

Iran in Iraq's Shadow: Dealing with Tehran's Nuclear Weapons Bid

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As the old military adage has it, no good deed ever goes unpunished. And so it would seem with American security interests in the Persian Gulf. Soon after the United States has removed a major threat to American and regional interests with the defeat of Saddam Hussein's regime, Washington has to come to terms with the looming challenge of Iran's quest for nuclear weapons. The good news is that assertive multilateral diplomacy still has some running room for negotiating a stall or derailment of Iran's nuclear weapons program. The bad news is that the prospects are dim for achieving this end without the resort to force over the coming years.

The Iraq war is the backdrop for the evolving policy debate on Iran. The Iraq situation pits competing views of American national security strategy after 11 September 2001 against one another. On one side, critics of the Iraq war are posturing that if weapons of mass destruction (WMD) failed to be a sufficient justification for waging war against Iraq, then concerns about WMD have even less merit for forcibly challenging the Iranian regime over its nuclear weapons aspirations. On the other side, the threat posed by WMD—with the associated risk that terrorists might get their hands on WMD—is emerging as a worldview to replace the grand unifying scheme of containment which governed American and Western policy during the Cold War. Those in this camp view the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq as models for other policy challenges that involve WMD and potential support for terrorist groups coming from the likes of Iran and North Korea.

There are pitfalls, though, of viewing the Iran policy debate entirely through the Iraq policy prism. Just as a prism bends rays of light, Iraq and Iran, while they share many features, are distinct problems that require the modulation of policy tools. This article seeks to illuminate the commonalities and variations between past Iraq and today's Iran as well as the strengths and weaknesses of American policy options for dealing with the growing security challenge posed by Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons.

Iran's Decrepit Armed Forces and Squeezed Geopolitical Space

Iran shares with Iraq geopolitical aspirations in the Persian Gulf in which weapons of mass destruction play a critical role. Iraq's past drive for WMD was fueled by Saddam's lust for power and his will to politically and militarily dominate the Gulf. Although Iraq's behavior over the past decade captured the most international attention, Iran too has hegemonic ambitions in the Gulf. Khomeini's revolutionary goal was to remake the region in Iran's own self-image, governed by clerics and Islamic law. Iraq's 1990-91 war pushed into the far background the premier security concern of the United States and the Arab Gulf states in the 1980s—that Iran would emerge as the winner of the war with Iraq to become the dominant power capable of directly threatening Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Iran's geographic girth lends itself to a country with large standing armed forces, but Iran's military today is weaker than it was in the wake of the revolutionary euphoria of 1979.¹ The Iranians militarily lived off the Shah's US-provided arms and equipment to survive the Iran-Iraq War, but the war nearly exhausted their inventories and put enormous wear and tear on equipment holdings. They have managed to make due, in part, by cannibalizing American equipment to keep fewer armaments running, but these stopgap efforts are increasingly more difficult to muster to prolong the longevity of the military inventory. The Iranians also are using illicit means to bypass US restrictions on the export of military equipment to Iran.² Iran has been hard-pressed to find direct external weapon suppliers to replace the United States. Michael Eisenstadt observes that in recent years Russia has been Iran's main source of conventional arms, but Moscow has agreed not to conclude any new arms deals and to halt all conventional weapons transfers since September 1999.³ The Iranians have made efforts to fill the void with indigenously pro-

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duced weapons, but Tehran lacks the ability to produce high-performance conventional weapons platforms.

Tehran must have shuddered when witnessing the American military slashing through Saddam's forces in the 2003 war. Iran already had a sense of its conventional military inferiority compared to American forces. Years ago Tehran received a direct taste of that from the American re-flagging operations in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War, when the US Navy readily destroyed much of Iran's conventional naval capabilities, leaving Iran to harass shipping with irregular hit-and-run gunboat attacks. In the spring 2003 war, American and British forces accomplished in about a month what Iranian forces had failed to do in eight years of war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988. Tehran cannot fail to appreciate that Iranian conventional forces would have little chance of resisting a US military assault.

