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A Nuclear Iran: Challenges and Responses

After the International Atomic Energy Agency on February 4 voted to report Iran to the UN Security Council because of its concerns over its nuclear program, the rituals of diplomacy persist. The international community sees the Security Council move as ratcheting up the pressure in order to deter Iran from moving closer to a potential weapons capability. But the Islamic Republic is seemingly determined to acquire a sophisticated nuclear infrastructure that will avail it a weapons option at some point in the near future.

Today, Iran stands at crossroads. For nearly three years, Iran was involved in delicate negotiations with Britain, France and Germany, regarding the direction of its nuclear program. The failure of those talks have not lessened the scope of international diplomacy, as the Russians are now struggling to craft an agreement that prevents Iran from completing its fuel cycle capabilities. Ultimately, the course of Iran's nuclear policy maybe decided less by what Europeans say, than by what Americans do. The nature of Iran's relations with the United States and the type of security architecture that emerges in the Persian Gulf are likely to determine Iran's decisions. It is neither inevitable nor absolute that Iran will become the next member of the nuclear club, as its internal debates are real and its course of actions is still unsettled. The international community and the United States will have an immeasurable impact on Iran's nuclear future. A more imaginative U.S. diplomacy can still prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold and assembling a bomb.

Understanding the Nature of the Iranian Regime

More than any other issue, the nuclear question has exposed the divisions within the clerical establishment over Iran's international orientation. To be sure, Iran's many factions are united on the need to sustain a vibrant nuclear research program that, in due course, will offer Tehran the option of manufacturing a bomb. However, the prospect of actually assembling a weapon in defiance of the international community and in violation of Iran's long-standing treaty commitments has generated a subtle yet robust debate.

From the outset it must be emphasized that for all the factions involved in this debate the core issue is how to safeguard Iran's national interests. The Islamic Republic is not an irrational rogue seeking such weaponry as an instrument of an aggressive, revolutionary foreign policy designed to project its power abroad. This is not an "Islamic bomb" to be handed over to terrorist organizations or exploded in the streets of New York or Washington. For Iran this is a weapon of deterrence and the relevant question is whether its possession will serve its practical interests?

The paradox of the post–September 11 Middle East is that although Iran’s security has improved through the removal of Saddam and of the Taliban in Afghanistan, its feelings of insecurity have intensified. The massive projection of American power in the region and the enduring antagonism between Washington and Tehran constitute Iran’s foremost strategic dilemma and its primary motivation for the acquisition of the "strategic weapon." At a time when the American politicians routinely and loudly contemplate regime change in Iran, it is hard for the leadership in Tehran to categorically dispense with a nuclear program that can serve as its ultimate guarantor. However, as with nearly every other important issue currently being debated in the Islamic Republic, the notion of crossing the nuclear threshold is hardly a settled topic.

The primary supporters of the nuclear breakout option are hard-line elements associated with the Supreme Religious Leader, Ali Khamenei. Through command of key institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards and the Guardian Council, Iran’s reactionary clerics have enormous influence on national security planning. A fundamental tenet of the hardliners’ ideology is the notion that the Islamic Republic is in constant danger from predatory external forces, necessitating military self-reliance. This perception was initially molded by a revolution that sought not just to defy but refashion international norms. The passage of time and the failure of that mission have not necessarily diminished the hardliners’ suspicions of the international order and its primary guardian, the United States. *Jumhuri-ye Islami*, the conservative newspaper and the mouthpiece of Khamenei, sounded this theme by stressing,

The core problem is the fact that our officials’ outlook on the nuclear dossier of Iran is faulty and they are on the wrong track. It seems they have failed to appreciate that America is after our destruction and the nuclear issue is merely an excuse for them.

In a similar vein, *Resalat*, another influential conservative paper, sounded out the themes of deterrence and national interest by claiming, “In the present situation of international order whose main characteristics are injustice and the weakening of the rights of others, the Islamic Republic has no alternative but intelligent resistance while paying the least cost.” Given such perceptions, the Iranian right does not necessarily object to international isolation and confrontation with the West. Indeed, for many within this camp, such a conflict would be an effective means of rekindling popular support for the revolution’s fading élan.

Iran’s nuclear calculations have been further hardened by the rise of war-veterans such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to positions of power. Although the Iran-Iraq war ended nearly twenty years ago, for many within the Islamic Republic it was a defining experience that altered their strategic assumptions. Even a cursory examination of Ahmadinejad’s speeches reveals that for him the war is far from a faded memory. In his defiant speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2005, Iran’s president pointedly admonished the assembled dignitaries for their failings:

For eight years, Saddam’s regime imposed a massive war of aggression against my people. It employed the most heinous weapons of mass destruction including chemical weapons against Iranians and Iraqi’s alike. Who, in fact, armed Saddam with those weapons? What was the reaction of those who claim to fight against WMDs regarding the use of chemical weapons then?

The international indifference to Saddam’s war crimes and Tehran’s lack of an effective response, has led Iran’s war-veteran turned president to perceive that the security of his country cannot be predicated on global opinion and disarmament treaties.

