

THE IRAN DEBATE

Professor John M. Owen, IV
University of Virginia

Introduction

Despite the hopes of millions in the United States and around the world that the new American administration will make a fresh start in foreign relations, President Obama, like all of his predecessors in the White House, has inherited a number of thorny problems. Among the most fraught with peril is Iran's nuclear program.

There is no doubt – indeed, its government proudly confirms – that Iran has a nuclear program. Tehran claims that its program is solely to generate electricity for Iran's economy so as to hedge against future decline in fossil fuel supplies. It plans to build seven nuclear power plants by 2025. But the governments of the United States and many other countries strongly suspect that Tehran intends to produce nuclear weapons and is steadily moving toward that goal. U.S. intelligence estimates that Iran could have a Bomb within five years; Israeli intelligence, within one year.¹

Many countries have nuclear weapons, of course – the United States, Russia, Great Britain, France, China, India, Pakistan, and Israel, with North Korea claiming to as well. Many more countries – Japan, South Korea, most West European states – have the ability to develop nuclear weapons fairly quickly. For the United States, however, Iran is not just another country.

America is the leading power in the oil-rich Middle East – what political scientists call the *hegemon* – determined to maintain stable energy prices for the global economy, and hence influence over as many oil-producing states as possible. It also is the patron of Israel, and deeply involved in trying to stabilize and reconstruct Iraq and Afghanistan, which sit on either side of Iran. America's chief security threat is Islamist terrorism, which originates in the region. Iran, meanwhile, ranks third globally in total oil

¹ David Ignatius, "Bomb Bomb Iran? Not Likely," *Washington Post* (August 3, 2008), B7, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/01/AR2008080102872.html>, accessed on January 23, 2009.

reserves, owns the northern coastline of the Persian Gulf, and borders the Strait of Hormuz, through which forty percent of the world’s crude oil must pass before reaching the rest of the world.² The Iranian regime’s domestic legitimacy is built upon Islamic theocracy and an explicit defiance of American power and influence. It is America, the regime perpetually reminds its people, that kept the hated Shah in power until the revolution of 1979 and that keeps Jews rather than Muslims ruling Palestine. Iran also aspires to lead the Muslim world and, with its ally Syria, supports the terrorist groups Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza as well as anti-American Shia groups in Iraq. Iran’s President routinely states a desire to see Israel, the “Zionist entity,” eliminated. For the past thirty-one years, relations between Iran and America have ranged from deeply mistrustful to, as now, a few steps from war.

Iran is an original signatory of the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which pledges it not to possess nuclear weapons. Its leaders have often declared that possession of such weapons would violate Islamic principles. The difficulty is that it is hard to know whether Iran is being sincere, and outsiders have ample reason to think that it is not. Civilian nuclear power is entirely legal under the NPT. Most countries seeking to build nuclear power plants import fuel – enriched uranium – from one or more of a few countries with the capability.³ They do so, in part, to remove any suspicion that they are secretly developing nuclear weapons. Iran, however, is openly enriching its own uranium at a plant in Natanz, in the center of the country. A country that insists on enriching its own uranium is within its rights under the NPT, but raises suspicions that it intends to enrich the fuel to the point that it is suitable for weapons. *Civilian* nuclear power only requires that naturally occurring uranium (U-238) be enriched to a low level (technically, to a relatively low percentage of radioactive U-235). *Weapons-grade* or highly enriched uranium (HEU, almost entirely U-235) requires much more processing. A country that openly imports all of its uranium can be virtually assured not to have HEU because of international export restrictions. Not so with a country that processes its own.

To allay such suspicions, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Vienna-based organization set up by the NPT to monitor and publicize potential nuclear proliferation, has procedures in place by which states seeking their own uranium-enriching capabilities must abide. Here, too, Iran’s behavior is troubling. For years Iran violated its NPT obligations by developing in secret an enrichment program, exposed

² U.S. Department of Energy, http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Persian_Gulf/ExportRoutes.html, accessed on January 24, 2009.

³ These include the declared nuclear-weapons powers, plus Brazil, Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands. See <http://www.wise-uranium.org/efac.html>, accessed on January 16, 2009.

only when a dissident group publicized it in 2002. The IAEA’s Director, Mohamed ElBaradei, has repeatedly stated that Iran still is not abiding by its obligations under the NPT. The IAEA, says ElBaradei, cannot be sure that Iran has not diverted any nuclear material from civilian to military use, nor that Iran has revealed all aspects of its Iran nuclear program.⁴ Israeli intelligence believes that Iran has a parallel nuclear weapons program, but the Israelis have not made public any evidence.⁵

It is important to distinguish the IAEA’s goal for Iran from the goals of the U.S., British, French, and German governments – and more recently the United Nations Security Council.⁶ The IAEA cannot challenge Iran’s right to enrich uranium; its goal is simply that Iran comply with the NPT’s safeguards. (Iran claims that it is doing so and that the IAEA is being manipulated by the Americans and Europeans.) The U.S. and other governments have a larger goal: to stop Iran from enriching uranium altogether, so that it must import its nuclear fuel and thereby reassure the world that it is not developing nuclear weapons. (Iran counters that it has a sovereign right to process nuclear fuel, just as the Americans and Europeans do, and that attempts to stop its exercise of that right amount to Western imperialism.) At the same time, the IAEA’s concern feeds that of the U.S. and other governments. Were Iran to comply with IAEA procedures, it would weaken the European-American case that it must halt uranium enrichment. That Iran does not do so feeds suspicions that it has something to hide.

