



## The Domestic Politics of Iran's Nuclear Debate

# LEADERSHIP DIVIDED?

NIMA GERAMI





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*Nima Gerami*  
*February 2014*



## Executive Summary

THE GENEVA NUCLEAR AGREEMENT, OFFICIALLY known as the Joint Plan of Action (JPA), signed between Iran and the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, and Germany) on November 24, 2013, raised hopes that Iran's political leadership had reached a broad consensus to negotiate with the West on its controversial nuclear program. Although Iran and the P5+1 are beginning to implement the first-step agreement, it remains to be seen whether the JPA can reach its stated goal of a "mutually agreed long-term comprehensive solution" on Iran's nuclear program once the initial six-month agreement expires. Will Iran's political leadership be able to sustain internal consensus toward a credible, comprehensive solution?

This study aims to reach a better understanding of Iran's evolving nuclear debate and to analyze the views of key political leaders, policymakers, and military practitioners who may be advising the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on nuclear policy. It argues that intra-elite differences on the nuclear issue are an indicator of underlying internal divisions that could frustrate Tehran's ability to sustain a credible, long-term nuclear agreement with the West.

Notwithstanding secret bilateral discussions between Iran and the United States, which reportedly ran alongside formal Iran-P5+1 talks in 2011–2012, nuclear negotiations appeared to gain momentum only after the surprise election of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani in June 2013.<sup>1</sup> Rouhani ran on a campaign platform that promised to reduce Iran's political and economic isolation through constructive engagement with the West. Not long after Rouhani's inauguration, Khamenei signaled his support for "heroic flexibility" in diplomacy—a formulation widely interpreted as approval for Rouhani's goal of engaging the West on the nuclear issue.<sup>2</sup>

The heroic flexibility speech led some observers to wonder whether Khomeini had succumbed to the views of his chief political rival, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and agreed to compromise on the nuclear issue. Rafsanjani famously persuaded the late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1988 to accept the ceasefire that ended the Iran-Iraq War—a decision Khomeini likened to “drinking the poisoned chalice.”<sup>3</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini has since expressed his explicit support for Rouhani and urged Iranian officials to support the country’s nuclear negotiating team as it attempts to carry out the difficult task of defending Iran’s “inalienable right to enrich” while obtaining its goal of maximum sanctions relief. Yet internal criticism of Rouhani’s nuclear negotiating team and the JPA has persisted, particularly among political and religious hardliners associated with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami*, IRGC) and within the Iranian parliament (*Majlis-e Shura-ye Eslami*). Tehran’s efforts to present a unified front to the world on the nuclear issue through strategic messaging and tightened censorship have not obscured elite divisions.

A broader view of Iran’s nuclear decisionmaking suggests that fissures among the political elite are growing and that these divisions extend beyond mere tactical disagreements to fundamentally opposing views about the desired end state of the nuclear program. Although the Supreme Leader has the final say on all domestic and foreign policy issues, he governs by consensus—not by decree—through consultation with a number of advisors, whose nuclear views are explored here.

Iran’s strategic community can be divided into three groups with differing views on the nuclear program:

- those who unreservedly support Iran’s nuclear program and believe Iran has the right to develop nuclear weapons as a credible deterrent against perceived external threats (nuclear supporters)
- those who advocate permanently rolling back Iran’s nuclear program in favor of other national interests (nuclear detractors)
- those who are willing to accept temporary constraints on Iran’s uranium-enrichment-related and reprocessing activities—thereby lowering the degree of nuclear weapons latency—to end Iran’s international isolation (nuclear centrists)

The nuclear detractors have largely been sidelined from positions of power, while the supporters and centrists have been most influential in shaping Iran's nuclear policies. Khamenei has maintained a delicate balancing act between the latter two groups, but the nuclear centrists have ascended to power at times when Iran has faced internal and external pressures.

Increased politicization of the nuclear issue in recent years has exacerbated internal divisions, making it a lightning rod for a broader debate among Iran's political elite about the core tenets of the Islamic Republic and its place in the world. Personal rivalries, bureaucratic infighting, and ambiguous guidance from the Supreme Leader on the nuclear issue further compound this problem, creating a political environment that could make progress toward a long-term, comprehensive solution difficult to sustain. Differences between nuclear supporters and centrists will likely manifest themselves in the degree of nuclear latency that Iran will ultimately accept after the JPA expires. A deal with the nuclear centrists, while promising, risks allowing Iran to retain a latent nuclear capability that could complicate long-term efforts to get Tehran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

## Notes

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1. See, for example, Laura Rozen, "Three Days in March: New Details on How U.S., Iran Opened Direct Talks," *The Back Channel*, Al-Monitor.com, January 8, 2014, <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2014/01/7484/three-days-in-march-new-details-on-the-u-s-iran-backchannel/>.
2. Ayatollah Khamenei delivered the "heroic flexibility" speech at the 20th National Assembly of commanders and officials of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on September 17, 2013. For the full text of his remarks, see [http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1827&Itemid=4](http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1827&Itemid=4). An infographic on the meaning of heroic flexibility was subsequently released on Khamenei's website, [http://farsi.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/24067/B/13920701\\_0124067.jpg](http://farsi.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/24067/B/13920701_0124067.jpg).
3. The "poisoned chalice" statement appears in a confidential letter written by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1988. Rafsanjani released the letter to the public in 2006 to defend himself against political opponents who accused him of persuading Khomeini to end the Iran-Iraq War when Tehran was on the verge of victory. For the full text of the letter, see <http://www.cfr.org/iran/letter-ayatollah-khomeini-regarding-weapons-during-iran-iraq-war/p11745>.



# **LEADERSHIP DIVIDED?**



## INTRODUCTION

THE SURPRISE ELECTION OF IRANIAN president Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 occurred largely in response to mounting political and economic pressures on Tehran. In light of the disputed presidential election in 2009, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was forced to accept Rouhani as president to restore regime credibility and legitimacy. Increased international sanctions aimed at Iran's banking and energy sectors, coupled with the economic mismanagement by two-term president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), prompted Khamenei to distance himself from the confrontational policies that came to characterize the Ahmadinejad administration, and to approve Rouhani's plans to end Iran's international isolation. This policy shift was reminiscent of the diplomatic approach adopted by the reformist government of President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) when Rouhani, as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005, sought to improve Iran's ties with the West while continuing to advance its nuclear fuel cycle capabilities.

Although the pendulum of Iran's fractious politics has swung back toward a more pragmatic government under President Rouhani, it is not clear whether this shift will translate into a change in Iran's nuclear calculus. Within the first few months of his presidency, Rouhani successfully achieved a deal with the West that caps Iran's uranium enrichment levels at 5 percent for a period of six months in exchange for incremental sanctions relief. But is there sufficient political will in Tehran to reach a comprehensive solution to the nuclear standoff? The opaque nature of Iran's nuclear decisionmaking precludes an easy answer to this question. Yet a closer examination of Iran's domestic politics is necessary—perhaps now more than ever—to better understand what Tehran's changing debate will mean for resolving international concerns over Iran's nuclear program.

This study seeks to identify leading individuals who shape Iran's nuclear policies and to elucidate their views on the issue through a review of Persian-language sources, including recently published memoirs, official speeches, and press coverage.<sup>1</sup> The study does not examine the role of the public but rather focuses on the substance of the debate between and among key Iranian political actors and intellectuals. Chapter 2 examines the nature of Iran's nuclear decisionmaking, with a particular focus on the domestic repercussions of government censorship on Tehran's nuclear policies. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the dynamics of nuclear decisionmaking by identifying individuals and institutions with vested interests in Iran's nuclear program. Chapter 4 analyzes the political landscape and the elite debate on the nuclear issue. Chapter 5 discusses critical junctures that have previously led to nuclear policy shifts. Chapter 6 draws out lessons for U.S. policymakers and international partners.

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## Notes

1. For further reference, see Shahram Chubin, "The Domestic Politics of the Nuclear Question in Iran," paper presented at the Aspen European Strategy Forum, September 23, 2010, <http://aspeninstitute.de/en/publication/download/20/The+Strategic+Implications+of+the+Iranian+Nuclear+Program+%7C+Conference+Papers.pdf>; Chubin, "Iran: Domestic Politics and Nuclear Choices," in *Strategic Asia 2007-08: Domestic Political Change and Grand Strategy*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis and Michael Wills (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2007); and Farideh Farhi, "To Have or Not to Have? Iran's Domestic Debate on Nuclear Options," in *Iran's Nuclear Weapons Options: Issues and Analysis*, ed. Geoffrey Kemp (Washington, D.C.: Nixon Center, 2001), <http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/npp/nixoniranwmd.pdf>.

## LIMITS ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR DEBATE

### Secrecy and Self-Censorship

INTERNAL DIVISIONS ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR program became most apparent during the third and final debate preceding the 2013 presidential election, which focused on domestic and foreign policy. Candidates Hassan Rouhani, Ali Akbar Velayati, and Saeed Jalili openly clashed on Tehran's handling of nuclear negotiations—a discussion heretofore not observed. The debate was of special significance given the credentials of the three candidates and their close ties with the Supreme Leader: Rouhani, former chief nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005 during the Khatami administration and the Supreme Leader's representative to the Supreme National Security Council (*Shura-ye Ali-ye Amniyat-e Melli*, SNSC); Velayati, former foreign minister (1981–1997) and a longtime special advisor to the Supreme Leader on foreign affairs; and Jalili, former chief nuclear negotiator from 2007 to 2013 during the Ahmadinejad administration.

The tone of the presidential debate reached a markedly different phase. Ironically, by the end of the campaign the nuclear program became a defining political issue, even though public criticism and media coverage of the nuclear program are strictly forbidden.