In Iran's geopolitical landscape and strategic calculus, the United States looms large and its "demonization" remains a central feature of the cleric regime's worldview. As Anoushiravan Ehteshami observes, "Iran holds an almost paranoid and conspiratorial view of the United States' role and actions in the Middle East and sees almost every US initiative as a direct or indirect assault on Iran's regional interests."⁴ Just as George Kennan in his Cold War analysis of the Soviet Union judged that the regime in Moscow needed to politically manufacture an enemy in the United States to justify its ruthless reign at home, so do the clerics in Tehran need a political opponent in the United States on which to heap the blame and deflect public attention from their own inability to deliver political freedom, basic living standards, and an adequate economic livelihood to its people. As part and parcel of its efforts to deflect domestic criticism toward outside targets, the regime portrayed numerous student demonstrations in Iran in June and July 2003—during which Tehran felt compelled to arrest about 4,000 demonstrators—as being the result of American instigation in Iranian affairs.

American military endeavors in the greater Middle East region necessitated by 9/11 have fueled Iran's insecurity and geopolitical sense of encirclement. As Ray Takeyh notes, "The paradox of the post-September 11 Middle East is that although Iran's security has improved through the removal of Saddam and the Taliban in Afghanistan, its feelings of insecurity have intensified."⁵ The United States used its military presence in the Persian Gulf to support operations both in Afghanistan and Iraq, even if host-country partners were reticent about publicly discussing their support, which cut against the grain of Arab public opinion. In its campaign against al Qaeda, much to Iran's chagrin, the United States also has had hubs of military activity or transit rights in several countries in Central Asia, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan.⁶

Glimpses of Iran's Nuclear Weapons Bid

Iran sees WMD and ballistic missiles as means to fill the void in military and deterrent capabilities. Tehran suffered under barrages of Iraqi ballistic missiles during the Iran-Iraq War and wants to have the option of using ballistic missiles that are faster and more reliable than Iran's air force for penetrating enemy airspaces to deliver both conventional and WMD warheads. In July 2003 Iran successfully tested the Shahab-3 missile, which achieved a range of about 1,000 km. Iran is suspected of having an unspecified number of operational Shahab missiles, which are based on North Korea's No Dong-1 missile that is reportedly capable of carrying an 800 kg warhead. Iran also is working on a 2,000-km Shahab-4 based on Russian technology, as well as a 5,000-km Shahab-5 missile.⁷ These missiles probably are too inaccurate to be of much military utility if armed with conventional warheads, but they would be sufficiently accurate to deliver WMD, particularly nuclear warheads.⁸ According to a foreign intelligence official and a former Iranian intelligence officer, the North Koreans are working on the Shahab-4 and providing assistance on designs for a nuclear warhead.⁹

The destructive power of chemical and biological weapons pales in comparison to that of nuclear weapons, which, unfortunately, often are considered the coin of the realm for major-power status in international relations.¹⁰ The Iranian clerics almost certainly want nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional military shortcomings to deter potential adversaries and enhance the security of their regime: "The powerful Revolutionary Guards and military strategists are convinced that only a nuclear Iran can assume its place as a major regional power and adequately deter a possible attack from the United States or Israel, said [a] policy adviser to a senior conservative cleric, who spoke on condition of anonymity."¹¹

The Iranians have learned that the road to nuclear weapons is best paved with ambiguity. The Israelis, Pakistanis, Indians, and apparently the North Koreans successfully acquired nuclear weapons by cloaking their research, development, procurement, and deployment efforts with cover stories that their efforts were all geared to civilian nuclear energy programs, not to be harnessed for military applications. Tehran could not have failed to notice that once these states acquired nuclear weapons mated with aircraft and missile delivery systems, they escaped—so far, at least—military preemptive and preventive action by rival states. In marked contrast, the Iraqis suffered as the result of Israeli and American preventive military actions, in part because Baghdad was not fast enough in acquiring nuclear weapons. The Israeli strike on an Iraqi nuclear research plant in 1981 and the American wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003 might have been deterred had Iraq managed to acquire nuclear weapons.