In debating the resolution – “America cannot tolerate a nuclear Iran and must go to any lengths to prevent it” – we must be more specific about the possible consequences were Iran to have nuclear weapons. We also must consider the consequences were America to use force to end Iran’s nuclear program.

Those who would favor the resolution – that America must do whatever is necessary to stop Iran from having nuclear weapons – typically appeal to one or more of four arguments: Iran would use its nuclear weapons to attack vital U.S. interests in the Middle East and South Asia, perhaps including attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan; short of direct attack, it would seriously harm U.S. interests by reshaping

⁴ “Statements of the Director General,” IAEA, November 27, 2008, <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Statements/2008/ebsp2008n013.html#iran>, accessed on January 21, 2009.

⁵ Seymour M. Hersh, “The Iran Plans,” *New Yorker* (April 17, 2006), http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/17/060417fa_fact?currentPage=all, accessed on January 23, 2009.

⁶ On March 3, 2008, the Security Council – including Russia and China – passed Resolution 9268, demanding that Iran halt all uranium enrichment. See <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9268.doc.htm>, accessed on January 21, 2009.

the Middle Eastern order; it would send nuclear weapons to client terrorists such as Hezbollah and Hamas; and it would provoke other regional actors, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to acquire or develop nuclear weapons in response, further destabilizing an already unstable region. The obvious premise is that Iran’s regime is implacably hostile to America and cannot be dealt with through standard diplomatic means as, say, the Chinese or Indian government is. Those favoring the resolution must also argue that the consequences of U.S. air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities would be less grave than the alternatives.

Those who would oppose the resolution fall into two camps. The first camp strongly opposes a nuclear-armed Iran but believes that an American (or Israeli) use of force to prevent it would do more harm than good. These argue that bombing Iran would probably not eliminate the country’s nuclear capability, would make Iran’s leaders even more determined to develop nuclear weapons, and would inflame Iranian and wider Muslim public opinion against America; they also argue that the right non-lethal methods should lead Iran to forsake uranium enrichment. The second camp sees a nuclear-armed Iran as a potentially stabilizing force in the Middle East: it would never attack Israel or America for fear of a devastating nuclear counterblow, and it will feel secure from a first strike from America or Israel.

Some Brief Recent History

Under Shah Reza Pahlavi (who ruled from 1941 to 1979), Iran had a civilian nuclear program. With cooperation from the United States from the 1950s, and other countries in subsequent decades, Iran built reactors and conducted nuclear research. Iran was an original signatory of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968, ratifying it in 1970s, and has never rescinded the treaty. In 1974 the Shah stated that Iran would gain nuclear weapons soon, but quickly retracted the statement. Later in the decade Tehran began pushing the United States to allow it facilities to reprocess imported nuclear fuel. The 1979 revolution disrupted Iran’s nuclear program. The new regime did not want foreigners – from France, Germany, and elsewhere – involved, and was ambivalent about nuclear power altogether. In 1982 civilian nuclear development, with foreign support, resumed. In the mid-1980s the foreign ministers of Iran, Syria, and Libya stated that their countries should develop atomic weapons to counter-balance Israel.⁷ Outside observers began to gather evidence that Tehran was attempting both to import

⁷ Iran Profile, Nuclear Threat Initiative, http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/1825_1826.html, accessed January 16, 2009.

highly enriched uranium and to develop the ability to enrich uranium itself.⁸ Pakistan’s notorious A. Q. Khan began to help the Iranians, reportedly meeting with them many times in the 1990s and selling them centrifuges to enrich uranium.⁹

In August 2002, a dissident group, the National Council of Resistance in Iran, announced that Tehran was secretly developing nuclear capability at two sites, in Natanz and Arak. In December ElBaradei of the IAEA admitted that he had not known of the Natanz and Arak facilities until then.¹⁰ Iran’s leaders decided that, rather than end the secret program, it would make the question one of national sovereignty. In November 2004 the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, proclaimed that Iran would not cease uranium enrichment “at any price.” In March 2005 Mohammed Khatami, the reformer who was then still President, said that ending enrichment was “completely unacceptable.”¹¹ Many trace Iran’s acceleration of its fuel-processing efforts to President Bush’s “axis of evil” speech in January 2002. By grouping Iran with Iraq (and North Korea) and signaling that regime change – democracy promotion – was official U.S. policy, the United States gave Iran (and North Korea) a powerful incentive to become a nuclear power as quickly as possible so as to deter a U.S. attack. In December 2003, under international pressure, Iran suspended uranium enrichment; in February 2006 it resumed.