#### Roots of Nuclear Censorship

As is true with most states, Iran's nuclear program is an intrinsically sensitive topic involving highly compartmented information. This is particularly the case in Iran, where a closed political system and institutional censorship on the nuclear issue create an illusion of unanimity and obscure the regime's strategic objectives. Sadeh Zibakalam, a Tehran University professor and an advisor to the Rouhani campaign, explains:

Essentially in Iran there have always existed sensitivities regarding foreign issues, and no expression of opinions against the regime's poli-

cies in this area has ever been allowed. It was the same way during the period of the Iran-Iraq War. From the beginning of the war in September 1980 to the July 1988 ceasefire after eight years of war, no press that was against the regime's entire policies in relation to the war was allowed. With regard to important statements on the nuclear issue, the same conditions exist. This means that in regard to the nuclear policies of the country, not even the smallest criticism can be written.<sup>1</sup>

The public disclosures in 2002 of Iran's undeclared nuclear facilities—a gas centrifuge enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy-water production plant at Arak—caused a “great uproar in the international media” that caught Iran's political leadership off guard.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, Rouhani, then chief nuclear negotiator, stated in a speech to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council that Iran never intended to declare its facilities to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in part for fear of “pressure from the West to deny [Iran] primary materials,” including gas centrifuge components and other equipment.<sup>3</sup>

Between 2004 and 2005, the SNSC began to issue censorship decrees in response to increased internal debate on Tehran's nuclear policies. After a widely reported disagreement between then president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani (2005–2007), the SNSC warned Iranian news agencies: “In the current situation, you must seriously refrain from publishing any material that may weaken the Supreme National Security Council or that may suggest there are disagreements over the nuclear issue.”<sup>4</sup> The SNSC continues to issue strict guidelines ahead of the quarterly publication of safeguards reports by the IAEA on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>5</sup>

After the 2002 revelations heightened public scrutiny of Iran's nuclear program, members of the Iranian parliament (*Majlis-e Shura-ye Eslami*) increasingly voiced criticism of the government's “self-created security halos,” claiming that the people's representatives were excluded from decisionmaking and that Tehran ignored concerns about the economic feasibility of the nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> According to Mohsen Mirdamadi, former chairman of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, IAEA inspectors visited the nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak before parliamentary leaders were even made aware of their existence or able to send their own visiting delegation.<sup>7</sup> The nuclear facilities were apparently funded secretly outside the Majlis's normal budgetary process. Majlis members of both reformist and conser-

vative tendencies have also criticized the fact that parliamentary leaders and expert committees have been kept uninformed about the details of nuclear negotiations.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, Majlis members lashed out at Rouhani's nuclear negotiating team, led by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, for not informing them of progress in the Geneva nuclear talks, which were being kept confidential.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Zarif's use of Facebook and Twitter to engage directly with the West is seemingly at odds with internal compartmentation on the nuclear issue and regime censorship controls, which block social media applications. Yet while Zarif's use of these platforms has received widespread attention in the West, this public outreach is part of a regime-approved messaging campaign that is directed to an external—not internal—audience.<sup>10</sup> Despite Rouhani's promise to "reduce the security atmosphere in Iran" by decreasing media and Internet restrictions, as of this writing the government continues to shut down newspapers, block social media applications including Facebook and Twitter, and has announced plans to set up a committee to issue work permits to reporters who receive government approval.

### Domestic Repercussions of Censorship

The penalty for breaking Iran's code of silence on the nuclear issue is severe: critics have been branded "seditionists" and many have been imprisoned. A particularly noteworthy example was the arrest in May 2007 of Seyed Hossein Mousavian, former spokesman for Khatami's nuclear negotiating team, then headed by Rouhani. Mousavian lamented publicly that "referral of the nuclear dossier to the UN Security Council created problems [for Iran]," and that the Iranian government should have taken steps to prevent escalation of the dispute.<sup>11</sup> His abrupt arrest sent a clear warning to Ahmadinejad's political adversaries that criticism of Tehran's nuclear policies came with a price. Achieving elite consensus on the nuclear issue can be difficult in a system where high-ranking officials have fallen prey to their own government censors.<sup>12</sup>

Another cost of censorship is that few people are apprised of the full scope of Iran's nuclear program, policy, and plans. Decisions are made in secret and details are only selectively leaked to the press. Ahmad Shirzad, deputy speaker of the sixth Majlis (2000–2004), observes:

[The] country's reformists, politicians, and intellectuals have only paid attention to nuclear issues since 1381 [2002].... Most responsible offi-

cials and those informed were unaware of what was going on. Even the vice-presidents, ministers, and, I may even dare say, the president himself were not aware of what was going on.<sup>13</sup>

In his 2011 Persian-language memoir *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, Rouhani describes how, as chief nuclear negotiator, he and his negotiating team often had little choice but to deduce what the position of the political system would be on certain issues given the lack of consensus, bureaucratic disarray, and uncertainty about the Supreme Leader's guidance.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of a lack of access, knowledge, and an overall culture of secrecy, internal critics have generally refrained from expressing their views on Tehran's nuclear policies.<sup>15</sup> These conditions discourage serious thinking within the political leadership about the proliferation and safety risks associated with a nuclear program. They also prevent discussion of the role of nuclear weapons, their appropriate employment, and command-and-control issues should the Supreme Leader decide—at some later date—to cross the threshold and develop nuclear weapons.

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## Notes

1. Sadeq Zibakalam, "Zaroorat-e Raf-ye Mamnooyat-e Zhar-e Nazar-e dar Barnameh-ye Hasteh'i" (The Necessity of Removing the Ban on Statements on the Nuclear Program), *Khabar Online*, June 11, 2013, <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/298014/weblog/zibakalam>.
2. Hassan Rouhani, "Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA concerning the Nuclear Dossier," text of speech delivered to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, *Rahbord* (Tehran: Center for Strategic Research, 2005), pp. 7–38, [http://www.iranwatch.org/sites/default/files/rahbord-rohani-093005\\_1.pdf](http://www.iranwatch.org/sites/default/files/rahbord-rohani-093005_1.pdf). Seyed Hossein Mousavian, former spokesman for Khatami's nuclear negotiating team, similarly states in his memoir that Iran's official assessments circa 2003 "did not anticipate the emergent crisis or broad-based international consensus" against Iran's nuclear program, due in part to bureaucratic infighting. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), pp. 75–76.
3. Hassan Rouhani, "Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA concerning the Nuclear Dossier," text of speech delivered to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, *Rahbord* (Tehran: Center for Strategic Research, 2005), pp. 7–38, [http://www.iranwatch.org/sites/default/files/rahbord-rohani-093005\\_1.pdf](http://www.iranwatch.org/sites/default/files/rahbord-rohani-093005_1.pdf).

4. Hamed Alavi, "New National Security Resolution to Censor the Press," *Rooz Online*, October 28, 2007, <http://www.roozonline.com/english/news3/newsitem/article/new-national-security-resolution-to-censor-the-press-1.html>.
5. See, for example, "Iranian Regime Instructs Press on How to Report on Nuclear Issue and Iraq," Middle East Media Research Institute, *Special Dispatch* no. 1899, April 16, 2008, [http://www.memri.org/report/en/print2731.htm#\\_ednref3](http://www.memri.org/report/en/print2731.htm#_ednref3).
6. "Iranian MP Proposes Nuclear Energy Policy Rethink," *Yas-e Now*, December 8, 2003, accessed via BBC Monitoring.
7. "Iran: Paper Analyzes Stance of Key Political Forces on Nuclear Crisis," *Shargh*, September 20, 2004, accessed via BBC Monitoring.
8. For example, in 2003 Elahe Kulai, a member of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, criticized Rouhani, then chief nuclear negotiator, for keeping Majlis deputies uninformed about the details of Iran's nuclear negotiations and the scope of government plans to build nuclear power plants. See "Majlis Deputy Calls for Explanations on Iran's Nuclear Negotiations, Activities," Mehr News Agency, December 4, 2003, accessed via BBC Monitoring.
9. "Emza-ye 150 Namayandeh Pae Nameh Eteraz be Moharamaneh Bodan-e Mozakarat-e Hasteh'i" (The Signature of 150 Majlis Representatives Protecting the Confidentiality of Nuclear Talks), *Namayande News*, January 21, 2014, <http://washin.st/1c490es>.
10. Zarif is the only sitting Iranian official who has publicly verified his personal use of Facebook and Twitter. At the 2013 Davos World Economic Forum, Rouhani told reporters that his "friends" write his online postings. See Martin Baron and Anne Gearan, "Iranian President Rouhani Says 'Friends' Write His English-Language Tweets, Facebook Posts," *Washington Post*, January 23, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iranian-president-rouhani-says-his-friends-write-his-english-language-tweets-fb-posts/2014/01/23/b3b37e7a-8427-11e3-8099-9181471f7aaf\\_story.html?hpid=z4](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iranian-president-rouhani-says-his-friends-write-his-english-language-tweets-fb-posts/2014/01/23/b3b37e7a-8427-11e3-8099-9181471f7aaf_story.html?hpid=z4).
11. Y. Mansharof, "Iranian Domestic Criticism of Iran's Nuclear Strategy," Middle East Media Research Institute, *Inquiry & Analysis Series Report* no. 317, January 24, 2007, [http://www.memri.org/report/en/print1810.htm#\\_ednref7](http://www.memri.org/report/en/print1810.htm#_ednref7).
12. In addition, Shahin Dadkhah, a former member of Khatami's nuclear negotiating team and an advisor to the Supreme National Security Council, was among those arrested by the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security on charges of espionage. He remains in Evin Prison.

13. "Iranian MP Criticizes Nuclear Chief's Diplomacy," Iranian Labour News Agency, March 3, 2006, accessed via BBC Monitoring.
14. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh'i* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), 3rd ed. (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istiratizhik, 2011), pp. 435, 449–451, 455–456.
15. Reformist journalist Ahmad Zeidabadi notes: "This enables the Iranian regime to present all political factions—including those who criticize it and oppose it inside Iran—as supporting [the effort] to attain nuclear fuel cycle [capabilities] at any price—and some of the international analysts repeat this view." See "Iranian Reformist Website: The Regime Is Trying to Silence Internal Dissent regarding Iran's Nuclear Program," Middle East Media Research Institute, *Special Dispatch* no. 1127, March 29, 2006, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print1649.htm>.