Given their paranoia and suspicions, the hardliners insist that American objections to Iran's nuclear program do not stem from its concerns about proliferation, but its opposition to the character of their regime. They argue that should Iran acquiesce on the nuclear portfolio, the perfidious Americans would only search for another issue with which to coerce Iran. "The West opposes the nature of the Islamic rule. If this issue [the nuclear standoff] is resolved, then they will bring up human rights. If we solve that, they will bring up animal rights," emphasized Ahmadinejad. As such, there appears no sufficient reason to compromise on a critical national program since such concessions will not measurably relieve American pressure.

At the core, all disarmament agreements call upon a state to forgo a certain degree of sovereignty for enhanced security. Once a state renounces its weapons of mass destruction programs it can be assured of support from the international community should it be threatened by another state possessing such arms. This implied trade-off has no value for Iran's hardliners. Once more, the prolonged war with Iraq conditions their worldview and behavior. Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran with impunity if not the tacit acceptance of Western powers has reinforced Iran's suspicions of the international order. *Jumhuri-ye Islami* stipulated, "As a rule, it is futile to enter any deal with the West over issues related to the country's independence and national security." For many of the Islamic Republic's reactionary clerics, the only way to safeguard Iran's interests is to develop an independent nuclear deterrent.

Beyond such perceptions, the American demands that Iran relinquish its fuel cycle rights granted to it by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty has aroused the leadership's nationalistic impulses. As a country that has historically been subject of foreign intervention and imposition of various capitulation treaties, Iran is inordinately sensitive of its national prerogatives and sovereign rights. For the new rulers of Iran, they are being challenged not because of their provocations and previous treaty violations, but because of superpower bullying. In a peculiar manner, the nuclear program and Iran's national identity have become fused in the imagination of the hardliners. To stand against an impudent America is to validate one's revolutionary ardor and sense of nationalism. Thus, the notion of compromise and acquiescence has limited utility to Iran's aggrieved nationalists.

Despite their bitterness and cynicism, the theocratic hardliners are eternal optimists when it comes to the international community's reception of Iran's nuclear breakout. Many influential conservative voices insist that Iran would follow the model of India and Pakistan, namely the initial international outcry would soon be followed by acceptance of Iran's new status. Thus, Tehran would regain its commercial contracts and keep its nuclear weapons. The former Iranian Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati noted this theme when stressing, "Whenever we stand firm and defend our righteous stands resolutely, they are forced to retreat and have no alternatives." The notion of Iran's mischievous past and its tense relations with the United States militating against the acceptance of its nuclear status by the international community is rejected by the right.

However, should their anticipations fail, and Iran become subject of sanctions, it is a price that the hardliners are willing to pay for an important national prerogative. Ahmadinejad has pointedly noted that even sanctions were to be imposed, "The Iranian nation would still have its rights." In a similar vein, Ayatollah Jannati, the head of the Guardian Council, has noted, "We do not welcome sanctions, but if we are threatened by sanctions, we will not give in." The notion of the need to sacrifice and struggle on behalf of the revolution and resist imperious international demands is an essential tent of the hardliners' ideological perspective.

In the Islamic Republic's informal governing structure, the national security decisions are subject to input by many figures, even those not necessarily with a portfolio. The former Prime

Minister Mir Hussein Mussavi for instance who has been out of power for nearly two decades is nevertheless consulted intimately about Iran's nuclear course. It appears that despite Western perceptions that the nuclear issue is decided by a narrow band of conservatives, Khamenei has broadened the parameters of the debate and has included relevant elites from across the political spectrum in the nuclear deliberations. Thus, reformers out of power, moderate conservatives struggling against their reactionary brethren as well as professionals from key bureaucracies are allowed to stress their point of view. Given the provocative nature of the nuclear program, Khamenei seems to be hoping that the burden of any ensuing international confrontation would be assumed by all political factions, as opposed to being the responsibility only of the conservatives. Thus, the systematic consolidation of power by the conservatives over the state does not necessarily mean that voices of restraint are excised from the decision-making process.

In contrast to the hardliners, the pragmatic elements within the Islamic Republic's officialdom insist that Iran's on-going integration into the international order and the global economy mandates accepting certain restrictions on its nuclear program. Although it is tempting to see this issue as divided between reactionaries and reformers, the coalition pressing for reticence features both conservatives, such as Rafsanjani, who is currently the head of the Expediency Council, and the reformist politicians attached to the Islamic Participation Front. The proponents of this strategy do not call for the dismantling of Iran's nuclear edifice, but for the development of a breakout capacity within the flexible guidelines of the NPT. Given Iran's long-term commitment to the NPT and the prevailing international scrutiny, a provocative policy could invite multilateral sanctions and lead Iran's valuable commercial partners, such as the European Union, to embrace the U.S. policy of isolating and pressuring Iran. Thus, for this constituency, a hedging strategy can sustain Iran's nuclear program while maintaining its international ties.