The Iranians therefore consistently and loudly proclaim that their pursuit of nuclear power is strictly for peaceful civilian purposes. President Muhammad Khatami, for example, said in February 2003, "I assure all peace-loving individuals in the world that Iran's efforts in the field of nuclear technology are focused on civilian application and nothing else."¹² The Iranians argue that they need electric power produced by nuclear plants to meet domestic energy needs and to free up oil for export and foreign currency. The Iranian claims have a hollow ring, however. Iran's oil industry could be modernized and made more cost-efficient and productive with the expenditure of far fewer economic resources than those needed for nuclear power, to better deliver energy to the Iranian population at lower costs while increasing production for the international market.

The Iranians are working closely with the Russians, who have an \$800 million contract with the Iranians to build the 1,000-megawatt light-water reactor at Bushehr.¹³ Although spent nuclear fuel at Bushehr could be diverted to use in nuclear weapons, Moscow has traditionally put more weight on near-term economic interests than on longer-term strategic interests in dealing with Iran. The Russians have adapted a Keynesian approach to Iran: damn the long-run strategic threat of an Iran armed with ballistic missiles tipped with nuclear warheads hostile to Russian political interests, because in the long run we'll all be dead anyway.

The Iranians also are interested in building a heavy-water reactor, which the international community considers as more of a nuclear proliferation risk than light-water reactors such as the one at Bushehr. Tehran has announced plans to build a 40-megawatt heavy-water research reactor, and it already has a heavy-water plant at Arak that could provide heavy water to the planned research reactor. Heavy water allows a heavy-water reactor to operate with natural uranium as its fuel and to produce plutonium.¹⁴ Spent fuel from the planned heavy-water reactor would be ideal for extracting bomb-grade plutonium. North Korea, for example, claims to have made its weapons from the plutonium-rich spent fuel of its 5-megawatt reactor.¹⁵ Gary Milhollin, writing in a *New York Times* article, puts the planned Iranian reactor in perspective by noting that it is too small for electricity and larger than needed for research, and is the type providing fuel for nuclear weapons programs in India, Israel, and Pakistan.¹⁶

Iran also is developing domestic uranium production capabilities, ostensibly to fuel its "civilian-use" nuclear power plants. In February 2003, Khatami announced that Iran had begun mining uranium near Yazd.¹⁷ The Russians, however, claim that the Bushehr contract includes "provisions for Russia to supply fresh fuel for the life of the reactor and to take spent fuel back to Russia, thus denying Iran any potential access to the plutonium contained in the spent fuel."¹⁸ The Iranians claim that the production facility is needed for self-sufficiency to

enrich uranium for nuclear power plants, but again, as with most Iranian claims regarding their ostensible “civilian” uses for nuclear power, it would be cheaper for them to purchase uranium for civilian power needs on the international market than to indigenously develop uranium production capabilities.

Perhaps most alarming are the recent international exposures of Iran’s emerging uranium enrichment capabilities. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in February 2002 discovered that Iran is building a sophisticated uranium-enrichment plant at Natanz, about 200 miles south of Tehran. The IAEA found that 160 centrifuges were installed at a pilot plant at Natanz and 5,000 more centrifuges are to be completed at a neighboring production facility by 2005. After completion of the plant, Iran will be capable of producing enough enriched uranium for several nuclear bombs per year.¹⁹ In a June 2003 visit to Iran, moreover, the IAEA discovered traces of highly enriched, weapons-grade uranium on centrifuges at the Natanz plant and the Kalaye Electric Company, raising the international concern that Iran’s centrifuges are intended to support a nuclear weapons program.²⁰

Iranian uranium enrichment capabilities appear to also have benefited from Pakistani assistance. The centrifuges inspected at Natanz by IAEA officials in February 2002 were reportedly based on a Pakistani design. The now-infamous Pakistani official widely regarded as the father of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program, A. Q. Khan, reportedly traveled frequently to Tehran to share his expertise about centrifuges and nuclear weapons design. A former Iranian diplomat turned defector claims that the Iranians gave Khan a villa near the Caspian Sea as a token of thanks for his support of Iran’s endeavors.²¹