## CONTEXTUALIZING NUCLEAR DECISIONMAKING

### The Key Stakeholders

NUCLEAR DECISIONMAKING IN IRAN IS complicated in part by the various government institutions involved in the program and the bureaucratic challenges that this presents. Stakeholders in Iran's nuclear program often advocate different approaches based on their vested interests and varying degrees of influence on policy outcomes. The decentralized nature of the political system makes it difficult to reconcile divergent viewpoints, which at times have paralyzed decisionmaking and derailed Iran's nuclear negotiations with the West. As Rouhani writes:

If internal differences exist, we cannot negotiate with foreigners from a position of strength.... Internal divisions not only make decisionmaking more difficult, but also reduce the West's confidence in [negotiations].<sup>1</sup>

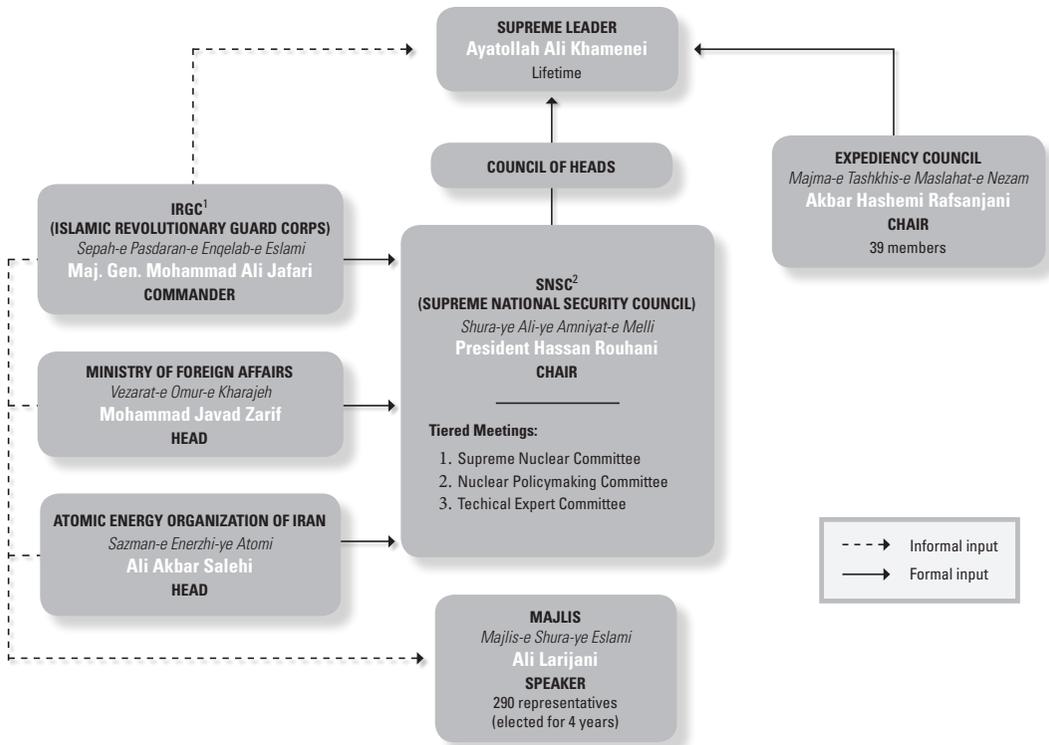
In addition, Rouhani has described bureaucratic challenges as Iran's "biggest failure," stating that Iran "still does not have an appropriate decisionmaking structure in the country."<sup>2</sup> He explains, for example, how interference of the sixth Majlis (2000–2004) in nuclear talks prevented the Khatami administration from reaching an agreement with the EU-3 (Britain, France, and Germany); it was not until the seventh Majlis (2004–2008) ascended to power that Iran was able to conclude the Paris Agreement in November 2004.<sup>3</sup> Bureaucratic infighting likewise created tension that complicated Tehran's response to the nuclear crisis that emerged in late 2002.<sup>4</sup> After the IAEA Board of Governors adopted a resolution calling on Iran to suspend "all further uranium enrichment-related activities" in September 2003, the Supreme Leader decided that one person—Rouhani—should be entrusted with authority on "all issues involving the nuclear case" and its relevant stakeholders.<sup>5</sup>

## Decisionmaking Structures

The process for approving and implementing Iran's nuclear policies is similar to that for other national security issues, although the Supreme Leader—around whom decisionmaking is concentrated—relies on input from a small, restricted group of individuals. These individuals are situated within the Supreme National Security Council (*Shura-ye Ali-ye Amniyat-e Melli*, SNSC), Expediency Council (*Majma-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Vezerat-e Omur-e Kharajeh*, MFA), Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (*Sazman-e Enerzhi-ye Atomi*, AEOI), Majlis, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami*, IRGC), and Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (*Vezerat-e Defa va Poshtibani-ye Niruba-ye Mosallah*, MODAFL). Although the IRGC is subordinate to the MODAFL, which was established to create a unified command-and-control structure for Iran's armed forces, IRGC officers, including current defense minister Brig. Gen. Hossein Dehghan (Ret.), have long overseen the MODAFL. See figure 1 for an approximate depiction of Iran's nuclear decisionmaking chain.

The SNSC is Iran's highest formal decisionmaking body responsible for determining and coordinating the country's defense and security policies. Article 176 of the Iranian constitution, amended in 1989, charges the SNSC with "preserving the Islamic Revolution, the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of the Islamic Republic."<sup>6</sup> The secretariat of the SNSC assumes responsibility for planning and overseeing Iran's nuclear strategy by collecting intelligence from all state institutions involved in the nuclear program and creating consensus for the implementation of policies. Formal members of the SNSC include: the heads of the three branches of government (executive, judiciary, and legislative); the chief of the Supreme Command Council of the armed forces; the officer in charge of planning and budget affairs; two representatives nominated by the Supreme Leader; the ministers of foreign affairs, interior, and intelligence and national security; a minister whose responsibilities relate to the subject (e.g., on the nuclear issue, the head of the AEOI); and the highest ranking officials from the regular armed forces and the IRGC.<sup>7</sup> See table 1 for a list of formal SNSC members.

All decisions made by the SNSC are presented to the Supreme Leader to solicit his approval for policy implementation. As chair of the SNSC, the president presides over the various subcommittees of the council or can delegate responsibility to another member. On the nuclear issue, Rouhani has described decisionmaking as taking place at four different levels:



## NOTES

1 The IRGC is subsumed under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, but MODAFL is not formally represented in the SNSC.

2 See table 1 for a list of formal members on the SNSC.

FIG. 1 Overview of Nuclear Decisionmaking in Iran

1. **COUNCIL OF HEADS:** a meeting of the highest political officials of the country where all major strategic decisions are made<sup>8</sup>
2. **SUPREME NUCLEAR COMMITTEE** (*Komiteh-ye Ali-ye Hasteh'i*) of cabinet-level ministers: meetings are held at the secretariat of the SNSC and attended by the Supreme Leader<sup>9</sup>
3. **NUCLEAR POLICYMAKING COMMITTEE:** meetings are also held at the SNSC secretariat at the level of deputy ministers of relevant organizations<sup>10</sup>
4. **TECHNICAL EXPERT COMMITTEE:** headed by a Foreign Ministry executive and comprising various subject matter experts to consider the technical and legal dimensions of the nuclear issue<sup>11</sup>

While the SNSC advises Khamenei on nuclear policy, other institutions provide input to the SNSC and, in separate channels, to the Office of the Supreme Leader (*Daftar-e Maqam-e Moazam-e Rahbari*). The IRGC provides a representative to the SNSC and has direct access to the Supreme Leader that allows it to exert considerable influence on nuclear decisionmaking. The MFA and AEOI meanwhile provide input to the SNSC on legal, technical, and scientific issues concerning the country's nuclear program and represent Iran in various international organizations, including the IAEA.

Conversely, the Majlis is one of the few institutions that do not provide direct input to either the SNSC or the Supreme Leader. On paper, the Majlis has the ability to influence nuclear policies and related arms control commitments through its powers over the annual budget as well as by drafting legislation, ratifying international treaties and agreements, confirming or impeaching cabinet ministers, and interpellation—issuing formal questions that the government is required to answer.

TABLE 1 Formal Members of the Supreme National Security Council\*

HEAD OF EXECUTIVE	Hassan Rouhani
HEAD OF JUDICIARY	Sadegh Larijani
HEAD OF LEGISLATIVE	Ali Larijani
CHIEF OF SUPREME COMMAND COUNCIL OF THE ARMED FORCES	Maj. Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi
HEAD OF PLANNING AND BUDGET AFFAIRS	Mohammad Nobakht
COMMANDER OF THE REGULAR ARMED FORCES	Maj. Gen. Ataollah Salehi
COMMANDER OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS	Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS	Mohammad Javad Zarif
MINISTER OF INTERIOR	Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli
MINISTER OF INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY	Mahmoud Alavi
HEAD OF ATOMIC ENERGY ORGANIZATION OF IRAN	Ali Akbar Salehi
SUPREME LEADER REPRESENTATIVE I AND SUPREME NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL SECRETARY	Rear Adm. Ali Shamkhani
SUPREME LEADER REPRESENTATIVE II	Saeed Jalili

\* The composition of SNSC meetings is fluid; participants are determined by constitutional mandate (Article 176) in accordance with the views of the Supreme Leader, the Council of Heads, and the president.

In practice, however, the Majlis has acted more as a forum for policy debates and less as an independent branch of government involved in the nuclear decisionmaking process.<sup>12</sup> Most notably, before the 2002 public disclosures, the construction of the gas centrifuge enrichment facility at Natanz and heavy-water production plant at Arak was conducted in secret for nearly eighteen years without the Majlis being informed or a budget being appropriated from its Planning and Budget Committee. And while the Majlis must in theory ratify all international treaties and agreements under Article 77 of the constitution, the SNSC has previously sidelined the Majlis by voluntarily implementing the IAEA Additional Protocol (2003–2006) as a confidence-building measure without seeking Majlis approval. The SNSC also bypassed the Majlis during the conclusion of the Paris Agreement in 2004 and the Joint Plan of Action in 2013 by classifying the agreements as memoranda of understanding rather than as international treaties.<sup>13</sup>

Another institution that has a less formal role in shaping nuclear policy is the Expediency Council, which serves as an advisory body to the Supreme Leader and exerts supervisory authority over the three branches of government.<sup>14</sup> The council, headed by former president Rafsanjani, comprises nearly forty members appointed by the Supreme Leader. Although the Expediency Council derives its power largely from the Supreme Leader, it provides Rafsanjani a forum to wield political influence, as well as the authority to form special committees, arbitrate legislative disputes, draft policy, and, in some cases, enact laws.<sup>15</sup>

In parallel with formal government institutions are an array of quasi-governmental institutions and research centers that inform the broader nuclear debate, provide independent analysis to the Supreme Leader, and serve as back channels for Iranian diplomacy.<sup>16</sup> The Office of the Supreme Leader coordinates these informal networks and bypasses normal bureaucratic channels to assert control over Iran's formal and informal decisionmaking networks. An estimated two thousand representatives of the Supreme Leader (*nemayandeha-ye rahbar*), who are personally appointed or approved by Khamenei, are placed in every major state institution.<sup>17</sup> These "clerical commissars" report directly to the head of the Office of the Supreme Leader, Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, who decides which information to pass on to Khamenei. The Office of the Supreme Leader also selects and advises the Friday prayer imams in each city, who propagate the Supreme Leader's messages to the Iranian people.