Of course, if Iran had the Bomb it would still need some way of delivering it to targets. According to the Federation of American Scientists, Iran currently has hundreds of short-range (Shahab-1 and -2) missiles with ranges between 200 and 700 km (125 to 435 miles); technology for these is from China, Libya, and North Korea. Iran is also working on ballistic missiles with much longer ranges. The Shahab-3, based on a North Korean design, would have a range of 1,500 km (900 miles) and hence be capable of hitting Israel. Iran maintains that it has no plans to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles, but some Western analysts believe it is working on modifying the North Korean Taepo-dong, which has a range of as much as 8,000 km (5,000 miles), putting the entire Eastern hemisphere within range.¹² It is not clear how soon any of these systems

⁸ http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Iran/Nuclear/1825_1878.html. Accessed on January 16, 2009.

⁹ Bill Powell and Tim McGurk, “The Man Who Sold the Bomb,” *Time* (February 6, 2005), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1025193,00.html>, accessed on January 23, 2009.

¹⁰ Nuclear Threat Initiative Chronology, http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Iran/Nuclear/1825_1879.html, accessed on January 23, 2009.

¹¹ Sharon Squassoni, “Iran’s Nuclear Program: Recent Developments,” *CRS Report for Congress*, March 8, 2007, 1.

¹² <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/missile/>, accessed on January 20, 2009; Stephen A. Hildreth, “Iran’s Ballistic Missile Programs: An Overview,” *CRS Report for Congress*, July 21, 2008.

would be operable. Iran created a stir in July 2008 when it tested the Shahab-3 and released photos, clearly signaling that it was seeking the capability to hit Israel.¹³

Parallel to the acceleration of its nuclear program, Iran over the past few years has experienced a remarkable rise in power and influence in the Middle East. Ironically, Iran’s rise is in part a product of the U.S.-led toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003. Hussein and his secular, Sunni Ba’athist regime were implacable enemies of Iran’s Shia-Islamist regime. The two fought a destructive and ultimately pointless war in the 1980s. In eliminating Iran’s worst enemy, America opened the door for Shia dominance of Iraq and close Iraqi ties with Iran. Tehran has been exploiting these ties and, according to Washington, giving material support to various Iraqi Shia actors and parties. Furthermore, Iran benefited from 2003 through the summer of 2008 from rising energy prices. Its oil revenues rose from \$23.7 billion in 2003 to \$46.6 billion in 2006 to \$81.7 billion in 2008 (although they will clearly drop steeply for 2009).¹⁴ Tehran has used its growing resources to extend its power in the Muslim world. Its Revolutionary Guard includes the al-Quds (Jerusalem) Force, a shadowy entity that attempts to spread the revolution and reports directly to Ayatollah Khamenei. Headed by Brig. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the Quds Force directs Iran’s covert operations in Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. It oversees relations with the terrorist groups Hezbollah and Hamas.¹⁵ The Bush administration accuses the Quds Force of aiding anti-U.S. Shia militias in Iraq.¹⁶ Finally, Iran – a minority in the Muslim Middle East for being Persian and Shia – has gained prestige among Arab publics at the expense of U.S. allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia whenever violence has broken out between the Israelis and either Hezbollah or Hamas. During these times Iran undercuts the prestige of these Arab states, and effectively weakens U.S. influence, by emphasizing how Cairo and Riyadh are not sufficiently supporting their Muslim brethren against the “Zionist entity” and “arrogant America.”

Today, owing in part to this shift in relative power in the Middle East toward Iran, Iranian-American relations are as bad as during the 1979-81 hostage crisis. Bilateral

¹³ “Iran Missile Test ‘Provocative,’” BBC News, July 9, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7498214.stm, accessed on January 20, 2009.

¹⁴ “Iran’s Oil and Gas Wealth,” Joint Economic Committee Research Report #109-31, U.S. House of Representatives, March 2006, <http://www.house.gov/jec/studies/rr109-31.pdf>; Ladane Nasser, “Iran Oil Revenue to Drop More than 50% This Year, Sarmayeh Says,” Bloomberg, January 20, 2009; both accessed on January 21, 2009.

¹⁵ David Ignatius, “At the Tip of Iran’s Spear,” *Washington Post* (June 8, 2008), B7.

¹⁶ Christopher Dickey and John Barry, “The Elusive Quds Force,” *Newsweek* (February 27, 2007), <http://www.newsweek.com/id/68489>, accessed on January 19, 2009.

interactions over Iran’s nuclear program are part of a larger set of interactions about the future order of this vital region.

Why Be Concerned about a Nuclear Iran?

What follows are some arguments back and forth about the potential dangers, to the United States and other countries, of an Iran with nuclear weapons.

A Nuclear Iran Could Start a Nuclear War

At bottom, assessing threats entails estimating a state’s capabilities and intentions. Particularly under the Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-), Iran has signaled hostile intent toward the United States and even more toward Israel. Ahmadinejad has hosted conferences questioning whether the Holocaust took place¹⁷ and a “World without Zionism”, and on several occasions has either called for or predicted the elimination of Israel. Iran’s President is a devotee of “Twelver” Shiism, the version of Shia Islam that holds that the Twelfth Imam or Mehdi, the messiah for Shia Muslims, went into hiding 1,000 years ago and will someday reappear. Within Twelver Shiism is a movement, of which Ahmadinejad is a part, that believes the Mehdi’s appearance is imminent. Ahmadinejad has spent millions of government dollars renovating the mosque where the Mehdi is supposed to appear.¹⁸ Putting together such apocalyptic beliefs, incendiary rhetoric, and defiant nuclear policies leads some observers to conclude that Iran, under its current leadership, might defy common sense and use nuclear weapons to attack Israel and begin a catastrophic war, thinking perhaps that it will help usher in a new age. Past radical leaders – Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot – have had visions that defied what most of us consider common sense, and used their power to try to bring those visions to fruition. Each ultimately failed, but killed millions in the process.

