

# Iran and Weapons of Mass Destruction

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Mar 4, 1998

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



## Brief Analysis

**D**espite the recent focus on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Iran poses a greater long-term threat to U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf. Iran possesses a large chemical weapons (CW) arsenal consisting primarily of first generation (World War I era) agents, and it is believed to have a nerve gas research and development program which it has been expanding since the revelations about the Iraqi CW program after the Persian Gulf War. Iran has also produced short-range ballistic missiles capable of reaching across the Gulf, and it is seeking a capability to produce medium-range ballistic missiles capable of reaching Israel and beyond. Iran is suspected of having an active biological weapons (BW) research program and a small BW stockpile. It is believed that this program was accelerated in 1995 after the revelations about the Iraqi BW program.

> The Iranian nuclear weapons program is thought to be in its early stages. It is focused upon developing indigenous nuclear expertise through a legitimate civilian power program and developing a clandestine fissile material production capability. While there is no "smoking gun" regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions, there is extensive circumstantial evidence that Iran is actively seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. Iran has the motive, it has an unnecessary, extremely expensive, civilian nuclear energy program, and it has a clandestine program to illegally purchase dual-use nuclear weapons equipment through "front-companies" in Western Europe.

### Why Does it Matter?

U.S. vital interests are at stake in the Persian Gulf, and WMD allow Iran the opportunity to attack each of the pillars on which the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf rests—very capable and expensive military forces, the political will to keep these forces deployed abroad, and friendly host nations. WMD increases the odds that an adversary such as Iran could deter the United States, disrupt U.S.-led coalitions, and foment regional instability and arms races.

### U.S.-European Policy Disconnect

There is a major disconnect among the western allies on the issue of Iran. The United States is pursuing a policy of "dual containment," though it is seeking a government-to-government dialogue with Iran. The Europeans, on the other hand, have a policy known as "critical dialogue" -in reality, a policy of unconditional political and economic ties with Iran. In principle, both the U.S. and Europe agree that they have no interest in Iran acquiring WMD capability. In practice, however, Europe is unwilling to go beyond using such traditional tools as export and arms control in

dealing with this problem. For its part, the U.S. makes a major point of pressuring Iran's suppliers, using economic pressure, consistently raising the WMD issue in dialogues with Russia and China, and maintains its military preparedness for operations against proliferators in the Persian Gulf. This fundamental difference in approaches must be bridged if efforts to thwart Iran's attempts to acquire WMD are to succeed.

#### Policy Recommendations

The foregoing analysis leads to the following policy recommendations:

- Europe should abandon its policies of unconditional political and commercial ties with Iran and undertake a joint-policy review with the U.S., while the U.S. should abandon its policy of isolating Iran by actively pursuing the opening provided by President Khatami and finding ways around the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act by granting waivers in order to encourage moderation in Iran;
- U.S. allies should implement a strategy toward Iran based upon agreed standards of Iranian behavior and an agreed schedule of penalties and rewards;
- The United States and its allies should jointly intensify political pressure against Russia and other supplier states to end nuclear and missile exports to Iran, and;
- U.S. allies should enhance their ability to participate in U.S.-led military operations against WMD-armed adversaries.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

#### Points of Contention

U.S. policy toward Iran has neither been a resounding success nor a total flop. Clearly, efforts to change Iranian behavior through economic pressure have not succeeded (though neither have the efforts by U.S. allies through political engagement). The U.S. did succeed in raising European and Japanese concerns about the nature of the Iranian threat, and as a result Europe and Japan have not gone forward with nuclear technology transfers, they have adopted restrictions on the transfer of dual-use technologies, and they do not sell arms to Iran. Finally, U.S. efforts to constrain Iran's military buildup have struck some notable successes as well. At best, however, these efforts have delayed, but not stopped, Iran's WMD programs.

Since President Khatami's inauguration, there has been little discernible change in the WMD arena. There has been a change in the leadership of the atomic energy organization of Iran-but the new head says he plans to move forward with Iran's civilian nuclear program. To the degree the civilian nuclear program is a springboard for a nuclear effort, this is certainly disconcerting. As regards to the issue of whether there is a "pro-" or "anti"-nuclear camp in Iran, there is no basis for assuming that moderates are "against" or conservatives are "for" Iran's efforts to acquire the bomb. For example, Iran's relatively liberal Minister of Culture Ataollah Mohajerani stated in October 1992 that he advocated the Iranian development of nuclear weapons to counter Israeli capabilities in this area. Finally, it is important to point out that Khatami is not the key decision-maker when it comes to Iran's WMD program, and as a Persian nationalist in clerical garb, there is no reason to assume that he would not want Iran to acquire WMD.

> The major problem the United States faces today regarding Iran and proliferation is the leakage of technology and know-how from Russia. Until recently it was possible to claim that Russia lacks adequate export control laws and the ability to implement the export controls they possess; however, recent reports that Russia and Iraq discussed the transfer of equipment that could be used to produce biological weapons in 1995, that Iraq acquired missile gyroscopes from Russia in 1995, and that Russia started assisting the Iranian missile program at about the same time, raise disturbing questions that Russian encouragement of proliferation in Iran (and Iraq) may in fact be a

matter of Russian policy.

If the U.S. and Iran do eventually succeed in establishing an official dialogue, WMD is likely to be the most intractable issue which Washington and Tehran address. Iranian opposition to the peace process and the sponsorship of terrorism-two other areas of U.S. concern-are issues that are important to relatively narrow constituencies in Iran. By contrast, most Iranians want Iran to be a strong, influential country, and to the degree that WMD contribute to this end, there will be broad support in Iran for retaining these capabilities. Finally, experience has shown that it is much easier to negotiate away a nascent capability than a relatively mature one. Thus, the challenge for U.S. policy is to find a way to delay Iranian efforts to acquire WMD until the time that these can be dealt with in formal U.S.-Iran negotiations.

Policy #305

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)