## Vested Interests vs. Relative Influence

Iranian state institutions that are responsible for various aspects of the nuclear program make policy recommendations based on organizational interests and bureaucratic politics. The AEOI's technical-scientific leadership, for example, has been generally opposed to any cessation of nuclear activities, which represents a threat to the organization's prestige and funding. It is both technically demanding and costly for the AEOI to restart centrifuges once they have been halted; enrichment suspension also affects retention of nuclear scientists. The IRGC has a vested interest in maintaining the nuclear program because it is responsible for Iran's chemical, biological, and ballistic missile programs and would likely have operational control of any potential military aspects of Iran's nuclear program.<sup>18</sup> IRGC engineering and construction companies, as well as its front companies involved in illicit procurement activities, further contribute to the IRGC's financial incentive to advance Iran's nuclear fuel cycle capabilities.

However, not all formal and informal state institutions have equal influence on Tehran's nuclear policies. The IRGC's unique mandate to protect the Islamic Republic and export the revolution has allowed it to increase its influence in nearly every facet of the Iranian government, including in the military, economic, and political spheres. The IRGC's physical control of nuclear sites strengthens its influence in nuclear decisionmaking, though the Supreme Leader and Rouhani have warned the IRGC not to interfere in the country's politics.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the IRGC and AEOI are widely regarded as the strongest advocates for expanding Iran's nuclear capabilities without constraints.<sup>20</sup>

Rouhani's transfer of the nuclear file from the SNSC to the Foreign Ministry in October 2013 raised the ministry's status and its role in the nuclear decisionmaking process.<sup>21</sup> In an interview with Mehr News Agency, Foreign Minister Zarif explained that the SNSC would continue to set Iran's nuclear policy but that the MFA would determine the methods and level of negotiations.<sup>22</sup> This increased authority affords the MFA broader insight into Iran's nuclear activities, allowing the ministry to take more proactive approaches in the conduct of nuclear negotiations, rather than defending the activities of other Iranian state institutions.

Internal jockeying for influence on the nuclear issue has often led to bureaucratic tensions. The Majlis has long sought to co-opt the Foreign Ministry's approach to nuclear negotiations in an effort to increase its own

involvement in nuclear decisionmaking.<sup>23</sup> Press reports suggest that the MFA ignored the Majlis's request to send a representative from its National Security and Foreign Policy Committee to the Geneva talks in order to increase its oversight of the nuclear program.<sup>24</sup> In response, the Majlis summoned Zarif to explain his meeting in New York with U.S. secretary of state John Kerry, which the Supreme Leader characterized as a "misstep."<sup>25</sup>

The Majlis has repeatedly questioned the legality of the Joint Plan of Action, claiming that the Foreign Ministry should have sought parliamentary approval before signing the agreement. Since Rouhani took office, the Majlis has required a record twelve out of eighteen state ministers, including Zarif, to appear before the parliament to answer questions.<sup>26</sup> The Majlis has also drafted legislation to increase uranium enrichment levels to 60 percent for nuclear-powered submarines should the U.S. Congress pass additional sanctions against Iran.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

1. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh'i* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), 3rd ed. (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istitratizhik, 2011), pp. 60–61.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
4. Rouhani and Mousavian describe disagreements between the MFA and AEOI on how to deal with the public disclosures of Iran's clandestine nuclear activities in 2002: the MFA "believed the situation would have severe consequences" for Iran, but the AEOI did not. See Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh'i* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), 3rd ed. (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istitratizhik, 2011), p. 62; and Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), pp. 75–76. Moreover, Rouhani states on pp. 55–56 of his text cited above that the lack of "national consensus" and an incoherent decisionmaking system in Iran often led to "confused political behavior."
5. According to Rouhani, "it was suggested that all issues involving the nuclear case be placed under one person's authority and that person's orders be mandatory for all organizations related to the case.... Eventually, the system's high-ranking officials in one of their meetings decided that I should undertake this responsibility." Mehdi Mohammadi, "Nuclear Case from Beginning to

- End in Interview with Dr. Hassan Rouhani (Part 1): We Are Testing Europe,” *Kayhan*, July 26, 2005, p. 2, [http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2012/08/Rowhani\\_Interview.pdf](http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2012/08/Rowhani_Interview.pdf).
6. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, amended July 28, 1989, Article 176.
  7. *Ibid.*
  8. Very little is publicly known about the Council of Heads, otherwise known as the leaders of the system (*nezam*), but it is believed to be responsible for developing broad guidelines to be implemented by agencies or ministries on highly sensitive matters, including the nuclear issue. In October 2003, the Council of Heads decided to designate Rouhani, a council member, as Iran’s first chief nuclear negotiator. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh’i* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), 3rd ed. (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istiratizhik, 2011), p. 139; and Mehdi Mohammadi, “Nuclear Case from Beginning to End in Interview with Dr. Hassan Rouhani (Part 1): We Are Testing Europe,” *Kayhan*, July 26, 2005, pp. 2–3, [http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2012/08/Rowhani\\_Interview.pdf](http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2012/08/Rowhani_Interview.pdf).
  9. The composition of the Supreme Nuclear Committee is at the discretion of the Council of Heads. In 2003, members of the committee included the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, the Supreme Leader’s special advisors on foreign affairs, the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and intelligence, and the head of the AEOI. The Majlis speaker was later invited to attend meetings. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh’i* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), 3rd ed. (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istiratizhik, 2011), pp. 95–96.
  10. For additional background, see Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh’i* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), 3rd ed. (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istiratizhik, 2011), pp. 107–114.
  11. *Ibid.*
  12. Bobi Pirseyedi, *Arms Control and Iranian Foreign Policy: Diplomacy of Discontent* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 25. See also Farideh Farhi, “Constitutionalism and Parliamentary Struggle for Relevance and Independence in post-Khomeini Iran,” in *The Rule of Law, Islam, and Constitutional Politics in Egypt and Iran*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand and Nathan J. Brown (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), pp. 138–139.
  13. “Geneva Deal Doesn’t Need MPs’ Nod,” IRIB World Service, November 27, 2013, <http://english.irib.ir/news/iran1/item/169604-‘geneva-deal-doesn’t-need-mps’-nod’>. Interestingly, Iran justified its unilateral decision in March 2007 to suspend implementation of the modified “Code 3.1” of its safeguards agreement

by claiming that the Majlis had never ratified its subsidiary arrangements, which specify when a state must report a new nuclear facility to the IAEA. See, for example, James M. Acton, “Iran Violated International Obligations on Qom Facility,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Proliferation Analysis*, September 25, 2009, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/09/25/iran-violated-international-obligations-on-qom-facility/3cyt>; and Nima Gerami and James M. Acton, “What Else Is Iran Hiding?” *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2009, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/09/28/what-else-is-iran-hiding/3njm>.

14. According to Article 112 of the constitution, the Expediency Council’s mandate is to advise the Supreme Leader and mediate disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council (*Shura-ye Negabban-e Qanun-e Assasi*)—the jurists who determine whether laws are consistent with sharia.
15. The Expediency Council deduces legislative power from Article 110 of the constitution and has enacted a number of laws since 1989, although the Majlis has sought to curtail this power. In terms of the legislative process, any bill passed by the Majlis must be reviewed and approved by the Guardian Council before it can be signed by the president. If the Guardian Council vetoes the bill and the Majlis rejects its objections, then the bill may be forwarded to the Expediency Council, which has the final say. See Silvia Tellenbach, “The Principle of Legality in the Iranian Constitutional and Criminal Law,” in *The Rule of Law, Islam, and Constitutional Politics in Egypt and Iran*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand and Nathan J. Brown (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), pp. 104–105.
16. Important research centers include the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations, the Majlis Research Center, the Expediency Council’s Center for Strategic Research, and the Foreign Ministry’s think tank, the Institute for Political and International Studies. Khamenei established the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations a year after Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005 to facilitate the country’s decisionmaking processes and develop new foreign policy approaches.
17. Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2000), pp. 47–48.
18. According to the unclassified version of the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), Iran’s nuclear weapons program was halted in fall 2003. See “Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,” November 2007, [http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/20071203\\_release.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/20071203_release.pdf). Consistent with the 2007 NIE, the IAEA judges that a suspected nuclear weapons program known as the AMAD Plan “was stopped rather abruptly pursuant to a ‘halt order’ instruction issued in late 2003” but that some of the program’s activities were resumed later by Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a senior

- IRGC officer who now leads the Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research. IAEA, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran," GOV/2011/65, November 8, 2011, p. 6, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>.
19. Mehdi Khalaji, "President Rouhani and the IRGC," *PolicyWatch* 2189 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 8, 2014), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/president-rouhani-and-the-irgc>.
  20. Jerrold D. Green, Frederic Wehrey, and Charles Wolf Jr., *Understanding Iran* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), pp. 56–60.
  21. "Vezerat-e Omur-e Kharajeh Masoul Anjam-e Mozakarat-e Hasteh'i Shod" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Became Responsible for the Nuclear Talks), Fars News Agency, September 5, 2013, <http://www.farsnews.com/printable.php?nn=13920614000665>.
  22. "Avaliyat-e Iran Tablavar Iradeh Hal Masaleh dar Muzakareh ba P5+1 ast" (Iran Will Define Priority Issues in Negotiations with the P5+1), Mehr News Agency, August 26, 2013, <http://www.mehrnews.com/TextVersionDetail/2132390>.
  23. Ali Larijani in 2009 said the Majlis would increase its supervisory role over the nuclear negotiations and "only authorize talks within the legislative-bodies framework." See "Iran Sets Framework for Nuclear Talks," Press TV, April 12, 2009.
  24. "Darkhast-e Majlis Bara-ye Hozor yek Namayنده dar Tim-e Mozakarehkonnandeh-ye Hasteh'i Taknoon Ajabat Nashodeh ast" (The Request of the Majlis to Send a Representative to the Nuclear Negotiating Team Has Not Yet Been Answered), Young Journalists Club, October 13, 2013, <http://washin.st/1btA496>.
  25. "Zarif: Makalameh-ye Rouhani ba Obama va Didar-e Tolani-ye Man ba John Kerry Nabaja Bood" (Zarif: Rouhani's Telephone Conversation with Obama and My Long Meeting with Kerry Were Missteps), *Kayban News*, October 8, 2013.
  26. "Zanganeh, Chitchiyan, va Ghazezadeh beh Majlis Ahzar Shodand" (Zanganeh, Chitchiyan, and Ghazezadeh Were Summoned to the Majlis), Fars News Agency, January 23, 2014, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921103000290>.
  27. "Tarh Alzam-e Dolat beh Ghanisazi Shast Darsad Taqdeem Hiyat-e Ra'is-e Majlis Shod" (The Necessary State Plan for Enriching to 60 Percent Went before the Head Majlis Council), Fars News Agency, January 13, 2014, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921004000784>.

## THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

### Elite Factionalism and the Nuclear Debate

IRAN'S NUCLEAR POLICIES ARE NEITHER clear nor consistent, but nuclear decisionmaking is often reduced in public discussion of the topic to differences between hardliners and reformists. Iran's nuclear politics does not fall neatly into these camps, however, and reformists are particularly divided on how to approach the issue. Prominent leaders of Iran's Green Movement (*Jonbesh-e Sabz*), such as Mir Hossein Mousavi, who protested the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, have expressed support for Iran's nuclear program and rejected the imposition of constraints, while other reformists emphasize the costs of advancing the program. The nuclear program is a national security issue that cuts across political lines; indeed, some of Iran's most sensitive nuclear activities were carried out during the reformist Khatami administration.

A closer examination of Iran's nuclear politics illustrates that elite divisions on the nuclear issue are inextricably linked to differing threat perceptions, domestic political calculations, and debate about the evolution of the Islamic Republic and its place in the world. Fundamentally, Iranian officials disagree about how to define Iran's national security interests, the desired end state of the nuclear program, and the best ways to pursue the country's strategic objectives. Although the Supreme Leader ultimately has the final say on all domestic and foreign policy issues, he governs by consensus—not by decree—through consultation with a number of advisors. Iran's strategic community can be divided into three groups with differing views on the nuclear program.<sup>1</sup> These groups do not directly coincide with divisions of Iran's political landscape, though there are degrees of overlap.

1. Nuclear supporters. Those who unreservedly support Iran's nuclear program and believe Iran has the right to develop nuclear weapons as a credible deterrent against perceived external threats.
2. Nuclear detractors. Those who advocate permanently rolling back Iran's nuclear program in favor of other national interests.
3. Nuclear centrists. Those who are willing to accept temporary constraints on Iran's uranium-enrichment-related and reprocessing activities—thereby lowering the degree of nuclear weapons latency—to end Iran's international isolation.

### Nuclear Supporters: Strength through Deterrence

Nuclear supporters claim that Iran's strength is derived from defying international norms. According to this view, the West imposes its will on Iran through international laws and institutions. Iran is, therefore, at its strongest when it possesses the capability to deter perceived external threats through the use of force. Nuclear supporters believe that a credible deterrent, however loosely defined, is necessary to ensure Iran's security and political status.

While nuclear supporters tend to fall on the conservative end of the political spectrum with constituencies in the IRGC and AEOI, influential nuclear supporters also exist in the Expediency Council, SNSC, and Majlis. Among the most prominent individuals are IRGC commander Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari; IRGC deputy commander Brig. Gen. Hossein Salami; the Supreme Leader's representative to the IRGC and former head of the IRGC's Political Bureau Brig. Gen. Yadollah Javani; Basij commander Brig. Gen. Mohammad Reza Naqdi; former IRGC commander Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi; Expediency Council secretary Mohsen Rezaei; AEOI head Ali Akbar Salehi; leading reformist strategist and former Khatami advisor Saeed Hajjarian; former Majlis representative and head of the Judiciary's Human Rights Council Mohammad Javad Larijani; SNSC secretary and former defense minister Rear Adm. Ali Shamkhani; Kayhan editor-in-chief and Khamenei confidant Hossein Shariatmadari; former chief nuclear negotiator and SNSC secretary Saeed Jalili; spiritual leader and Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi; and a host of conservative Majlis members.

Nuclear supporters adopt a maximalist position on the nuclear issue and justify the program in terms of the need to protect Iran from regional

nuclear powers, including Israel, Pakistan, and India.<sup>2</sup> Ali Shamkhani, as defense minister from 1997 to 2005 under the Khatami administration and in his current role as SNSC secretary, called for national unity on the nuclear issue to deter Iran's adversaries: "We should not give the people permission to get off the revolutionary train. We are a minority in the region and in the world and we should not forget that we are bounded together."<sup>3</sup>

Mohammad Javad Larijani, a close advisor to Khamenei, also framed the nuclear issue in terms of deterrence and defense planning:

From a defensive point of view, it makes no sense for our enemy to have nuclear weapons while we deprive ourselves of these weapons... We must not accept the massive wave of Western propaganda, which tries to suggest that nuclear capability is a negative value. We have a certain and indisputable right to possess nuclear weapons. After all, the countries in our region all have nuclear weapons. Israel possesses nuclear weapons, and because of this, no one has a right to deprive us of the possession of these weapons.<sup>4</sup>

Nuclear supporters claim that the West has used the nuclear issue to advance its political agenda, seek the overthrow of the Islamic Republic, and prevent Iran from making advances in science and technology. The Supreme Leader's representative to the IRGC, Yadollah Javani, wrote in 2012 that the West uses Iran's peaceful nuclear activities as an excuse to threaten military action and "beat the drum of war."<sup>5</sup> Nuclear supporters believe that challenging the West on the nuclear issue demonstrates Iran's ability to resist threats to its sovereignty.<sup>6</sup>

Since the nuclear program is seen as central to projecting Iranian power in the region and abroad, nuclear supporters do not feel that they should be held accountable to the Iranian people. They are opposed to holding a national referendum on the nuclear program and consider any debate on the issue to be tantamount to treason. For example, reformist strategist Saeed Hajjarian, in a widely publicized debate with former interior minister Abdollah Nuri in 2012, argued that the Iranian people were in a "comatose state" that prevented them from voting on an issue as important as the country's nuclear program.<sup>7</sup> The notion that the average Iranian is uninformed and unable to make educated decisions about national security issues is a common argument that nuclear supporters use to justify the lack of transparency surrounding Iran's nuclear decisionmaking. Some nuclear supporters have also criticized their political opponents for leaking sensitive information to the public. During the 2013 presidential campaign, Saeed

Jalili's campaign deputy reportedly accused Rouhani of disclosing classified information in his memoir about previous nuclear negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

Skepticism of nuclear diplomacy is a longstanding theme for nuclear supporters. In 1998, then IRGC commander Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi delivered a speech to IRGC officers in Qom emphasizing that diplomacy with the West alone would not protect Iran's national interests.<sup>9</sup> In his book *The Islamic Revolution: A Surge in Political Changes in History* (2005), Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, spiritual advisor to former president Ahmadinejad, writes:

The most advanced weapons must be produced inside our country even if our enemies don't like it. There is no reason that [our enemies] have the right to produce a special type of weapon, while other countries are deprived of it.<sup>10</sup>

Nuclear supporters repeatedly criticize nuclear negotiations with the West for failing to defend Iran's national interests and its "right to enrich."<sup>11</sup> They claim that, while Iran may change its negotiating tactics, the desired end state of the nuclear program remains constant.<sup>12</sup> Among nuclear supporters, the Supreme Leader's "heroic flexibility" speech was widely interpreted as a means for Iran to buy time to further its nuclear capabilities.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, nuclear supporters claim that Iran must remain vigilant against Western efforts to undermine Iran in the negotiations.<sup>14</sup> The Supreme Leader has publicly intervened and urged this group to support Rouhani's nuclear negotiating team after several senior military officers, including IRGC commander Ali Jafari and the Supreme Leader's representative to the IRGC Yadollah Javani, criticized the negotiations.<sup>15</sup> In further asserting their antagonism toward negotiations with the West, nuclear supporters have called for continuing to chant "Death to America" (*Marq bar Amrika*) during official ceremonies.<sup>16</sup>

### Nuclear Detractors: Strength through Normalization

Unlike nuclear supporters, detractors claim that prolonged conflict over Iran's nuclear program will lead to the country's increased isolation and economic downfall. Harsh international sanctions, according to this group, are a direct result of Tehran's unwillingness to reach a nuclear agreement with the West. Nuclear detractors question the practical need for civilian nuclear energy and whether the costs of the program outweigh its potential benefits.

Many nuclear detractors have been sidelined from positions of power in both

the current administration and in former administrations, making this group the least influential of the three, though it has enjoyed more support after the public disclosures of Iran's clandestine nuclear activities in 2002. Nuclear detractors are primarily represented by a small subset of reformists (though not all reformists are necessarily nuclear detractors) drawing support from academics, former or retired government officials, and Majlis members, particularly those affiliated with the outlawed Islamic Iran Participation Front (*Jebhe-ye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Eslami*, IIPF) and the Organization of the Mujahedin of the Islamic Revolution of Iran (*Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Eslami-ye Iran*).<sup>17</sup> Prominent nuclear detractors include IIPF members Ahmad Shirzad; Reza Khatami, brother of former president Mohammad Khatami; Seyed Ahmad Azimi, former deputy chairman of the Majlis Energy Committee; Elahe Kulai, member of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee; Abdollah Nuri, former interior minister, and his deputy Mostafa Tajzadeh; and Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, former spokesman for the Khatami administration.

Nuclear detractors claim that the nuclear program does not promote Iran's national security interests and has made the country less secure by subjecting it to foreign pressure. They view the nuclear issue as a strict cost versus benefit calculation, rather than in terms of nationalism or deterrence. This group defines Iran's national interests as having broader contours than the nuclear issue and is willing to give up sensitive nuclear capabilities to pursue other national interests, such as addressing the country's deteriorating economy.