Some would object that even if Ahmadinejad is so irrational, willing to risk destroying Iran itself to accomplish some transcendent goal, he is not the highest political power in Iran. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the final decision maker, much more important than Iran’s President. Khamenei, too, is highly ideological, however: he shares the revolutionary goals of his predecessor, Ruhollah Khomeini, and indeed Ahmadinejad only says and does what he permits. Another problem is that, strictly

¹⁷ “Ahmadinejad at Holocaust Conference: Israel Will ‘Soon Be Wiped Out’,” *Ha’aretz*, December 13, 2006, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/800098.html>, accessed on January 20, 2009.

¹⁸ Frances Harrison, “Row over Ahmadinejad Imam Beliefs,” BBC News, February 20, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7255602.stm, accessed on January 20, 2009.

speaking, if Iran’s leaders are seeking nuclear capability they should eliminate all open uranium enrichment; boasting of such enrichment has actually raised the probability of a U.S. or Israeli attack. Western notions of rationality may not apply to the goals or strategies of Iran’s regime.

Here, then, would be the strongest reason to use any means necessary to stop Iran’s gaining the Bomb: Iran might actually deliberately start a war with it. Among the targets that could be in range of nuclear-tipped Shahab-3 missiles are U.S. soldiers and marines in Iraq, to the west, or Afghanistan, to the east. Slightly farther afield, Iran could attack American naval forces in the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean (the Fifth Fleet), or the Mediterranean Sea (the Sixth Fleet). Israel may also soon be within range. Should Iran acquire long-range missile technology from North Korea, or develop it on its own, it could eventually gain the ability to hit U.S. territory.

Objection: Iran Would Be Deterred from Attacking America or Israel

At this point many analysts would protest that Iran would never be so foolish as to attack U.S. (or Israeli) assets with nuclear weapons. Both the United States and Israel have many nuclear weapons of their own and the ability to attack Iran with them quickly. (Israel has never declared itself as a member of the nuclear club, so as not to trigger nuclear proliferation in the Middle East; but it is widely known to have the Bomb.) Were Iran to attack either country, the latter’s nuclear weapons would doubtless survive. The attacked country would then almost certainly hit Iran back with some of its nuclear force, inflicting massive loss of life and infrastructure. Reasoning backward, the virtual certainty that Iran would suffer massive nuclear retaliation should deter Iran from launching a nuclear attack on the United States or Israel to begin with. In general, nuclear weapons are so destructive that they remove the uncertainty from war: everyone knows that nuclear war would destroy their country as well as their enemy. As Ronald Reagan liked to say, “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” The upshot of what political scientists call *rational deterrence theory* is that a nuclear Iran would not be dangerous to America or its vital interests after all.

Indeed, the prominent political scientist Kenneth Waltz, who has stated the logic of nuclear deterrence clearly, goes farther and argues that nuclear weapons are a stabilizing force in international politics and their controlled spread is to be welcomed. Not only would a nuclear Iran be deterred from attacking the United States, but the United States would be deterred from attacking a nuclear Iran. The prototypical stable nuclear standoff was between America and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The two were rivals and the world seemed dangerous, but neither ever fired a shot at the other. This is not because their leaders were particularly sober or non-ideological.

One objection to Waltz’s arguments would be that it assumes that leaders are rational, and that assumption, while useful for academic analysis, may not always hold in reality. Above the rationality of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad was called into question. But rational deterrence theorists counter that the weapons themselves impose a cold rationality upon even the most unpredictable leaders. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, when the world came as close to nuclear war as it ever got, the erratic Nikita Khrushchev and the inexperienced John Kennedy saw clearly the consequences of a nuclear strike, and even of ambiguous acts that might be interpreted by the other as presaging such a strike. India and Pakistan have both had nuclear weapons since 1998 and have avoided war despite acute territorial disputes and provocative incidents. Iran’s leaders may seem irrational to Westerners, but even they are rational in matching means to ends. Khamenei and Ahmadinejad doubtless realize that destroying Iran would defeat their purposes.¹⁹

A Nuclear Iran Could Send Weapons to Terrorist Groups

Another objection to rational deterrence theory is that a nuclear Iran could transfer weapons to terrorist groups, who would then be less constrained about using them against U.S. forces or Israel. Above was mentioned Iran’s Quds Force, which supports foreign guerrillas and terrorists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. Iran has shipped thousands of rockets to the Shia-Islamist Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syria, many of which were used in the Hezbollah-Israeli war of the summer of 2006.²⁰ Hamas in Palestine is Sunni-Islamist and an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, traditionally aloof from Iran’s Shia Islamism. But Iran has cultivated relations with Hamas, pledging \$50 million to them following the Western aid cutoff of 2006. Hamas has fired Iranian-made rockets into southern Israel, although it is not clear that it bought them directly from Iran.²¹

¹⁹ For Waltz’s reasoning on nuclear deterrence see his “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” *American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (September 1990), 731-45. On the virtues of nuclear proliferation, see his sections in Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

²⁰ Charles Goldsmith, Judy Mathewson and Jonathan Ferziger, “Iran Builds Rockets to Arm Hezbollah, Deter Sanctions,” Bloomberg.com, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=aMrliCQRWnMo&refer=home>, accessed on January 23, 2009.

