormous, it has nevertheless also interjected and infused a sense of confidence, national pride, ability to manage crises, and internal development of native recourses unparalleled in the region. This combination of loneliness, independence, and self-sufficiency underscores both Iran's cautious attitude toward regional conflicts, on the one hand, and its bold – even tough – style on issues of national significance. Iran has a seasoned elite that, while displaying idiosyncrasies of its own in missing opportunities, is quite capable of maneuvering during real crises, not only with regional states, but also with Great Powers like the United States.¹³ Do not underestimate Iran's power, a power that is not necessarily, nor primarily, physical. The staying power of Iran's elites is considerable, especially in times of crisis. Thanks to the United States' removal of Iran's enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq, this is all the more true now that Iran faces its most favorable geopolitical position since the revolution in 1979.

Thus, as a true example of an international system that is based on self-help, Iran's "anarchical" regional environment has all the ingredients of a strategic nightmare: hostile neighbors, a lack of Great Power alliances, a 25-year face-off with the greatest superpower in history, living in a war-infested region (5 major wars in less than 25 years), contending with ethno-territorial disputes on its borders (Iran has been a major refugee hub), competing with a dominant Wahhabi trans regional movement that theologically and

¹¹ Mohiaddin Mesbahi "Iran's Foreign Policy Toward Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus" in John Esposito and R.K. Ramazani Edited, *Iran at the Crossroads*; Palgrave, 2001, 149-150.

¹² Guardian, September 16, 2003, and Mohiaddin Mesbahi "Characteristics of Iranian Security Environment" in Maurizio Martellini Edited, *Iran: Surrounding Regions and International Linkage*; Instituto Diplomatico, Rome, Forthcoming.

¹³ Mesbahi in Martellini: Forthcoming.

politically despises Iran, and coping with nearby nuclear powers (Pakistan, Israel, and India). In many ways, Iran is located in the middle of the “uncontrollable center” that has been created by post-Cold War and post-9/11 world politics.

Three points are worth emphasizing in order to understand Iran’s national security environment. First, one must assess Iran’s intentions and policies in terms of rationality – not sympathy – taking Iran’s taxing geostrategic environment into account. Second, in spite of this challenging security framework, Iran has not only managed to maintain its territorial and political integrity, but it also has developed considerable infrastructure and a stable society – all without external support. Third, Iran is the most important linkage state in the Middle East.¹⁴ Because of its geography, revolution, ambitions, and jealously-guarded sense of independence and centrality, all issues of importance in the Middle East, either by default or design, run through Iran – from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, proliferation, terrorism, Iraq’s future, stability in Afghanistan, future of relations between Islam and the West, regional political change and reform, Persian Gulf security, to secure energy access in both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin. Therefore, isolating Iran is not a productive policy.

Policy Sources

Decisions about Iran’s nuclear program are made and influenced at the ideological intersection of Islam and nationalism. Iran’s threat perceptions, multi-ethnic character, organizational imperatives of involved agencies, and national pride all play significant roles in informing and framing Iran’s nuclear policy. Five important facets are influential in the specific formulation of Iran’s nuclear program:

1. Ideological Sources

Three important ideological orientations are influential in shaping defense policy in Iran: Revolutionary Islam, Reformist Islam, and Iranian Nationalism. Depending on the particular issue, the configuration of political forces, and the behavior of the international community, the ability of each of these ideologies to influence policy varies. If there is not a consensus among these camps, which is often the case, serious problems arise in the implementation of policies.

¹⁴Mesbshi in Esposito and Ramazani, 2001; and in Martellini: Forthcoming.

Ideological orientation and commitment, though with less vigor than before, are still very important. In analyzing their importance, it is worth asking: why did Iran temporarily halt its nuclear program after the 1979 Revolution? The prevailing view among scholars in Iran is that suspension of the program was due to an ideological commitment. The dominant interpretation of Islam at that time was that the production, procurement, and usage of nuclear weapons contradicted Islamic principles. Therefore, WMD were forbidden in Iran, according to Islam. It should also be pointed out that Iran refrained from retaliating against Saddam's missile attacks on Iranian cities for several years. Later during the war, out of desperation and following a change in the interpretation of Islamic principles, Iran did resort to such tactics.