Some scholars and observers of Iranian politics dismiss the foregoing as evidence that Iran has embarked on a full-fledged nuclear weapons program. It is curious that they should have confidence in making such an assessment, given that the secretive regime in Tehran is not likely to publicly broadcast a decision to acquire nuclear weapons. Such a decision would be tightly held in a small circle of regime insiders. After all, many observers were surprised by the breadth, depth, and sophistication of the Iranian uranium enrichment discovered by the IAEA inspectors because the regime’s decision to pursue these activities was not publicly announced. The Iranians would be foolhardy to undermine their civilian nuclear power cover story and announce their quest for nuclear weapons, only to increase their vulnerability to American and Israeli preventive military action.

Diplomatic Options for Stalling Iranian Nuclear Weapons

American diplomacy is encouraging energetic and assertive IAEA inspections of Iran under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. The specter of the US use of force against another pillar of the “axis of evil,”

coupled with Europe's belated doubts about the efficacy of engagement to curtail Iran's nuclear weapons program, has worked to coax Iran to accept no-notice IAEA inspections. The Europeans—the French and Germans, in particular—who had long resisted US efforts to isolate Iran and favored diplomatic and economic engagement of Tehran, were apparently taken aback by the scope of Iran's work on uranium enrichment and disregard for the NPT. The French, Germans, and British are rightly trying to exchange trade discussions for Iran's cooperation on no-notice inspections and ending its pursuit of the nuclear fuel cycle, which would give Iran the capability to pursue nuclear weapons in short order.²² The European Union Foreign Minister declared publicly in June 2003 that if diplomatic efforts to deal with Iran's WMD should fail, coercive measures could be envisioned.²³ Obviously such bravado is in marked contrast to European opposition to the American use of force against Saddam's regime, and should push come to shove in dealing with Iran's nuclear weapons program, the Europeans may well revert to their aversion to the exercise of American military power. It is easy for the Europeans to argue theoretically that force may have to be used when that contingency appears well over the horizon, but it would be politically more unpalatable for European capitals when the concrete decision time for the resort to force beckons.

Tehran for its part probably calculates that its acceptance of the no-notice inspections will buy Iran more time to work on its clandestine nuclear weapons program by politically diffusing international support for an assertive American stance. At the same time, Tehran probably is betting that it can work on nuclear weapons undetected by IAEA inspectors. Iran has had plenty of opportunity to learn lessons on beating the IAEA inspection regime from watching Iraq and North Korea, which both cheated successfully against IAEA inspectors. Both Iraq and North Korea worked feverishly on nuclear weapons programs while officially considered "in good standing" in the eyes of the IAEA inspectors and their governing NPT. Only US intelligence was able to catch North Korea covertly working on a uranium enrichment program, which led to a chain of events that resulted in Pyongyang formally withdrawing from the NPT. The massive scope of Iraq's nuclear weapons program was revealed only after Iraq's 1991 battlefield defeat and intrusive UN weapons inspections. UN inspectors found the Iraqis to be expert in denial and deception efforts that allowed them to vigorously pursue a nuclear weapons program despite years of IAEA inspections. If IAEA inspectors were on their way to a sensitive Iranian site, Tehran's security services could manufacture all kinds of obstacles to slow the IAEA team or misdirect them, just as the Iraqis did with IAEA and UN weapons inspections.

To hedge against these potential Iranian calculations, IAEA inspectors would have to demand an unparalleled level of sustained and rapid access

to Iranian facilities and personnel, with full Iranian cooperation. No-notice and intrusive IAEA inspections should be regularly and routinely mounted without international apology. IAEA inspectors should have routine, widespread, and unencumbered debriefing access to any and all Iranian scientists and technicians, who could be debriefed outside of Iran and without Iranian minders present. Such measures were only faintheartedly implemented by the United Nations under Hans Blix in the run-up to the 2003 war against Iraq.