²¹ “Iran Supports Hamas, but Hamas Is No Iranian ‘Puppet’,” interview of Karim Sadjadpour by Bernard Gwertzman, Council on Foreign Relations, January 8, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/18159/>, accessed on January 23, 2009.

Both Hezbollah and Hamas have short-range rockets and have deliberately targeted Israeli civilians with them, despite knowing that Israel might well retaliate with devastating (conventional) force. Israel has so retaliated in both cases – against Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, against Hamas in December 2008. It is arguable that these terrorist groups are either deficient in calibrating means to ends, or so desire the destruction of Israel that they would accept the devastation of their own people as the price. Either way, the conclusion would be alarming: Hezbollah and Hamas might not shy away from a nuclear attack on Israel. Even more alarming is the possibility that Iranian nuclear weapons could end up in the hands of al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is a Sunni group and longstanding enemy of Iran’s regime; but Iran has befriended Hamas, another Sunni group, and the fluidity of Islamist networks means that al Qaeda’s acquisition of the Bomb cannot be ruled out.

Rational deterrence theory would respond that even if that were the case, Iran’s own government would not deliver nuclear weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas. Khamenei would have to fear that the weapons would be traced to Tehran, as Hezbollah rockets have been.²² (Syria would also have to cooperate in the case of Hezbollah). Furthermore, if Khamenei does not want Israel to destroy Iran in a nuclear retaliation, neither should he want Israel to destroy Gaza or southern Lebanon, both of which are valuable assets.

But here is where a second key assumption of rational deterrence theory becomes extremely important, and, for some analysts, dubious. Rational deterrence theory assumes not only that leaders are rational but also control their states’ nuclear arsenals. It asserts that states are *unitary actors*, in which information is received, judgments made, and decisions carried out as if by a single mind. We know that states are really not so simple, and many scholars argue that when it comes to nuclear weapons it is dangerous to treat them as if they were. Even the United States, with its centralized and advanced command and control systems, has had many close calls over the years concerning the accidental launch of nuclear weapons. Scott Sagan has argued that the Iranian state is more like the Pakistani than the American, more difficult to control from the political center:

There is no reason to assume that, even if they wanted to, central political authorities in Tehran could completely control the details of nuclear operations by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The IRGC recruits

²² James M. Klatell, “Hezbollah’s Rocket Science,” CBS News, July 26, 2006, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/07/20/world/main1821335.shtml>, accessed on January 22, 2009.

young “true believers” to join its ranks, subjects them to ideological indoctrination (but not psychological-stability testing), and – as the IAEA discovered when it inspected Iran’s centrifuge facilities in 2003 – gives IRGC units responsibility for securing production sites for nuclear materials.²³

When thinking about nuclear politics in the Middle East, it might be better not to envisage watertight, unitary states, but rather porous states penetrated by decentralized transnational networks, alternately decomposing and recombining, each trying to be more radical than the others. The most dangerous thing about such groups is not their beliefs but that they are often difficult to trace and punish. Seven and a half years after 9/11, the United States still has not apprehended Osama bin Laden. That failure is bound to encourage other terrorists to think that they could launch a nuclear attack on American personnel or Israel with impunity.

A Nuclear Iran Could Bluff and Intimidate America and Its Allies

Even if Iran’s leaders are rational in the academic sense and would never attack U.S. forces or Israel, it may not follow that America has nothing to fear from a nuclear Iran. In the 1960s the economist Thomas Schelling noted that the threat to use nuclear weapons might be used to coerce other states. Nuclear weapons are qualitatively different from conventional weapons not in their ability to destroy the human race – people could always have done that – but in the way they enable one country to do significant damage to another without first defeating it on the battlefield. The Bomb conveys to its owners the power to hurt an enemy quickly and cheaply.²⁴ If Iran gained the power to hurt U.S. assets or allies, then, as Schelling implies, it could in principle manipulate America by threatening to use that power. It could bluff Washington into changing its policies precisely because the risks to Washington of calling the bluff would be so high. Iran might be able to get its way without launching an attack; it might simply *threaten* to do so, and count on the risk-aversion or timidity of U.S. leaders. It could try to hasten the U.S. departure from Iraq or Afghanistan or intimidate Washington into withdrawing from the Persian Gulf. “Nuclear diplomacy” is the term analysts use for coercing another state by threatening a nuclear attack.

But under the logic of rational deterrence theory, how credible would such a bluff be? Since all sides would understand that Iran would be deterred from using nuclear weapons, would not any nuclear diplomacy likewise fail?

²³ Scott D. Sagan, “How to Keep the Bomb from Iran,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 5 (September / October 2006).

²⁴ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

Schelling and others argue that a nuclear-armed state can probably not credibly threaten to launch a nuclear strike, but it can do something more indirect and subtle. It can manipulate the risks inherent in dealing with nuclear weapons by blackmailing the other, creating a situation in which the adversary has a choice between starting a nuclear war or backing down. If two automobile drivers are playing a game of “chicken” – driving straight toward one another – one may cause the other to swerve by throwing his own steering wheel out of his window.