2. Threat Perceptions

Threat perception can be categorized into threats to Revolutionary ideology/values and threats to national interest. The dominant ideological approach is the *Umm Al-Qura* view of Iran. According to this view, "global arrogance" (U.S. imperialism) and international Zionism are out to destroy Islam. The only acceptable reading of Islam for the West is a reactionary and non-political Islam that would support the plundering of Muslim resources and wealth. From this perspective, Iran is seen as the *Umm Al-Qura* (center of the Islamic world), which provides leadership to the Islamic *Ummah* (nation), which the United States is trying to destroy.¹⁵ Defending the *Umm Al-Qura* against aggression and "global arrogance" by whatever means and whatever cost is the primary obligation of every Muslim.¹⁶ "Global arrogance" and Israeli aggression are the most significant and immediate threats. U.S. puppets in the region pose dangers as well, but they are less imminent.

Iran's national interest becomes more important when there is incompatibility with ideological priorities. Geopolitical issues, territorial integrity, and enhancing Iran's

¹⁵ For a discussion of the concept of *Umm al-Qura* see Mesbahi "Gorbachev's New Thinking and Iran's Security in 1990's."

¹⁶ In *Jomhuriyeh Islami*, a conservative daily in Iran, a verse of the Qu'ran was referred to in argument with those who wished Iran to sign the Additional Protocol, saying "This daily's understanding of this verse "verse" is that Iran and the Islamic Ummah have to have the "power," nuclear or otherwise, to bring deterrence and in turn peace and stability in the region and the world. It did, however, distinguish between having the weapons and using the weapons.

international standing via demonstrating the primacy of Iran's national interests, are more influential in shaping and molding Iran's security and defense policies. Threats emerging from Iran's immediate environment are considered more dangerous than those from countries further away, provided that ideological considerations are not the driving forces behind the foreign policies of other countries. Instability in Afghanistan, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan – as well as Turkey's membership in NATO and U.S. encirclement of Iran – are all important factors in the formulation of Iran's defense and security policies. Supporters of this realist perspective prioritize threats differently and address them pragmatically.

3. Organizational Imperatives

Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO), a number of universities and research institutions, and defense establishments are involved in the production and exchange of nuclear knowledge and technology. Certainly, like other bureaucracies in the world, they have their own concerns and interests in finding new projects and tasks to ensure their preservation and expansion. Iran's nuclear institutions and bureaucracies are not very different from others around the world.¹⁷ They are very concerned that Iran, in dealing with the IAEA, would accept a concession that prevents these organizations from achieving their goals of survival and "logical" expansion. Many people working in the atomic energy field were very concerned about the November deal with the IAEA and European foreign ministers, and a great number of them were angry that Iran agreed to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment activities. About 500 students from the most prestigious engineering school in Iran and 240 faculty members from universities, wrote two different open letters, asking the government to be careful with promises it makes to the IAEA. They stated that if government officials commit Iran to an agreement that would prevent Iran from obtaining atomic knowledge and technology, they would be committing "treason."¹⁸

¹⁷ Interview with Ambassador Zarif, January 23 2004.

¹⁸ 500 students from Sharif Technical University, the most prestigious engineering school in Iran, published the following statement with regard to Iran's nuclear program: "Experts all agree that oil as a national asset has multiple uses and purposes beyond energy usage. Due to this reason, many countries have searched for alternative sources of energy including nuclear energy. Iran's policy should not be different from the rest of the world. Any lack of steadfastness with regard to finding alternate sources of energy would be considered by Iranians of future generations as treason."

"Unfortunately, it has been a while now that Iran has been under foreign pressure to stop acquiring its nuclear technology and has been prevented from progressing. We are concerned that due to foreign pressure that many

4. *National Pride*

Iran is an old civilization with a grandiose perception of its role and power. Many would argue that it is difficult for Iranians to accept that its neighbors have more advanced technology and weapons than Iran. They believe that advancement in this area could empower Iran, raising Iran to its deserved place in world affairs. They argue that this is exactly why the Shah created the IAEO. This idea is still alive in the hearts and minds of many Iranian elites. Thus, pride and prestige are important drivers of the Iranian nuclear program and must be taken into account in any resolution to the crisis. In a region that consists of nuclear neighbors (Israel, India, and Pakistan), some Iranians feel that achieving a comparable power status necessitates acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁹

5. *Past Experiences*

As stated before, the war with Iraq and the use of chemical weapons by Iraq against Iranians deeply affected the psyche of the Iranian population at large. Iran discovered that it could not rely on the international community to provide for its national security and defense when it failed to react strongly to Iraq's chemical weapon use. Iranians concluded that the international community could not be trusted – a decision with heavy costs – because there was always a possibility that factors beyond Iran's control would convince nations to ignore Iran's plight. This point is driven home by the recent declassification of documents indicating not only that high-ranking U.S. government officials knew of Saddam's use of chemical weapons, but also that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was supposed to assure Saddam Hussein that he did not need to worry about American criticism.²⁰ Historical precedent is in fact an important input to Iran's nuclear policy.