Washington could further use international sanctions to cut Iran's trading access to the global market, particularly for oil exports, to increase pressure on Tehran to accept assertive IAEA inspections and a stoppage in Iran's nuclear fuel cycle efforts, but that course could suffer from numerous pitfalls. Sanctions would have to be sustained for a prolonged period of time before they began to hurt Iran's economy, and after that time, much like the sanctions implemented against Saddam's regime, they would hurt the livelihood of the general populace more than regime elites. As a consequence the United States might undercut its objective of looking to the Iranian population to usher in a political change in Tehran—under the stress of such international sanctions, the population could rally around the regime rather than taking up political actions against it.

A better alternative might be for Washington to offer to sweeten the diplomatic tea with a variety of options to encourage Iran to accept an unprecedented level of intrusive IAEA inspections and to stop its nuclear fuel cycle efforts. For example, Washington could offer the resumption of diplomatic ties with Tehran severed after the 1979 revolution; the release of frozen Iranian assets in the United States; and the easing of trade sanctions that would facilitate Iranian access to the international marketplace, technology, and business, thus helping to modernize Iran's oil industry. As Takeyh observes, "The economic dimension is particularly important as, in the past decade, Tehran has grudgingly come to realize that Iran's tense relations with the United States preclude its effective integration into the global economy and access to needed technology."²⁴ These positive incentives, however, might still not be sufficient to reverse Iran's hostile policy toward the United States given the factions competing for power in Tehran. As Geoffrey Kemp points out, "Opponents can be counted upon to do all they can to prevent such a thing from happening, including strategic leaks designed to undermine any diplomacy in prospect."²⁵

The uncertainty over the Iranian internal power structure would make it difficult for American policymakers to establish "rules of the road" in any diplomatic dialogue designed to gain a degree of confidence that Tehran could exercise responsible and stringent controls over future nuclear weapon stocks. Notwithstanding past Iranian public support for the Iranian President, the wind in Khatami's reform-minded sails is dying. And the Iranian elections in February 2004 in which conservatives barred moderates from being placed

on ballots have stranded the reformers at sea without fresh water. While many in the West hope that the counterrevolutionary winds will grow stronger with public demonstrations and cast aside the conservative clerics, such a desirable course of events may await the longer run. In the short to medium terms, there are greater prospects for hard-line clerics ousting the more pragmatic clerics in the regime power struggle.

Military Options for Disrupting Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program

American diplomatic support for robust IAEA inspections is reducing widespread European and Middle Eastern criticism that the United States acts unilaterally or hegemonically in the international arena. Such criticism reached shrill heights during the lead-up to the war against Saddam's Iraq. The United States needs to work to heal those wounds to garner political support from Europe and the greater Middle East region to complement diplomacy with military force in a concerted policy to derail Iran's train ride toward nuclear weapons.

Military options could be employed to physically disrupt, delay, and destroy key components of Iran's nuclear weapons program. Such military options would be geared toward causing the Tehran regime pain and inflicting costs for Tehran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. They could be aimed at changing Tehran's strategic calculus, so that Iran views nuclear weapons not as something that enhances the security of the regime, but as a liability that increases prospects for conflict with the United States and threatens the clerical regime's hold on power.

Obviously military options would entail less risk if exercised before Iran acquires nuclear weapons. American policymakers would have to be concerned that if military options are employed after Iran acquires nuclear weapons, the Iranians could retaliate for US conventional military strikes by targeting American forces in the region with nuclear weapons or by using clandestine means to attack American civilians, perhaps via the Iranian intelligence services or collaborating transnational actors, especially Hezbollah. While such risks may not ultimately preclude the decision to use force, Iranian possession of nuclear weapons would make the decision a heavy burden.

American military superiority over Iran gives Washington a wide spectrum of military options for coercing Tehran. These options range from limited strikes against Iran's political, military, internal security, and WMD-related infrastructure. For example, the United States could target Iran's nuclear power infrastructure—to include the Bushehr nuclear power plant as well as any future nuclear power plants, heavy-water facilities, future plutonium reprocessing plants, and uranium production and enrichment plants—with

cruise missiles or combat aircraft strikes. An American air campaign mounted from regional support hubs in the small Gulf Arab states could make short work of Iran's air force and air defense forces to gain air superiority for attacks against Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Such strikes could serve the practical purposes of disrupting Iran's means for developing nuclear weapons as well as constituting a symbolic, political demonstration of American resolve to use whatever means are available to block Iran's nuclear weapons aspirations.