The IIPF has consistently challenged the utility of a civilian nuclear infrastructure in Majlis proceedings, cautioning that the program "could lead Iran into isolation or even war."<sup>18</sup> Prominent IIPF member Ahmad Shirzad has voiced some of the most explicit criticisms of the program:

Contrary to its claims, the regime is secretly preparing to produce weapons of mass destruction... This whole issue has turned into a point of weakness for the country, and the foreign powers are using it to exert pressure on us. In other words, instead of generating power and strength for Iran, the nuclear issue has only weakened it.<sup>19</sup>

Nuclear detractors have challenged whether Iran has a scientific or technical need for nuclear energy, a premise they say Iranians have not questioned since the deposed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi began building nuclear power plants with assistance from the United States in the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> In 2003, IIPF member Reza Khatami, in a speech to the Majlis, challenged the pur-

pose of a civilian nuclear energy program and urged the Majlis to weigh its costs and benefits.<sup>21</sup> Mohsen Renani, an economist at the University of Isfahan, has contended most recently that Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant would supply less than 3 percent of the country's total energy needs and that the Karun Dam in Iran's southwestern province of Khuzestan could generate more electricity.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, nuclear detractors claim that the government's current policies are responsible for increased sanctions and Iran's economic turmoil. They underline the negative impact that the government's nuclear stance has had on the Iranian people by denying them access to global markets and creating economic insecurity.<sup>23</sup> In a 2008 panel debate, former spokesman for the Khatami administration Abdollah Ramezanzadeh questioned whether continuing the nuclear program was a sound decision for Iran given the increasing costs of sanctions.<sup>24</sup> According to nuclear detractors, there is no economic solution to the current economic crisis because the economy is trapped by Iran's nuclear "dead-end policies."<sup>25</sup>

Nuclear detractors promote transparency and accountability to the Iranian people on the nuclear issue. In 2012, Iran's former interior minister Abdollah Nuri urged the Iranian government to hold a nuclear referendum—a historic reference to the referendum that founded the Islamic Republic in 1979—to determine whether the people believed it was in Iran's national interests:

Have we ever thought that the approach of the West to [Iran's] nuclear program is similarly a trap to hurt Iran? If so, our decisionmaking strategy must aim at saving the country, not sacrificing all of our national interests for the nuclear program...we must not underestimate the [resulting] difficulties for the people's lives, and allow one issue, although very important, to threaten all of our national interests.<sup>26</sup>

Conservatives and reformists in the nuclear supporters camp immediately rejected Nuri's call for a nuclear referendum. Conversely, nuclear detractors supported Nuri's position that Iranian officials had a constitutional duty to consult experts and the Iranian people on the future of the nuclear program.

### Nuclear Centrists:

#### Normalize and Deter

Nuclear centrists underscore the need to solve Iran's nuclear standoff with the West through diplomacy while increasing Iran's ability to confront per-

ceived threats through deterrence. Iran, according to this group, can leverage international treaties and agreements to “convert threats into opportunities.”<sup>27</sup> Yet nuclear centrists will only drink from the “poisoned chalice” and make concessions on national security issues when faced with extreme pressure that threatens regime survival.

Nuclear centrists currently constitute the majority of the Rouhani administration. Because they tend to possess deep expertise on the nuclear issue, mainly as former nuclear negotiators or Foreign Ministry officials involved in diplomatic efforts, nuclear centrists appear authoritative in discussing matters concerning Tehran’s nuclear program and its policies. Prominent nuclear centrists include President Rouhani; Expediency Council chairman and former president Rafsanjani; former foreign minister and foreign policy advisor to the Supreme Leader Ali Akbar Velayati; Foreign Minister Zarif; former spokesman for Khatami’s nuclear negotiating team Seyed Hossein Mousavian; Majlis speaker and former chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani; Tehran University professor and Rouhani campaign advisor Sadegh Zibakalam; and former president Mohammad Khatami.

Nuclear centrists claim they can reduce sanctions while continuing to advance the country’s nuclear fuel cycle capabilities. Rouhani promoted this message during the 2013 presidential campaign, stating: “It is good to have centrifuges running, provided people’s lives and livelihoods are also running.”<sup>28</sup> According to Foreign Minister Zarif, international sanctions “are creating pressure on the [Iranian] people but this will not result in major political changes” or concessions during Iran’s nuclear negotiations with the West.<sup>29</sup> Ali Akbar Velayati described nuclear negotiations as necessary for safeguarding Iran’s national interests: “The art of diplomacy is to preserve [our] nuclear rights, not to see sanctions increase.”<sup>30</sup>

This group seeks to prove to the West that Iran’s nuclear program is exclusively peaceful through confidence-building measures and appeals to rationality (*mantiq*). Nuclear centrists believe Iran’s nuclear objectives can be achieved by exploiting political differences between the European Union (EU-3) and the United States. Rouhani in his memoir claimed that divisions between the EU-3 and the United States over the Iraq war presented a “point of hope” for laying the groundwork for nuclear negotiations.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Iran preferred to negotiate with the EU-3 because the Europeans “believed that the path of discussion, debate, and understanding was the most logical path to solving all these issues.”<sup>32</sup>

Nuclear centrists, like nuclear supporters, believe that Iran has a “right to enrich” but should be “flexible” about how it interacts with the West on other aspects of the nuclear program. As Expediency Council member and cultural advisor to the IRGC Mohammad Hossein Saffar Harandi stated in a Friday prayer speech, “Maneuvering to solve international problems is certainly acceptable within the framework of the system.”<sup>33</sup> This sentiment is exemplified in the Foreign Ministry’s new strategy under Rouhani to normalize relations with the West while attempting to create gaps between Europe and the United States in order to break international consensus and avoid increased sanctions on Iran.<sup>34</sup>

Nuclear centrists appear to support accountability to the Iranian people on the nuclear issue but do not publicly advocate steps that could diminish Iran’s nuclear opacity and increase transparency. Rouhani, for example, claimed that there were no opponents to holding a referendum on continuing uranium enrichment during the last months of the Khatami administration but that it was not a realistic goal in light of political turnover associated with the 2005 presidential election.<sup>35</sup>

## Notes

1. Similar terminology has been used to describe India’s nuclear politics. See, for example, Stephen P. Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), pp. 182–184; and Kantai Bajpai, “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *Pugwash Meeting* no. 279, November 15–17, 2002, <http://www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/bajpai.htm>.
2. Mehdi Firuzkuhi, “Nuclear Weapons in the National Security Interest of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Ya Lesarat al-Hoseyn*, January 25, 2006, accessed via BBC Monitoring; and “Iran: Editorial Says Nuclear Weapons Best Deterrence against Nuclear Powers,” *Jomhori-ye Eslami*, November 8, 2003, accessed via BBC Monitoring.
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5. Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, “IRGC Publication: Is the Revolutionary Guard after War?” *Iran Pulse*, Al-Monitor.com, October 12, 2012, <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2012/10/482/ircg-publication-is-the-revolutionary-guard-after-war/>.

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9. Safavi's remarks were first reported in *Jamee*, April 27, 1998.
10. Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji, *Nuclear Fatwa: Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy*, Policy Focus 115 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 2011), p. 20.
11. Morteza Tamadon, a former Majlis deputy, said in reference to Rouhani's nuclear negotiating team under Khatami: "When they were in charge of policy, all our nuclear activity was suspended...and we lost all the golden opportunities." Saeed Barzin, "Analysis: Iranian Politicians Struggle with Nuclear Policy," BBC Monitoring, October 15, 2007.
12. Brig. Gen. Mohammad Esmail Kowsari, former IRGC commander and a member of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, underlined that Rouhani's efforts to reach a nuclear deal are "only in the tactical arena and not in the system's broader policy." "Esmail Kowsari dar Goftogoo ba *Etemaad*" (Kowsari in an Interview with *Etemaad*), September 24, 2013, <http://www.etemaad.ir/Released/92-07-02/204.htm>.
13. For example, Basij commander Mohammad Reza Naqdi claimed that the purpose of negotiations with the West was "to buy time for Iran to build a nuclear bomb." "Moaza-ye Hasteh'i-ye Jomhori-ye Eslami az Zaban-e Namayandeh Vali Faqaiyeh dar Sepah" (The Islamic Republic's Nuclear Position in the Words of the Supreme Leader's Representative to the IRGC), *Kayhan*, September 11, 2013, <http://washin.st/1iU2h8L>.
14. "IRGC Official: 'Death to U.S.' Slogan Unchangeable," Fars News Agency, November 2, 2013, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13920811001503>.

15. Yadollah Javani called the negotiations a “big mistake.” See “Javani dar Goftogoo ba Fars” (Javani in an Interview with Fars), Fars News Agency, October 6, 2013, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920714000573>. Ali Jafari praised Rouhani’s September 24 speech at the UN General Assembly but said it was a “tactical mistake” for Rouhani to have spoken with U.S. president Barack Obama. “Makalmeh-ye Telefoni Biyad Ba’d Az Aqdamat-e Amlī-ye Amrika Mokool Mishod” (The Telephone Conversation Should Have Been Postponed until after America Took Concrete Steps,” Tasnim News Agency, October 10, 2013, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/154227>.
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21. Safa Haeri, “Iran’s Rulers Strongly Criticised by Ahmad Shirzad,” Iran Press Service, November 24, 2003, [http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles\\_2003/Nov-2003/shirzad\\_majles\\_speech\\_241103.htm](http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles_2003/Nov-2003/shirzad_majles_speech_241103.htm).
22. Mohsen Renani, *Iqtasadi-ye Siasi-ye Munaqshe-ye Atomi-ye Iran* (The Political Economy of Iran’s Nuclear Dispute) (Tehran, 2013), pp. 72–73. A copy of Renani’s book was submitted to several senior officials, including Ayatollah Khamenei, but publication of his book was apparently not authorized. Renani released the book on his website at [http://www.renani.ir/Assets/Files/The\\_Political\\_Economy\\_of\\_Iran\\_Nuclear\\_Dispute.pdf](http://www.renani.ir/Assets/Files/The_Political_Economy_of_Iran_Nuclear_Dispute.pdf).
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that have deprived Iran from access to cheaper and higher quality markets, consuming billions of dollars of our valuable resources each year.” Saeed Laylaz, “Dignified Compromise,” *Shargh*, November 22, 2004, accessed via BBC Monitoring.