Iran's Nuclear Program: The Debates

years of hard work which has led to a lot of advancement in the field of nuclear technology and science may be wasted”

“We the signors of this letter, urge the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to, under no circumstances, sign any letter which would create an impediment to our legitimate right to acquire knowledge and technology.”

¹⁹ Geoffrey Kemp, “How to Stop the Iranian Bomb”, *The National Interest*, Summer 2003, 50.

²⁰ Please see footnotes 2 and 3.

Iran began its nuclear program in 1960, during the Shah's regime and in 1974 entered into a commercial agreement with France under the perception that oil was a finite resource that would ultimately be exhausted.²¹ Ironically, the United States supported this initiative.²² One of the arguments being made against Iran's nuclear energy program today that Iran does not need nuclear energy due to its vast oil and gas reserves – was never made before 1979. This inconsistency remains a confounding issue in the minds of many Iranians.²³ They are surprised that, with a population twice the size of pre-revolutionary Iran, and oil consumption exponentially higher,²⁴ the United States continues to make the same argument today. Simply put, this argument is viewed as politically motivated and illogical, given the economic realities in Iran today.²⁵

There are four general domestic views on Iran's nuclear program. The following discussion will outline the four basic opinions in Iran and their relevant makeup.

1. *Opponents of Acquiring Nuclear Energy*

A small number of people argue that, due to environmental and economic reasons, nuclear energy is not a necessity for Iran. They argue that the cost of investment for generating a kilowatt of electricity is more expensive using nuclear energy than it is by other means, such as oil. Behzad Nabavi,²⁶ the powerful deputy speaker of parliament and an influential leader of the reformist movement, supports this view.²⁷ Few people

²¹ International Crisis Group, 27 October 2003, *ICG Middle East Report* No 18 Amman/Brussels, 3.

²² As ICG stated (MER 18) "The U.S. provided Iran with a small research reactor, which is housed at the Tehran Research Center and remains in use to this day. The U.S. also supplied Iran with "hot cells"-heavily shielded rooms with mechanical arms used to separate irradiated material from the research reactor."

²³ Farideh Farhi, "The WMD debate in Iran", presented at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington DC, 25, September 2003.

²⁴ Gholam-Reza Aghazadeh the Director of Iran Atomic Energy Organization argues: "Our prime priority of nuclear program is generation of nuclear electricity. Due to the rapid socio-economic development of Iran during the past three decades, our strategy for use of fossil resources has been affected by two restrictive elements. On the one hand, rising living standards and improvement of economic indicators have prompted an increase in the demand for energy in domestic and industrial sectors and on the other hand, our national economy is dependent on oil revenues. To dispose of these two contradictory and restrictive elements, our country needs to develop a long-term strategy to reverse the trend of unrestrained use of fossil resources." *Iran's Nuclear Policy*, IAEA, Vienna, May 6, 2003.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 3-5.

²⁶ "I wish to make a point from my own perspective – not a point from my position as a deputy speaker of Majlis or that of the organization I am a member of with regard to nuclear energy. It does not seem rational for a country that has the second largest reservoir of gas and has a lot of oil to seek nuclear energy to produce energy that can be produced cheaper elsewhere. Nuclear energy should not be a priority for us because we have to spend a lot of money to produce nuclear energy; this is not economically wise. Producing one kilowatt of electricity with existing methods would be less expensive (Producing with gas is 200, steam is 500, but nuclear energy would cost one to two thousand dollars). So considering political and economic costs, this is not intelligent way forward. Since the investment on Buhshahr reactors began before the Revolution and we have dedicated many resources to it, we should finish it. However, we should act very wisely by signing the Additional Protocol and giving assurances to the international community."

²⁷ *Iranian Students' News Agency* (ISNA), 15, 08, 2003).

in academia, the Foreign Ministry, Energy Ministry, and Oil Ministry support this view.²⁸ As such, the American perspective has few takers in Iran.