The United States would be operating with a less-than-perfect intelligence picture of Iran's nuclear weapons infrastructure, however. The Iranians cannot have escaped learning the importance of diversifying and building redundancies into their nuclear weapons program components in light of Israel's preemptive strike on Iraq's nuclear power facility. They managed to hide Iranian uranium reprocessing developments from the outside world for some time and have undoubtedly tightened security to stem further exposures of their nuclear weapons program. In the aftermath of any American air strikes against their nuclear infrastructure, Iran undoubtedly also would redouble its efforts to conceal and build redundancies into its nuclear weapons infrastructure to make follow-on American attacks more difficult.

American aircraft and cruise missiles also could target Iran's key political, security, and military infrastructures to harm the power of the regime in Tehran. Strikes could target government buildings and even the homes of clerics; facilities and compounds used by internal security and policy forces; assets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij forces; major army units and garrisons; and WMD delivery vehicles, such as aircraft and ballistic missiles, as well as their production facilities. Targeting internal security organs would be particularly useful because that might allow the disgruntled populace more freedom to demonstrate against the regime and substantially increase the pressure on clerics to forgo their nuclear weapons aspirations.

The threat of a US invasion of Iran should not be taken off the table, because it could be used to bolster the strength of coercive diplomacy to compel the Iranians to desist on nuclear weapons and to accept robust and intrusive international inspections to help ensure their compliance with the NPT. The most imprudent step a statesman can make is to let his adversary know what he is not prepared to do; that profoundly undermines his political leverage to achieve interests without resort to force. President Clinton made this critical mistake in the 1999 Kosovo war, in which he declared that US ground forces would not be used against Serbia.

Nevertheless, the US military presence in the greater Middle East that brackets Iran would be insufficient to stage the type of massive ground campaign that would be required to occupy Iran's major cities. Iraq is a comparatively easy occupational task in comparison to Iran; it is smaller and has

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fewer citizens. Iraq is twice the size of Idaho and populated with about 25 million people, while Iran is nearly four times the size of Iraq with approximately 67 million people.²⁶ The American and British forces in neighboring Iraq are likely to be fully preoccupied with Iraq’s internal security for the coming years, and without significant augmentation they would be unavailable for a cross-border invasion of Iran. US forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan are much smaller and more suited for special operations that would augment, rather than spearhead, the massive ground force campaign that would be necessitated by Iran’s sheer geographic size.

American decisionmakers have to weigh political ends against military means as a basis for formulating strategy. The United States now has a significant portion of its total ground forces committed to Iraq and would be hard-pressed to mount a comparable or larger operation simultaneously against Iran. The United States also needs to keep its forces ready to meet contingencies elsewhere in the world, particularly in Asia where potential clashes could emerge on the Korean Peninsula or over Taiwan. The weighing of these concerns, however, would best be done in the minds of policymakers and not shared aloud in the public domain for the ears of Iran’s clerics.

The domestic Iranian political fallout from American military operations could cut two ways. On one hand, US operations could undermine the regime politically as many Iranians would see them as more evidence that the nature of the regime works to prolong Iran’s isolation from the world community and its economic stagnation and political retardation. On the other hand, the clerics would seize on the strikes as evidence of a hegemonic American campaign to conquer the Middle East and its oil, and use that perception as justification for repressive domestic security measures to hold onto power. In the final analysis, the United States could have to just wait and see which of these competing forces would prove to be stronger as it vigilantly monitored Iran’s efforts to reconstitute its infrastructure and made follow-on strikes over a period of years to perpetually “kick the can down the road” and delay Tehran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons.