24. “Manazareh Hasas Fazaeli va Ramazanzadeh” (Special Debate between Fazaeli and Ramezanzadeh), *Farda News*, June 14, 2008, [www.fardanews.com/fa/print/53977](http://www.fardanews.com/fa/print/53977).
25. Mohsen Renani, *Iqtasadi-ye Siasi-ye Munaqshe-ye Atomi-ye Iran* (The Political Economy of Iran’s Nuclear Dispute) (Tehran, 2013), p. 8.
26. “Abdollah Nuri: Manaqsheh-ye Hasta’i-ye Iran be Referendum Gozashteh Shod” (Abdollah Nuri: Iran’s Nuclear Dispute Should Be Put to Referendum), Radio Farda, July 12, 2012, [http://www.radiofarda.com/content/o2\\_nouri\\_iran\\_nuclear\\_reformists/24642379.html](http://www.radiofarda.com/content/o2_nouri_iran_nuclear_reformists/24642379.html).
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30. Marcus George, “Khamenei’s Diplomatic Adviser Velayati Eyes Iran’s Presidency,” Reuters, June 12, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/12/us-iran-election-velayati-idUSBRE95B09420130612>.
31. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh’i* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), 3rd ed. (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istiratizhik, 2011), pp. 132–134. See also Hassan Rouhani, “Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA concerning the Nuclear Dossier,” text of speech delivered to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, *Rahbord* (Tehran: Center for Strategic Research, 2005), pp. 7–38, [http://www.iranwatch.org/sites/default/files/rahbord-rohani-093005\\_1.pdf](http://www.iranwatch.org/sites/default/files/rahbord-rohani-093005_1.pdf); and Kazem Gharibabadi, “Barnameh-ye Hasteh’i-ye Iran Vaqhaytha-ye Asasi” (Basic Facts on Iran’s Nuclear Program) (Tehran: Markaz-e Chap-e va Intesharat-e Vazarat-e Amor-e Kharaji, Fall 2009), pp. 161–162.
32. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh’i* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), 3rd ed. (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istiratizhik, 2011), p. 570.

33. “Avaleen Vakanesh beh Sha’ar ‘Marg bar Amrika’ dar Namaz-e Jama’eh Pas Az Goftogoo-ye Rouhani va Obama” (First Reactions to “Death to America” Slogans at Friday Prayers after Rouhani’s and Obama’s Speeches), Iranian Students News Agency, October 4, 2013, <http://washin.st/1eYNYPM>.
34. Rouhani describes this strategy as “creating gaps in the Western front.” In an October 2013 meeting with the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Zarif similarly stated that Iran would drive a wedge between the United States and Israel “by utilizing the opposing views within the United States” and taking advantage of Israel’s vulnerabilities in multilateral diplomatic fora. See Steven Ditto, “Rouhani’s Negotiating Strategy: Divide and Isolate,” *PolicyWatch* 2153 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 9, 2013), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rouhanis-negotiating-strategy-divide-and-isolate>.
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## CRITICAL JUNCTURES

### Internal Divisions and Nuclear Policy Shifts

THE LACK OF ELITE CONSENSUS on the nuclear issue has forced Tehran to periodically reappraise its nuclear strategy. These policy shifts affect Tehran's willingness to engage with the West on the nuclear issue. There is historical precedent for Iran changing its course on national security issues when the consequences of continuing such policies have threatened regime survival. In a speech to IRGC commanders in 1988, Rafsanjani portrayed Iran's decision to end the war with Iraq as a strategic move that demonstrated Iran's flexibility and the spirit of the Islamic Revolution. The Supreme Leader's speech to IRGC commanders in 2013 similarly emphasized "heroic flexibility" in diplomacy and urged military leaders not to criticize Rouhani's nuclear negotiating team.

Nuclear supporters, detractors, and centrists influence nuclear policy to varying degrees, depending on which group is in power and its proximity to the Supreme Leader. Nuclear centrists have traditionally exerted the greatest influence when Iran is faced with increased internal and external pressures, whereas nuclear supporters have ascended to power when these threats receded. Nuclear detractors have never enjoyed influence equal to the centrists and supporters, primarily because they have been cast out or marginalized from the system as a result of political infighting.

At the height of their power, nuclear centrists brokered the most significant shift in Tehran's nuclear policy before the Joint Plan of Action—the decision to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment in the Tehran Joint Declaration announced in October 2003 by the Iranian government and the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and Germany.<sup>1</sup> With the centrists' return to power, Iran is again facing a decision point on whether to make meaningful concessions on its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. The Supreme Leader has empowered the nuclear centrists to reach a deal with the West to lift sanctions, improve the deteriorating economy, and preserve regime stabil-

ity. But will the nuclear centrists be able to withstand internal criticism from nuclear supporters and detractors and sustain progress toward a final comprehensive solution? The following section examines previous nuclear policy shifts and illustrates the difficulty of sustaining elite consensus.

### Decision to Suspend Uranium Enrichment

Internal divisions among Iran's political elite on the nuclear issue first emerged in 2002 after the public disclosures of its clandestine nuclear activities. Some Iranian officials feared that the revelations would lead to increased sanctions or military action against Iran, particularly given U.S. military forces in the region and the impending U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. These fears influenced Tehran's decision to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment and sign the IAEA's Additional Protocol in 2003, which allowed for more intrusive inspections of Iran's nuclear program. The 2002 revelations prompted Iran's rival political factions to consider the nuclear program's costs and centrality to the regime's strategic objectives. This period also marked the emergence of the nuclear detractors, particularly in the Majlis, although the group did not gain momentum until 2011, when concerns about sanctions and nuclear safety increased.

Nuclear centrists gained considerable political clout during this period because the Supreme Leader entrusted them with preventing the referral of Iran's nuclear file to the UN Security Council. The Supreme Leader authorized Rouhani, then secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), to defuse the crisis by devising a new framework for nuclear diplomacy. By exploiting political differences between the European Union and the United States over the Iraq war, Iran was able to leverage both sides in the nuclear negotiations and prevent escalation of the crisis.

The centrist influence began to wane, however, when Khamenei set red-lines for Rouhani and his negotiating team about direct engagement with the United States, for reasons to be explained shortly. The Supreme Leader's decision to resume uranium conversion activities at Isfahan, despite Rouhani's warning that this decision would cause Iran's referral to the Security Council, further weakened the centrists' influence on Iran's nuclear policies and caused Rouhani's negotiating team to lose credibility with the West.

### Decision to Resume Uranium Conversion

The Supreme Leader's decision to resume uranium conversion activities at Isfahan and thereby nullify the terms of the 2004 Paris Agreement marked the ascent of Iran's nuclear supporters. By the end of the Khatami admin-

istration, changing geopolitical circumstances and internal power shifts prompted Tehran to change its nuclear calculus. With U.S. military forces preoccupied in Iraq, the threat of U.S. military action against Iran began to recede. Tehran assessed that the United States was in a weakened position and unable to stop Iran from dominating Iraq and advancing its nuclear program. Meanwhile, conservatives in Iran gained control of the Majlis and began to criticize the reformists for allying themselves with the United States.

Iran's nuclear file was referred to the UN Security Council at the same time that Iranian conservatives began to consolidate power in the executive branch and Majlis. The election of President Ahmadinejad in June 2005 ushered in a new era of populist, anti-Western policies. Between 2005 and 2010, Ahmadinejad used the nuclear issue as an instrument of partisan politics—with the Supreme Leader's support—to stigmatize his opponents. A string of cabinet-level resignations ensued, including that of then SNSC secretary Ali Larijani and foreign minister Manoucher Motaki, for a total of nine cabinet changes during the first three years of the Ahmadinejad administration. Iranian officials with deep expertise on the nuclear issue criticized Ahmadinejad's brash defiance of the West and handling of negotiations. Gholam Reza Aqa Zadeh, then head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, stated that he had many differences with Ahmadinejad about the handling of Iran's nuclear file before resigning in 2009.<sup>2</sup>

As internal criticisms over Ahmadinejad's nuclear and foreign policies increased, the SNSC issued additional censorship decrees and tightened media restrictions. Yet the nuclear debate continued as international sanctions exacerbated the economic costs of continued defiance.

### 2009 Election Crisis and the Tehran Research Reactor Proposal

Nuclear supporters began to lose momentum after the disputed reelection of Ahmadinejad in June 2009 and the regime's resulting legitimacy crisis. In response to widespread protests, Iran imprisoned thousands of reformists and carried out mass show trials. IRGC officers and diplomats reportedly began to defect, accusing the government of corruption and deceit.<sup>3</sup> According to one senior IRGC officer, the Supreme Leader's fatwa against nuclear weapons was "a sheer lie."<sup>4</sup> Nuclear centrists also began to criticize Ahmadinejad for economic mismanagement and his perceived role in isolating Iran from the international community.

Ahmadinejad attempted to save face by supporting a deal brokered by the nuclear centrists with the West to refuel the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), a five-megawatt thermal light-water research reactor that produces medical isotopes. The United States supplied the TRR to Iran in 1967 as well as weapons-grade uranium fuel for the reactor, but cut off any further fuel supplies after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In 1987, Iran paid Argentina's Applied Research Institute (INVAP) to convert the TRR's fuel from 93 percent enriched uranium to slightly less than 20 percent low-enriched uranium (LEU) and to provide the LEU fuel to Iran. The reactor has been operating at a lower capacity on a diminishing supply of Argentine LEU since 1993.<sup>5</sup>

After an initial meeting held in Geneva in October 2009 with France, Russia, and the United States, the Ahmadinejad administration agreed "in principle" to ship out 1,200 kg (then nearly 80 percent) of Iran's LEU stockpile in exchange for fuel for the TRR.<sup>6</sup> When the details of the agreement became public, nuclear centrists, motivated in part by their opposition to Ahmadinejad, voiced concerns about the TRR deal and ultimately derailed talks with the IAEA. The chairman of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, denounced the TRR deal, claiming that the Majlis was "completely opposed to the proposal."<sup>7</sup> Khamenei also reversed his support for the deal, warning that the U.S. negotiators were "hiding a dagger behind their backs."<sup>8</sup> The perception that Iran was negotiating from a position of strength after suppressing postelection unrest in 2009 contributed to this shift in Iran's nuclear calculus.

In a last ditch effort to save the deal, the nuclear centrists in May 2010 proposed a new TRR fuel swap in a Joint Declaration signed by Iran, Turkey, and Brazil.<sup>9</sup> The proposal was derailed by Iran's refusal to commit to limiting uranium enrichment to less than 20 percent, a level it had reached shortly before the Joint Declaration was announced, in violation of previously binding UN Security Council resolutions. By 2011, the Supreme Leader had distanced himself from Ahmadinejad and his nuclear policies as a result of Iran's deepening power struggle and attempts by Ahmadinejad to expand his executive authority.<sup>10</sup>

### Calls for a Nuclear Referendum

Nuclear detractors increasingly voiced criticism of Iran's nuclear program during the final two years of the Ahmadinejad administration, when fears

about nuclear safety and Iran's deteriorating economy led to an unlikely coalition between Ahmadinejad's conservative and reformist opponents. In March 2011, the massive earthquake and tsunami that led to the meltdown of Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant raised concerns in Iran and worldwide about the safety risks of nuclear energy.<sup>11</sup> As a result of the Fukushima disaster, some nuclear detractors began to reframe the issue in terms of the Iranian people's right to live in a safe, nuclear-free environment.<sup>12</sup>

Given the actual and potential costs of the nuclear program to Iranian citizens, nuclear detractors argued that the public should have a say in shaping Tehran's nuclear policies. However, calls for a national referendum on the nuclear issue in 2012 were strongly opposed by both conservatives and reformists.