In October 1973 President Richard Nixon did something like this with the Soviets. To compel them not to intervene on behalf of Egypt in its war with Israel, Nixon put U.S. nuclear forces on high alert, mobilized the Strategic Air Command, the Sixth Fleet, and the 82nd Airborne Army division, and moved B-52 bombers from Guam to the United States. Nixon never threatened a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, but deliberately tried to make it difficult for the Soviets to do anything but back down. In a public statement Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s National Security Adviser, publicly mentioned the threat of nuclear holocaust several times.²⁵ The Soviets backed down.

A nuclear-armed Iran might try to treat America the way America treated the Soviet Union in 1973. It might make moves that, if countered by the United States, would make nuclear war more likely. The U.S., British, and French navies all patrol the Persian Gulf, and Iran’s navy has had several incidents with the U.S. and British navies, at one point kidnapping fourteen British sailors.²⁶ Tehran could arm naval vessels with nuclear weapons and stage an incident, forcing the United States (or an ally) to choose between making the situation still more dangerous or backing down.

If Iran had nuclear weapons, it might also be tempted to increase its support of Hezbollah, Hamas, and other terrorist groups, leading them to become more aggressive toward Israel and perhaps to attack American targets in the region. Tehran would do this knowing that any U.S. or Israeli threat to attack it would no longer be credible.

An Iran able to intimidate and harass the United States would be able, by extension, to intimidate U.S. allies such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It would simultaneously embolden its own allies Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas. It would, in short, further shift

²⁵ Barry Blechman and Douglas M. Hart, “The Political Utility of Nuclear Weapons: The 1973 Middle East Crisis,” *International Security* 7 (Summer 1982), 132-56.

²⁶ “Iran TV Shows Seized UK Navy Crew,” BBC News, March 28, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6503657.stm, accessed on January 20, 2009.

the balance of power in the Middle East from the United States to itself, with long-term consequences for America’s influence in a vital region.

A Nuclear Iran Could Trigger a Middle Eastern Arms Race

The last point about the regional balance of power stands even though Egypt and Saudi Arabia would likely not stand idly by after Iran announced its membership in the nuclear club. Nuclear proliferation tends to feed on itself. When America developed the atomic bomb in 1945, Stalin’s Soviet Union determined to do the same, and succeeded within four years. When China tested a Bomb in 1964, India followed suit in 1974. When India tested again in 1998, Pakistan followed suit within weeks. Israel has had nuclear weapons since the 1970s, but has never publicly acknowledged this because it has not wanted to force Muslim states to go nuclear as well. Should Iran possess nuclear weapons, Israel would likely publicly declare its arsenal so as to signal Iran clearly that it could not attack Israel without sustaining unacceptable damage to itself. But these two declarations would place enormous pressure on Arab states that resist the pretensions of both to respond in kind. Arabs governments see Persian Iran as a would-be usurper of the leading position in the Muslim world.

In 2006, when Iran renewed its uranium enrichment, at least six Arab states – Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia – began to pursue nuclear power programs. The announcements were striking, because all six had previously maintained that the Middle East should be a nuclear-free zone (so as to discredit Israel). The six insisted that their programs were civilian, particularly intended for water desalination. But the timing of the announcement led IAEA and other analysts feared that the six were really trying to gain the option to develop nuclear weapons.²⁷ The problems that a nuclear Iran would present, the attempts at intimidation of Israel and even the United States, the risks of inadvertent nuclear war, would be accordingly multiplied. Already the most volatile region in the world, and the most vital source of energy in the world, the Middle East would bristle with nuclear arms.

What Is To Be Done?

²⁷ Richard Beeston, “Six Arab States Join Rush to Go Nuclear,” *Times* (London), November 4, 2006, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article624855.ece, accessed on January 19, 2009.

Those who adopt the strong version of rational deterrence theory outlined above would reject any use of force by the United States to halt Iran’s nuclear program. Indeed, they might suggest that Washington offer to help Iran develop its arsenal or at least secure it once developed. The United States spent millions of dollars helping Pakistan do this with its own arsenal.²⁸

Those who believe the risks of Iranian irrationality, inability to control its arsenal, or ability to blackmail and intimidate the United States are too great will argue that President Obama must do something to halt Iran’s uranium enrichment.

Invasion

The surest way to rid Iran of any taint of a nuclear-weapons program is to invade and occupy the country. America has thousands of personnel and much hardware in Iraq and Afghanistan already, on Iran’s western and eastern borders, respectively, and air support available from several locations in the region. Although a U.S. invasion has been rumored and reportedly planned in the past,²⁹ overstretching of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the costliness of conquering the occupying Iran, seem to have taken this option off of the table.