As has been the case in the war against Iraq, the United States would have to ride out the international political fallout from any military actions

against Iran. At first glance, Russia, China, North Korea, and Pakistan probably would politically protest “American unilateralism” out of concern over economic losses as a result of attacks on Iranian facilities that those countries are supporting. But then again, from a more cynical view, those states might work to economically exploit the situation and seek additional contracts to rebuild all that the Americans had destroyed. Military operations too would come with a tide of regional outcries against the United States. Many would accuse the United States of the all-too-familiar refrain that Washington holds a double-standard in the region by ignoring Israeli nuclear weapons while taking military actions against Muslim states such as Iraq and Iran, which were seeking to arm themselves to balance Israeli and American nuclear power. As hard as it is for American observers to appreciate, many in the region—officers, diplomats, officials, as well as the general public—harbor the view that a nuclear-armed Iran could be useful to counterbalance Israeli as well as American nuclear power.

Running Risks with Iranian Nuclear Weapons

And what if these diplomatic and military options were unsuccessful? What could Iran do with nuclear weapons? Would Iranian nuclear weapons pose a profound security challenge for the United States? Or would an Iranian nuclear weapons inventory be manageable for Washington? Could the United States accept Iranian nuclear weapons capabilities, much as Washington has accepted those possessed by Israel, Pakistan, India, and perhaps North Korea?

A grave concern is that Iran could transfer nuclear weapons to non-state actors, because for the past 20 years Tehran has consistently used non-state actors as instruments of statecraft to advance Iranian political interests and objectives. Indeed, the prospects for the transfer of nuclear weapons to non-state actors is greater in the case of Iran than it was for Saddam’s regime, because Tehran has been much more active than Baghdad had been in the sponsorship of terrorist operations, particularly those orchestrated by Hezbollah, against the United States.²⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg reports in *The New Yorker*, “Hezbollah has an annual budget of more than a hundred million dollars, which is supplied by the Iranian government directly and by a complex system of finance cells scattered around the world.”²⁸

Some observers argue that the revolutionary steam has run out of Iran’s regime and that Iranian sponsorship of terrorist operations against US interests has diminished. Iran’s complicity and support for the 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers, the American military housing complex in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 American servicemen, belies arguments that Iran’s government has tempered its opposition to the United States, however. Former FBI Director Louis Freeh has publicly and directly linked Iran to the Khobar

Towers attack: “Over the course of our investigation the evidence became clear that while the attack was staged by Saudi Hezbollah members, the entire operation was planned, funded and coordinated by Iran’s security services, the IRGC and MOIS [Ministry of Intelligence and Security], acting on orders from the highest levels of the regime in Tehran.”²⁹ More recently, Iran has shown an interest in maintaining links to al Qaeda by harboring its operatives, some of whom had fled neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan in the midst of the October 2001 American military campaign in Afghanistan.³⁰

Some observers are inclined to give the Iranian regime the benefit of the doubt regarding allegations of complicity in the Khobar Towers bombing by arguing that “rogue elements” or conservative hardliners in the regime, not President Khatami and like-minded supporters in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and parliament, supported the operations. Conclusive evidence to bolster this argument is elusive, but even if it were found to be the case, such a fact would be of little solace to American policymakers and the public coming to terms with the potential dangers posed by Iranian possession of nuclear weapons. Policymakers would have to be concerned that hardliners in the future could control or direct transfers of nuclear weapons even if it were not the consensus policy of the regime. If an American city were to suffer from the detonation of a Hezbollah-planted Iranian nuclear weapon, it would be largely irrelevant whether or not it came about via rogue or mainstream elements of the Tehran government.

Tehran might calculate that a nuclear deterrent would give it more leeway for supporting militants in the Middle East, including Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. The Iranians, even without nuclear weapons, are moving in this policy direction. As Daniel Byman observes in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, “Since the outbreak of the al Aqsa intifada in October 2000, Hezbollah has provided guerrilla training, bomb-building expertise, propaganda, and tactical tips to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other anti-Israeli groups.”³¹

Tehran might judge that even if its hand were revealed in supporting terrorist operations via these groups against American interests and partners among the Gulf Arab states, Iranian nuclear weapons would deter military reprisals against Iran. American and Israeli contemplation of retaliatory strikes against Iran would be substantially riskier if Iran had the means to retaliate with nuclear weapons. The Iranian clerics are not well schooled in the ins and outs of the elaborate Western strategic literature formulated during the Cold War. The clerics probably would be more influenced by their Islamic ideological worldviews than by a rational calculation of national interests. As George Perkovich argues, “Political leaders like Khamene’i and Rafsanjani see nuclear weapons as an almost magical source of national power and autonomy. These men are political clerics, not international strategists or technologists.