### Renewed Diplomatic Engagement with the West

The June 2013 presidential election marked the reemergence of nuclear centrists as a political force in Iran and a new period of diplomatic engagement with the West. Faced with mounting economic pressure and the need to reestablish the government's legitimacy following the disputed 2009 election, the Supreme Leader was forced to allow Rouhani's victory in 2013. Rouhani's election was widely viewed as a sign that Tehran was willing to change its nuclear course: Iranian editorials suggested that the election represented a public "referendum on the nuclear issue" and a rejection of the previous administration's policies.<sup>13</sup> Former AEOI head Gholam Reza Aqa Zadeh praised Rouhani for his "transparent and logical" approach to the nuclear issue, claiming that Iran had reached a decision point and needed to reenter serious negotiations with the West.<sup>14</sup>

Rouhani's focus, both during the campaign and as president, has primarily been on fixing Iran's economy by resolving the nuclear standoff. Within the first few months of his presidency, Rouhani reframed the nuclear crisis as a political issue rather than a security dilemma by transferring the nuclear file to the Foreign Ministry and appointing technocrats to important cabinet positions. He launched a diplomatic offensive abroad, promised to increase political freedoms at home, and attempted to obtain broad domestic support for constructive engagement with the West.

Rouhani's agenda was met with skepticism and resistance, as nuclear supporters began to denounce the negotiations. Rouhani urged Iranian officials to support the negotiations, underlining that it would take time to

reverse sanctions. In an appeal to the Majlis, he asked lawmakers to refrain from criticizing the negotiations for at least “between six months and a year.”<sup>15</sup> IRGC commander Ali Jafari initially praised Rouhani’s speech at the UN General Assembly and his diplomatic initiatives in New York, but later criticized the high-profile phone call between Rouhani and U.S. president Barack Obama as a “tactical mistake.”

Khamenei also implicitly criticized Rouhani for speaking with Obama, claiming that some of Rouhani’s actions were “inappropriate.”<sup>16</sup> Despite this criticism, Khamenei has come to the defense of Rouhani’s nuclear negotiating team by warning Iran’s political elite not to undermine nuclear talks: “No one should consider our negotiators as compromisers; they are our children and the children of the revolution. They have a difficult mission, and no one should seek to weaken an official who is on duty.”<sup>17</sup>

On November 24, Rouhani sent a public letter to Khamenei soliciting his approval for the deal, claiming: “The clear results of this initial agreement include the formal recognition of the nuclear rights of Iran” and halting “the process of imposing oppressive sanctions.”<sup>18</sup> In a taciturn reply, Khamenei expressed cautious support for the diplomatic efforts, emphasizing that “resistance against avarice should always be the main standard in the forward movement for the officials in charge of this sector.”<sup>19</sup> Other Iranian officials, including those who have previously criticized nuclear negotiations, have fallen in line with Khamenei by expressing support for Iran’s negotiating team yet remain pessimistic about the value of engaging with the West. As Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Ibrahim Aqa Mohammadi has stated, negotiations were “undertaken with the protection and guidance of the Supreme Leader. So our pessimism must not be towards the team of Iranian negotiators, but towards the Western side.”<sup>20</sup>

Internal consensus in Iran on the nuclear issue remains fragile. The nuclear centrists have sought to emphasize the limitations of the Joint Plan of Action to assuage concerns of the Supreme Leader and the nuclear supporters. Days after the interim agreement was signed in Geneva, Foreign Minister Zarif announced, “Enrichment is an inseparable part of [Iran’s] nuclear program. None of the nuclear facilities will be shut down.”<sup>21</sup> He added, “All of our confidence-building actions and commitments are reversible, and we can undo them in a matter of a few weeks,” despite Iran’s agreement not to make further advances at Natanz, Fordow, and Arak.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

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1. For the full text of the agreement, see “Statement by the Iranian Government and Visiting EU Foreign Ministers,” October 21, 2003, [http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iaeaيران/statement\\_iran21102003.shtml](http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iaeaيران/statement_iran21102003.shtml).
2. “Aqazadeh dar Goftogoo ba IRNA” (Aqazadeh in an Interview with IRNA), Islamic Republic News Agency, July 2, 2013, <http://www.irna.ir/html/1392/13920411/80720650.htm>.
3. The names, ranks, and professional associations of whistle-blowers and defectors are often kept anonymous to avoid risking life or security. Many have reportedly been arrested or disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Among those defectors publicly identified after the 2009 election protests are: Mohammad Reza Heydari, counsel-general of Iran to Norway, granted asylum in February 2010; Farzad Farhangian, press attaché at the embassy of Iran in Brussels, Belgium, defected in September 2010; Hossein Alizadeh, deputy head of the embassy of Iran in Helsinki, Finland, granted asylum in October 2010; Lt. Behzad Masoumi Legwan, Iranian air force, defected in November 2010; Ahmad Hashemi, Foreign Ministry interpreter, defected in June 2012; Hassan Golkhanban, presidential photographer, defected in October 2012; Mohammad Hossein Torkaman, Basij officer, defected in 2010; and Brig. Gen. Mohammad Reza Madhi, IRGC officer. Madhi appeared in a documentary aired on Iranian state TV in June 2011 and was described as a “double agent” tasked with infiltrating Iranian opposition abroad.
4. “Nameh-ye Yeki Az Sardaran-e Akhraj-i-ye Sepah beh Mohammad Nurizad” (Letter from a Dismissed IRGC Commander to Mohammad Nurizad), July 7, 2012, <http://Nurizad.info/?p=19306>.
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7. Fredrik Dahl and Hossein Jaseb, “Senior Iran MPs Reject UN Atom Fuel Plan,” Reuters, October 31, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/10/31/us-iran-nuclear-mp-idUSTRE59U0I420091031>.
8. Farhad Pouladi and Jay Deshmukh, “Khamenei Says U.S. ‘Hiding a Dagger’

in Talks with Iran,” Agence France-Presse, November 3, 2009, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gS\\_YG7DFPgQewQXAWQzpXHTpPvkw?hl=en](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gS_YG7DFPgQewQXAWQzpXHTpPvkw?hl=en).

9. For the full text of the agreement, see “Joint Declaration by Iran, Turkey and Brazil,” May 17, 2010, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/joint-decl.pdf>.
10. For more background, see “The Iranian Power Struggle and Its Implications for the Nuclear Crisis,” Institute for Science and International Security, June 2, 2011, <http://www.isisnucleariran.org/reports/detail/the-iranian-power-struggle-and-its-implications-for-the-nuclear-crisis/>.
11. Ahmad Shirzad, “Westerners’ Atomic Escape,” *Shargh*, June 15, 2011, accessed via BBC Monitoring; and Golnaz Esfandiari, “Exiled Iran Religious Scholar Calls for Debate on Nuclear Safety,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 31, 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/interview\\_exiled\\_iran\\_religious\\_scholar\\_debate\\_nuclear\\_safety/3542999.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/interview_exiled_iran_religious_scholar_debate_nuclear_safety/3542999.html).
12. Hasan Yousefi Eskehvari, “Mardom-e Iran Biyad Az Tanbiyeh Dogoon-e Tahrirha Najat Peyda Konand!” (The Iranian People Must Find Sanctions Relief from Two-Sided Punishments), August 15, 2013, <http://yousefieshkevari.com/?p=3898>.
13. “Piroozii-ye Rouhani va Sarnevesht-e Mozakarat-e Hasteh’i” (Rouhani’s Victory and the Fate of the Nuclear Talks), Radio Zamaneh, June 15, 2013, <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/76566>.
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## CONCLUSION

### Lessons Learned

SPURRED BY ROUHANI'S ELECTION, internal consensus on the nuclear issue may have yielded success in Geneva, but Iran's political elite remains sharply divided. The Joint Plan of Action (JPA) demonstrated that neither the nuclear supporters nor the centrists are willing to forfeit Iran's uranium enrichment activities; both groups have claimed that the agreement was a "victory" for Iran because it forced the West to acknowledge Iran's "inalienable right" to pursue such activities. Yet nuclear supporters and centrists have different end goals for the program and conflicting ideas about how to attain them. Whereas the nuclear supporters seek to develop a credible deterrent based on their belief that military power will ensure Iran's status in the region, the centrists attempt to balance Iran's economic and political demands with the need to maintain a latent nuclear capability.

The Supreme Leader has gravitated between these two groups, depending on domestic pressures and geopolitical circumstances. Backed by Khamenei, Rouhani has a limited "window of opportunity" to prove that engagement with the West can successfully ease economic pressure on Iran. Yet the Supreme Leader remains guarded in his endorsement of the negotiations and is careful not to alienate nuclear supporters who form his power base. This delicate balancing act is evident in Khamenei's speeches, in which he lauds the negotiating team as "children of the revolution" while warning about the dangers of trusting the United States, the "smiling enemy."

Although it is difficult to predict whether the nuclear supporters will return to the top of Iran's constellation of power, it is clear that the centrists have remained ascendant when Iran has faced increased pressure and have been sidelined when these threats have faded. Maintaining pressure on Iran through existing sanctions is critical to reaching a long-term agreement that addresses concerns about the possible military dimensions of Iran's

nuclear program—an issue that is not explicitly included in the Joint Plan of Action. If the goal of the JPA is to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, then Iran’s decisionmakers will need to reach an internal consensus on the desired end state for negotiations. The differences between the nuclear supporters and the centrists will likely manifest themselves in the degree of nuclear latency Iran will ultimately accept after the JPA expires. The prospect of such a deal may appear promising, but the risks of providing economic benefits to Iran, while allowing it to retain a latent nuclear capability, could complicate long-term efforts to get Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

## About the Author

NIMA GERAMI is a research fellow in the Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction at the National Defense University. A specialist on Iran and its nuclear program, he lectures at NDU and regularly serves as a guest instructor at senior service schools and other professional military education venues. Prior to joining NDU, he was a research assistant and editor in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and, from 2003 to 2007, served as an assistant to the executive director of the Office of International Affairs at the University of Connecticut. His publications have appeared in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Guardian*, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, and the *New Republic*. He holds a master's degree in government from the Johns Hopkins University.

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