Air Strikes

More realistic are air strikes – bombing and missile attacks – on all known Iranian nuclear sites. The efficacy of such strikes depends upon how many of Iran’s nuclear sites U.S. intelligence has identified and whether the strikes can penetrate the underground facilities. How well Washington knows Iran’s sites is secret, of course, although U.S. and Israeli commandos and predator drones have been in Iran since 2004-5. Col. Sam Gardiner (USAF – Ret.), a war-gaming expert, has put together several simulations of air attacks on Iran. One in 2006 identified 400 “aim points” (some targets have multiple “aim points”) (see Table 1).³⁰

²⁸ David E. Sanger, “Obama’s Worst Pakistan Nightmare,” *New York Times Magazine* (January 8, 2009), <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/magazine/11pakistan-t.html>, accessed on January 23, 2009.

²⁹ Hersh, “Iran Plans.”

³⁰ Reproduced from Sam Gardiner, “The End of the ‘Summer of Diplomacy’: Assessing U.S. Military Options on Iran,” The Century Foundation (2006), www.tcf.org/publications/internationalaffairs/gardiner_summer_diplomacy.pdf, accessed on January 23, 2009.

Table 1. Targets in Iran	
Initial Strikes	Follow-on Strikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuclear facilities • Military air bases • Air defense command and control • Terrorist training camps • Chemical facilities • Medium-range ballistic missiles • 23rd Commando Division • Gulf-threatening assets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Submarines ◦ Anti-ship missiles ◦ Naval ships ◦ Small boats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revolutionary Guard bases • Command and governance assets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Intelligence ◦ Military command ◦ Radio and television ◦ Communications • Security forces in Tehran • Leadership: targeted killing

Gardiner writes that the publicly known facilities could be destroyed in five days, with minimal U.S. casualties. Involved would be overflight bombing by B-2 stealth aircraft (based on U.S. territory) and B-52s and ships firing cruise missiles from a safe distance. One complication is that the uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz is “buried under more than fifteen meters [forty-five feet] of reinforced concrete and soil,” and that as time goes by Iran is reinforcing its other underground sites. Indeed, 75 of the “aim points” would require “penetrating weapons.” Seymour Hersh writes that U.S. planners have considered using tactical nuclear “bunker-busting” weapons – the B61-11 – against facilities such as Natanz.

Any direct use of force would carry high political costs. There are indications that Tehran has placed some nuclear facilities in population centers. Even if civilian casualties were low, bombing nearly always causes a population to rally around its government. In the Iranian case, the millions of youth who are weary of the Islamist regime and are relatively pro-American, who provide the promise of a more liberal and internationalist Iran for the future, would swiftly turn and support the regime against America. Farther afield, millions of the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims would become more anti-American than ever, placing pressure on friendly governments such as those of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. It would be that much harder to lure Iran’s friend Syria away. U.S. use of tactical nuclear weapons would do serious long-

term damage to America’s legitimacy; for many, the country’s reputation would have crossed a threshold from which it would be difficult to return.

Iran would doubtless respond to U.S. air strikes as forcefully as it could. It cannot bomb America in return, of course, but has a number of tools at its disposal. It could hit U.S. assets in Iraq via its strong ties with Shia militias, or even with chemical and biological weapons mounted on short-range missiles. It could wreck recent progress in reconstructing Iraq by pressing Shia parties to withdraw from the government, attacking Iraqi oil facilities, and renewing attacks on Americans and Sunni Iraqis. It has ways to cause oil prices to spike and trigger economic turmoil the world over. It could try to block the Strait of Hormuz so as to stop oil from flowing to world markets; the U.S. Navy would have to respond, but oil prices would likely spike in any case. It could strike oil fields in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar. It could encourage Hamas and Hezbollah into stepping up attacks on Israel. As is often noted, as long as its scientists remained, it could restart its nuclear program, having learned how to inoculate it from future U.S. air strikes.³¹ Gardiner writes that Washington would likely have to escalate the conflict, perhaps using further air strikes to try to topple Iran’s regime (see the column labeled “Follow-on Strikes” in Table 1). If the regime were toppled, then a weary United States would have its third regime-rebuilding task in the same region. If it were not, its hold on power may have been solidified for another generation.

Covert Action

With the probable costs of air strikes so high, are more subtle means available? It is conceivable that Washington could sabotage at least some of Iran’s nuclear facilities with special forces and recruits inside Iran. Indeed, American commandos from Iraq, as well as Israeli special forces, have evidently been operating in Iran since 2004, focusing on the northeast where Iran’s nuclear facilities are concentrated. U.S. predator drone flights over Iranian facilities commenced in 2005.³² No doubt all would prefer covert operations to air strikes, but it is doubtful that sabotage alone could end Iran’s nuclear program.

A Grand Bargain

With UN sanctions ineffective, the only non-lethal tool available to the United States appears to be some sort of bargain under which Iran agrees to abandon all uranium

³¹ Hersh, “Iran Plans.”