They intuit that the bomb will keep all outside powers, including Israel and the US, from thinking they can dictate to Iran or invade it.”³² In short, a nuclear-armed Tehran might fear the prospect of American and Israeli nuclear retaliation less than Western strategists would hope.

The Iranians could elect to rely more heavily on integrating nuclear weapons into their war-fighting strategies. They undoubtedly have ingrained into their political and military thinking the premise to never again be caught in a prolonged war of attrition as was the case in the Iran-Iraq War that Tehran ultimately lost. The Iranians might come to view nuclear weapons as useful, or even essential, battlefield instruments for destroying the armed forces of an adversary, particularly those of Iraq. As Gary Sick points out, Iran’s past use of unconventional hit-and-run speedboat attacks in the Persian Gulf during its war with Iraq demonstrate Tehran’s willingness to “use unconventional, even terrorist, methods to pursue a political and military strategy, even if that meant confronting the United States.”³³ Along these lines, Tehran might be tempted to harness the threat of nuclear weapons for leverage in the political-military struggle against the United States for power and influence in the Persian Gulf.

Iranian nuclear weapons would give Tehran greater political and military prestige that could translate into leverage over the Arab Gulf states. As Kenneth Pollack warns, “Tehran appears to want nuclear weapons principally to deter an American attack. Once it gets them, however, its strategic calculus might change and it might be emboldened to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy.”³⁴ The Arab Gulf states would be more vulnerable to Iranian political pressure to reduce security cooperation with the United States, particularly in the event of a regional contingency. Finally, an Iranian nuclear bomb also would increase the already high incentives for Arab states to procure nuclear weapons.

NOTES

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1. Tehran’s regular armed forces consist of about 325,000 in the army, 18,000 in the navy, and 52,000 in the air force. It has a parallel force structure in the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with about 125,000 soldiers, including about 100,000 ground troops, 20,000 naval, 5,000 marines, and an unknown number in an air force. Tehran also has a paramilitary force, the Popular Mobilization Army or Basij, with about 40,000 active troops. See International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance, 2002-2003* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), p. 104.

2. In July 2003, the United States issued search warrants and grand jury subpoenas to 18 US companies in a massive raid against illegal export of American-built military components to a London front company for Iran. The front company was procuring components for the Hawk air defense system, F-14, F-4, F-5 combat aircraft, C-130 transport aircraft, and radar as well as other equipment. California police in July 2003 arrested two men trying to export military technology—including components for the F-4, F-5, and F-14 aircraft, and Hawk surface-to-air missiles—to China. These items are not in the Chinese military inventory, however, but are in the Iranian military’s inventory, strongly suggesting that China is acting as a middle man for Iran’s clandestine re-

pair parts pipeline. See Christine Hanley, "Two Men Tried to Illegally Export Military Parts to China, U.S. Says," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 2003, p. B5.

3. Michael Eisenstadt, "Living with a Nuclear Iran?" *Survival*, 41 (Autumn 1999), 140.

4. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Tehran's Tocsin," in *Contemporary Nuclear Debates: Missile Defense, Arms Control, and Arms Races in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Alexander T. J. Lennon (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 152.

5. Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Nuclear Calculations," *World Policy Journal*, 20 (Summer 2003), 23.

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27. Hezbollah was responsible for the bombing of the US Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in October 1983 that killed 241 marines, the April 1983 bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut that killed 63 people, killed the CIA Beirut station chief in 1985, and killed a US Navy diver on hijacked TWA Flight 847 that landed in Beirut in 1985. For an argument against using Iraqi ties to terrorist groups as a strategic rationale for waging war against Saddam, see Richard L. Russell, "War and the Iraq Dilemma: Facing Harsh Realities," *Parameters*, 32 (Autumn 2002), 47-48.

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