2. *Supporters of Acquiring Nuclear Energy*

A much larger group believes that Iran needs nuclear energy and should acquire nuclear knowledge and technology. They claim that investing in alternative forms of energy is an economically wise decision, and that having nuclear energy would be good for Iran's pride and prestige. It is seen as a "technology of the future," and no country should be deprived of having access to such knowledge and technology. They argue that the very point of Iran joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was to gain access to this technology. Numerous university students, along with hundreds of faculty members, government officials, many in the Foreign Ministry, and elites Iran-wide uphold this policy.²⁹ European, Japanese, and Russian governments support this position.

Most people in this camp believe that Iran should only have access to nuclear technology for civilian purposes and that nuclear weapon technology of any sort should be prohibited. According to this thinking, nuclear weapons will not enhance Iran's national security and will, in fact, increase Iran's vulnerability; rather, they will violate Iran's international commitments, contribute to regional proliferation, and be detrimental to Iran's relations with other states. Those holding these beliefs favor Iran's signing and ratifying the NPT Additional Protocol, support nuclear disarmament, and criticize the United States for overlooking Israel's nuclear weapons, which block the creation of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East. The possession of nuclear weapons by other states, including Pakistan and Israel, tends to weaken the proponents of this view in Iran.

3. *Supporters of Nuclear Weapons Capability*

Some argue that Iran should not only have nuclear technology for alternative sources of energy, but also possess a nuclear weapons capability. For supporters of this outlook, the security environment of Iran, given the past history of being

²⁸ Dr. Hossein Salimi, dean of the Faculty of law and Political Science at the Allameh Tabatabaie University, asked "Is Iran's demand to enjoy nuclear technology worth putting the country's vital national interest at risk given that vast energy resources and Iran's enormous potential of human resources promise a prosperous future for the country?" Cited in *ICG, MER* 18, 16.

²⁹ President Khatami stated: "It is an integral part of the fundamental duties of the Islamic Republic....to become more and more equipped with science and technology, including nuclear technology. We want to be strong, and being strong means to have technology and nuclear technology is the most advanced, one that we would master thanks to the intelligence and will of our children". *Iran Press Service*, 16 September 2003 (Cited in *ICG, MER* 18).

victimized by chemical weapons, the poor track record of the international community in aiding Iran during times of crisis, and the numerous threats perceived by Iran necessitate the development of this capability. There is a nuance that should be appreciated in this perspective. Some merely argue that the capability to produce fuel for the reactors is sufficient. Their main concern is not typical security per se, but rather that they can be self-sufficient in the event that other states cannot or will not provide nuclear fuel for reactors. The other portion of this group argues that it is, in fact, important for Iran to have all the necessary elements and capabilities for producing weapons. Note, however, that they only want the capability, not the actual physical weapons. The capability alone is an important strategic deterrent in their view, and it can make a positive contribution to Iran's defense and national security; that is, the simple fact that Iran could develop nuclear weapons with the materials at hand within the country relatively quickly enhances Iran's power while not becoming too threatening to others. There are quite a few influential institutions and people who support this perspective. A fair number of people in academia, the press, think tanks, and the military support this view.

4. *Supporters of Acquiring Nuclear Weapons*

A small number of people do argue that Iran should withdraw from the NPT and develop nuclear weapons as quickly as possible. They believe Iran should pay the price of international sanctions if necessary. This stance is justified by citing international hostility toward Iran, Iran's precarious security environment, and how such weapons would provide an ideal deterrent. With nuclear weapons, Iran could preserve its territorial integrity, ensure its security, and enhance Iran's status in the region and the world at large. Few people in academia and the military would support this view.³⁰

The first and last groups have few supporters in Iran because they represent extreme positions. The majority of Iranians, including elites and governmental officials, support the more moderate second and third views. It would be very unwise for the United

³⁰ Abu Mohammad Asghar-Khani a member of Faculty of Law and Political Science at Tehran University argues: "If you ask me if Iran needs to nuclearize itself, I would say this is a must for Iran's strategy of survival. A nuclear Iran must not be seen as a threat to its neighboring countries or to the Israel. The weapons would serve as a minimum deterrence for self-defense in a world of uncertainty. It is necessary not only as a substitute for fossil energy but also for Iran's social cohesion and prestige....Iran needs both soft power and hard power to regain its national identity and prestige". *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 15 September 2003.