In the recent months, as Iran's reckless diplomacy has generated a series of IAEA resolutions condemning its conduct and calling for its referral to the UN Security Council, the members of this group have called for restraint, even suspension of various nuclear activities. Rafsanjani has taken the lead in admonishing Iran's new president by stressing that "we have reached a sensitive point. There is need for prudence on both sides. The reformers have gone further, as Mohsen Armin, a leading figure of the Organization of the Mujahedin of the Islamic Revolution, called on the government to "suspend nuclear activities voluntarily and resume talks in order to build confidence and protect Iran's right to conduct peaceful nuclear activities in the future." For the more moderate elements of the nuclear program has to be seen in a wider context of Iran's international relations.

Unlike their reactionary brethren, the more pragmatic elements appreciate that given Iran's "exceptional" nature and the eagerness of the United States to publicize all of its infractions as a means of multilateralizing its coercive policy, a defiant posture may not serve it well. The influential moderate politician Mohsen Mirdamadi stipulated, "The reality is that our recent achievement in the area of nuclear technology has been part of our strength and created new opportunities for us in the international arena, but we should not turn this into a new threat. We should be careful not to bring the US and Europe together." To be sure, other states have surreptitiously developed nuclear weapons, however, they did so with superpower acceptance—even complicity—and an international environment that was not suspicious of their intent. Iran does not enjoy such advantages, as its revolutionary past and its continued engagement with terrorist organizations makes many states wary of its motives. Tehran simply does not have the luxury allotted to Pakistan or India. All this does not imply a propensity to renounce a weapons capability but recognition of the need for restraint and the importance of the international community and its opinion.

Iran's pragmatists are increasingly been drawn to the North Korean model, as Pyongyang has adroitly managed to employ its nuclear defiance to extract concessions from the international community. Through a similar posture of restraint and defiance, threats and blandishments, perhaps Tehran can also utilize its nuclear card to renegotiate a more rational relationship with its leading nemesis, the United States. The conservative publication *Farda* postulated such a move, stressing that "the credibility that these weapons have had and continue to have at the global level, their importance is in the support they give to bargaining in international negotiations and advancement of the country's national interests." The influential conservative politician Muhammad Javad Larijani, echoed this theme by stressing, "If out national interests dictate, we can go to the bowels of hell to negotiate with the devil."

Hovering over this debate, once more, stands the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. As mentioned, Khamenei's instincts would be to support the reactionary elements in their call for defiance and pursuit of the nuclear option. However, in his role as the guardian of the state, he must consider the nuclear program in the context of Iran's larger international relations. Thus far, despite his ideological compunctions, Khamenei has pressed the state toward restraint. The fact that Iran continues to negotiate with the Russians and did suspend critical components of its program for over two years, reflects his willingness to subordinate ideology to pragmatism. Indeed, President Ahmadinejad's acceptance of the negotiations, despite his campaign rhetoric, denotes his willingness to accede to the direction set out by Khamenei.

All this may change, as Iran does need to make critical decisions regarding its nuclear program. In assessing a state's nuclear path, it is important to note that its motivations cannot be exclusively examined within the context of its national interests and security considerations. Whatever strategic benefits such weapons offer a state, they are certainly a source of national prestige and parochial benefits to various bureaucracies and politicians. As such constituencies emerge, a state can potentially cross the nuclear threshold even if the initial strategic factors that provoked the program are no longer salient. The emergence of bureaucracies and nationalistic pressures in Iran is generating its own proliferation momentum, empowering those seeking a nuclear breakout. Time may not be on the side of the international community, as inevitably the pragmatic voices calling for hedging are likely to be marginalized and lose their influence within the regime.

The question then becomes what is to be done? The focus of U.S. diplomacy should not be on Ahmadinejad, as his pathologies are immutable. However, should Washington and its European allies craft a generous package of security assurances and measurable sanctions relief in exchange for Tehran's suspension of the critical components of its nuclear infrastructure, it may succeed in peeling away important clerical powerbrokers from the cause of nuclear arms.

In the end, there is neither a Russian nor a purely European solution to Iran's nuclear conundrum. Despite its aversions and prohibitions, the United States has to be involved in negotiations with Iran for this issue to be conclusively resolved. At this point, Washington should contemplate establishing a contact group that would involve seven parties: U.S., Russia, China, Britain, France, Germany and Iran. The seven-party format would provide the Bush administration with enough political cover that it could state publicly that it has not bestowed legitimacy or recognition on the Islamic Republic. This would be similar to the stance Washington has taken vis-à-vis Pyongyang in the six-party talks.

These talks would offer Iran nuclear fuel guarantees that could place the fuel with a trusted third party. But fuel assurances alone would not be enough incentive to convince Tehran to suspend its uranium-enrichment program. In addition, the security dialogue approach should

provide Iran with tangible economic incentives designed to help its ailing economy. Furthermore, Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technologies would be recognized. However, in return, Tehran would agree to cease its enrichment activities as well as other work that could lead to production of weapons-usable fissile material. In addition, Iran would ratify and implement the additional protocol to help provide verifiable evidence that these activities have been suspended.

If Iran rejects this concerted diplomatic effort, then the United States will have an easier time reaching a consensus through the United Nations to enact tough multilateral sanctions. Examining the past history of countries that have renounced nuclear weapons or potential weapons programs, the predominant theme is that these renunciations took place only after those countries experienced a substantial lessening of external threats.