³² Gardiner, “‘Summer of Diplomacy,’” 10.

enrichment in return for various guarantees. Figuring out what guarantees would work involves divining precisely why Iran wants nuclear weapons to begin with.³³

With U.S. forces flanking it in Iraq to the west and Afghanistan to the east, and the memory of President Bush’s “axis of evil” address, it would be odd if Iran’s leaders did not fear a U.S. attack, and beyond that an attempt at regime change. Ironically, their nuclear quest has made such an attack more likely, but they rightly calculate that once they announce that they possess the Bomb the threats from America and Israel will fade. If Washington could assure Tehran that the regime could be secure without nuclear weapons, Tehran might accept the deal. Scott Sagan, who adamantly opposes allowing Iran the Bomb and equally adamantly believes air strikes a bad solution, calls for a bargain in which Iran gives up most uranium enrichment and opens itself to untrammelled IAEA inspections in return for American guarantees not to attack or try to topple the Islamic Republic. Ultimately a grand bargain must require Iran to cease its support for terrorism. Sagan suggests that the United States could learn from the failure of the Agreed Framework with North Korea, worked out by the Clinton administration in 1994 and later violated by Pyongyang. Pyongyang, in turn, claimed that Washington never held up its end of the bargain: it did not try to normalize relations and delayed help with civilian nuclear reactors. The lesson is that the United States must take care to abide by its agreements. But it must also make clear that if Tehran violates the agreement, it reserves the right to launch air strikes.³⁴

Would it work? Nationalistic statements from Iranian officials suggest that Iran wants not simply safety from U.S. or Israeli attack but also the prestige it imagines nuclear weapons will lend it. There are signs that Iran sees itself as the rightful leader in the Middle East. Since Israel has nuclear weapons, Iran must have them too.³⁵

But perhaps hope may be found in other, more encouraging cases of states that gave up nuclear weapons programs. South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, and Libya all once had programs at advanced stages and then ended them. Each country’s story is different, but common to all seems to have been a political decision by the government to abandon a strategy of defying what is sometimes called the international community

³³ For an extensive attempt, see Soushiant Zanganehpour and Wade L. Huntley, eds., *Iran in the World: The Nuclear Crisis in Context* (Vancouver: Simon Centre for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Research, 2008), <http://liu.xplorex.com/?p2=modules/liu/publications/view.jsp&id=2087>.

³⁴ Sagan, “Keep the Bomb from Iran.”

³⁵ E.g., Hooshang Amirhamadi, “Nuclear Geopolitics in the Middle East,” in *Iran in the World*; see also Ilan Berman, “How to Tame Tehran,” *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2004), http://www.meforum.org/article/614#_ftn1, accessed on January 24, 2009.

but might better be termed the West or U.S.-European hegemony. The West offers many material incentives – trade, investment, security guarantees – but in exchange demands democratization and human rights, market liberalization, and a forsaking of weapons of mass destruction. Admittedly, states that accept this bargain sacrifice some autonomy or international ambition; the United States, Britain, and France are not about to get rid of their nuclear weapons. But some governments have decided that international ambition is a game not worth the candle.

In the Brazilian, Argentine, and South African cases, a change in government preceded the decision to give up nuclear weapons. This, in turn, suggests that it might be best not to ask “what Iran wants,” as if Iran were a unitary rational actor, but what various Iranian factions want and how those who want to deal with the West might be encouraged and empowered. The good news is that Iran does have several reform movements, the most prominent led by former President Mohammed Khatami. U.S.-Iranian relations did improve under his Presidency (1997-2005), peaking when Iran supported the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks. Khatami and others have been sharply critical of Ahmadinejad for harming Iran’s international image. But things are not so simple. Even among young reform-minded Iranians, the nuclear program is popular. Khatami is still an Islamist who evinces little interest in acquiescing to the Western-run global order. It was under his Presidency that Iran was discovered to be secretly enriching uranium in 2002. If even Iran’s reformers want nuclear weapons, then stopping Iran from getting the Bomb will be difficult indeed.

It is crucial to keep in mind that many other countries share America’s objections to a nuclear-armed Iran, and that any grand bargain would probably have to involve some of them. Particularly important is Russia, whose crucial involvement in building Iran’s nuclear power plant at Bushehr gives it particular influence and leverage. Russia guarantees that it will supply all fuel for the Bushehr plant, and to date all fuel there has been open to IAEA inspection.³⁶ In 2006 Iran stated that in principle it accepted a more general Russian plan that would apply something like the Bushehr procedure to all of Iran’s nuclear facilities. Under the Russian plan, Iran would carry out one stage of uranium enrichment but the final conversion to fuel would be conducted in Russia by Russian personnel. The fuel would then be moved to Iran and IAEA inspectors could monitor those movements. Iran would save face, and Russia would be Iran’s exclusive

³⁶ Borzou Daragahi, “Iran, Russia Test Joint Nuclear Reactor in Bushehr,” *Los Angeles Times* (February 26, 2009), <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-iran-nuclear26-2009feb26,0,7858717.story>, accessed on March 3, 2009.

supplier of nuclear fuel. The plan, of course, would entail risks because it would leave Iran with some fuel-processing capacity.³⁷

Since 2006 these Moscow-Tehran talks have stalled, but Russian interests in the plan endure. Having a monopoly over Iran’s nuclear fuel not only would generate steady revenue for a Russia suffering from the global recession, but also would expand Russia’s influence in the Middle East. The Obama administration is doubtless contemplating not only whether the Russian proposal is trustworthy, but also whether granting Russia greater leverage over such a vital region is a price it is willing to pay to keep the Bomb from Iran.

³⁷ Lionel Beehner, “Russia’s Nuclear Deal with Iran,” Council on Foreign Relations (February 28, 2006), http://www.cfr.org/publication/9985/russias_nuclear_deal_with_iran.html, accessed on March 3, 2009.