States to press for the first position, because it would be perceived by a majority of ordinary Iranians and elites alike as indicative of hostile U.S. intentions. In other words, Iranians would view such an American policy as an effort to preclude Iran from achieving knowledge and technology to help better itself. An insistence on this position will serve to unify diverse forces in Iran against the United States.

The United States has already placed severe economic sanctions on Iran in an attempt to modify the behavior and attitude of Iranian officials on issues such as terrorism, WMD, and the Arab-Israeli conflict; none of these objectives have been achieved. According to the State Department, Iran is still on the list of terrorist state sponsors and continues to oppose the peace process in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the IAEA claims that Iran has made vast improvements in its nuclear infrastructure and capability. Some would argue that, if the international community imposed much tougher sanctions, it would force those who favor weaponization of Iran's nuclear program to quit, but the bottom line is that, if Iran is determined to develop nuclear weapons (although this author does not believe that is so), it has the capability to do so and nothing can stop Iran. For example, Iran's financial resources that can aid a nuclear weapons program are significantly greater than those of Pakistan. Thus, additional sanctions will likely be unsuccessful in changing the minds of Iranians who favor weaponization.

It should also be pointed out that a surgical military strike on different nuclear sites in Iran (either by Israel or the U.S.) would only enhance and strengthen the will of the Iranians to go forth with full nuclear weaponization, while likely missing in the attack large chunks of Iran's dispersed nuclear infrastructure. Additionally, Iran has sufficient resources in Iraq, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, the Persian Gulf, Lebanon, and other places, to escalate the tension. Iran's capabilities in these areas, policymakers in Iran believe, should provide a sufficient deterrent to those states contemplating any surgical attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities. Even in the event that such attacks did occur, they would have to be unlimited in scope – acts akin to total war – in order to be successful, posing unfathomable dangers in terms of stability and energy resources in the Persian Gulf. With the upcoming presidential election in the United States and current U.S. difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan, surgical strikes seem like an unlikely course of action. Iran's sense of pride, independence, capabilities, and the lack of international support for offensive strikes make first strikes on Iran unrealistic.

A related issue is Iran's missile program. Asking Iran to stop or dismantle its missile program would simply not work. Considering the missile attacks by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and the importance of missiles in defense policy, Iranian military planners are convinced that it is imperative for Iran to invest in missile research and development. Iran has successfully tested mid-range missiles, such as the *Shahab-3*. However, it is possible that Iran might be persuaded to cease developing longer-range missiles, or limit the deployment of the *Shahab-3* so it cannot reach sensitive areas in Israel and Europe, as a bargaining chip in a comprehensive deal to resolve disputes with the United States. Iran and the United States could agree on a verification regime to check and monitor missile deployments. Agreements along these lines could represent important confidence-building measures.³¹

Policy Recommendations

Considering all the inputs into Iran's nuclear policy and the differences of opinion which exist in Iran with regard to nuclear policy, a plausible and pragmatic U.S. foreign policy approach should emphasize the following points:

1. Iran's access to nuclear knowledge, technology, and energy should be facilitated and acknowledged openly and publicly by the international community. By depriving Iran of access to such nuclear options, the Iranian people and elites would conclude that the international community lacks equity, and is seeking to thwart Iran from legitimately gaining knowledge and technology of the future.
2. The reliability of nuclear fuel is very important to many Iranian elites and policymakers. In this debate, one of the points that often comes up is the possibility of blackmail by powerful nations. The international community should provide assurances and guarantees, possibly through an international consortium, that nuclear fuel would be provided for Iran's nuclear reactors. There should be no "ifs, ands, or buts" in this agreement.
3. If Iran becomes convinced that going down the path towards nuclear weapons would increase their vulnerability and decrease their national security, a proposal to increase Iran's security environment substantively would make Iran's decision-making on the nuclear issue easier. The first possibility is the creation of a nuclear weapons free zone. The International community should convince,

International Crisis Group, 27 October 2003, *ICG Middle East Report* No 18 Amman/Brussels, p: III.

persuade, pressure, and even threaten every country in the region until they all agree to this proposal. The second proposal is a collective security arrangement that may include countries outside the region. The third option is the extension of the nuclear umbrella to Iran.

4. Despite the debate among Iranian elites and the fact that nuclear policy has now become a public issue in Iran, there is still a lack of sophisticated literature on the subject. It is important to produce and distribute materials on nuclear issues so that the Iranian public can make informed decisions. Thus, organizing conferences about this issue, writing about it, and having public debates through the Internet, radio, television, and printed media—in Persian—would be more meaningful and useful. Presenting a more informed and realistic view of the nuclear issue, such as how it would decrease or enhance Iran's security, entail political and economic costs, possibly spark an arms race in the region, and other related issues is essential.
5. Iran has invested a lot of economic resources into nuclear-related facilities. Asking Iran to dismantle them without providing reasonable compensation is not fair to many Iranians. Rather, a significant and meaningful economic package, or something else along those lines, should be provided in order to enhance the support of those who say that Iran is better off by giving up nuclear capabilities.

Concluding Remarks

There has been a lot of talk and conversation about “regime change” in Iran, especially after President Bush’s “axis of evil” speech and even more following the military victory in Iraq. This rhetoric has been heavily influenced by certain elements of the Iranian expatriate community in Washington and some influential think tanks. However, such analysis has been primarily driven by politicized information, tainted, self-serving, and supplied by Iranians opposed to the Tehran government. Although the Iranian regime is grappling with many difficulties, as well as serious shortcomings and flaws—many of which are in open display in public—this regime is firmly in control. It is not about to be overthrown by a few declarations in Washington. Discussing the domestic situation in Iran is too complex of a subject to treat here, but a few fundamental facts are worth mentioning.

First, although the conservatives in Iran are a minority they control many resources. They have leadership, organization, an ideology that binds them together and commits them to the cause, control of a coercive apparatus, vast economic and political resources, and social and cultural propaganda at their disposal. They are also well linked with their constituency. These characteristics and resources make them a potent force. Reformers, on the other hand, many of whom are former radicals, are not supportive of externally engineered change in Iran any more than the conservatives.

Second, the real impetus and energy—both intellectually and politically—for reform is generated from within the ruling elite itself, not from outside the regime. There is a serious ideological struggle within the regime itself, over the very identity and substance of the Islamic Republic, which is not subject to simplistic wishes and dictates of outsiders. The reformers are neither pro-American nor anti-American; they have a much larger agenda with a broad historical perspective in mind: the establishment of democracy in Iran in harmony with its cultural and religious traditions—an experiment with far-reaching ramifications not only for Iran, but for the Muslim world in general.

Third, the elite, both conservatives and reformers, and the public at large are fervent—even obsessed—about Iran's sense of independence and dignity. Thus, they are very sensitive about outside interference, especially when the United States is involved, which has a poor historical record with Iran dating back to 1953. American meddling, especially the attempts of a few people in Washington to manufacture “regime change” through expatriate opposition, covert plans, etc., will weaken reform efforts, unifying Iranian elites and signaling the beginning of real confrontation with the United States in the region. Iranians want peaceful change through nonviolent means. It should be a domestically-driven change from within the established framework of the Iranian polity. Any foreign-supported radical change will be poorly received by the population. Out of a 10 million-person population in Tehran, less than 10,000 people participated in last summer's protests, because they were largely perceived as externally inspired and manipulated. The debate on nuclear issue for example, among others, also underscored the important caveat that Iran's domestic politics cannot be comprehended by simplistic analysis. Hundreds of the same students who protested in the summer, praised by the United States for their anti-regime demonstrations, strongly and openly warned against Iran's acceptance of demands beyond the NPT Additional Protocol. At the same time,

many of the conservatives who forcefully denounced the students' movement lined up for the approval of a more rigorous IAEA verification regime.

Fourth, while there is real frustration, both inside and outside Iran about the pace of Iranian reforms, the reality is that there have been significant and irreversible changes in Iran. Frustration over unmet and justifiably high expectations should not overshadow that fact.

Finally, the real check on Iran's elite, coming from both the reformers and conservatives, is the fear of losing domestic legitimacy. As an imperfect Republic, the greatest asset of the regime for the last 25 years, in spite of international isolation, has been sufficient popular support at home. With such support, Iran is never truly lonely. Public frustration over the unfulfilled promises of the reform movement, not fear of an American attack, is the chief worry among the ruling elite. Though this concern is not felt universally and equally among all, it has certainly become the most important preoccupation of the regime. Even with nuclear weapons, an Iranian regime cannot rule for long without sufficient public popularity and legitimacy.

Nasser Hadian is a Professor at Tehran University and a Visiting Professor at Columbia University.