

Iran's Nuclear Proliferation Strategy: U.S. Policy Options

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](#), [Mahsa Rouhi \(/experts/mahsa-rouhi\)](#), [Suzanne Maloney \(/experts/suzanne-maloney\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



[Mahsa Rouhi \(/experts/mahsa-rouhi\)](#)

Mahsa Rouhi is a research fellow with the Center for Strategic Research at National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies, where she focuses on nuclear policy and security strategy in the Middle East, with particular emphasis on Iran.



[Suzanne Maloney \(/experts/suzanne-maloney\)](#)

Suzanne Maloney is vice president and director of the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, where her research focuses on Iran and Persian Gulf energy.

 Brief Analysis

Three experts discuss how Washington might feasibly attempt to steer Tehran away from actively pursuing nuclear weapons.

On December 13, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Michael Eisenstadt, Mahsa Rouhi, and Suzanne Maloney. Eisenstadt is the Institute's Kahn Fellow, director of its Military and Security Studies Program, and author of its new study [Iran's Nuclear Hedging Strategy: Shaping the Islamic Republic's Proliferation Calculus \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-nuclear-hedging-strategy-shaping-islamic-republics-proliferation-calculus\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-nuclear-hedging-strategy-shaping-islamic-republics-proliferation-calculus). Rouhi is a research fellow with the Center for Strategic Research at National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. Maloney is vice president and director of the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Michael Eisenstadt

The U.S. policy debate regarding Iran's nuclear program has often focused narrowly on the technical dimensions of the proliferation process (centrifuges, breakout times, weaponization) and relied mainly on sanctions and diplomacy to prevent the regime from obtaining a nuclear weapon. However, effectively countering Iran's nuclear ambitions requires a deeper understanding of the political and geostrategic considerations that drive its hedging strategy, as well as a more holistic approach that uses all instruments of national power to keep it kicking the nuclear can down the road.

Iran's nuclear weapons program started with nascent hedging from the mid-1980s (during the Iran-Iraq War) to the late-1990s. The Islamic Republic then pursued a crash program to build a bomb (the AMAD Plan) from the late 1990s to early 2000s, followed by a cautious hedging strategy beginning in the mid-2000s through the present. It adopted this strategy when it concluded that the potential risks and costs of a crash program were greater than anticipated. Moreover, it has opted to halt (2003) or reverse (2013, 2015) parts of the nuclear program when it believed these activities jeopardized other important interests (avoiding international isolation), or when doing so facilitated the achievement of other goals (sanctions relief; legitimization of its uranium enrichment program). Yet even in these cases, it continued to advance the program in other ways.

This ambiguous, somewhat ambivalent hedging strategy may offer opportunities for U.S. policy. Washington should try to persuade Tehran that pursuing a buildup of fissile material, a nuclear breakout, or production of a bomb would all entail major risks and costs, and that nuclear restraint is therefore in its interests. While harsh sanctions and a credible military threat are necessary to achieve this goal, such measures may not suffice. The United States needs to fashion a shaping strategy that employs other levers to influence Iran's proliferation calculus.

For example, Tehran should be reminded that Washington has repeatedly made dramatic policy U-turns in the Middle East, undertaking major military operations after trying to avoid entanglements there. The regime should also understand that in light of its proven inability to protect its nuclear scientists, facilities, or archives from sabotage, cyberattacks, or foreign intelligence services, seeking nuclear weapons would be unwise, since they may malfunction when needed or end up detonating inside Iran. Moreover, the creation of a dual-use (conventional and nuclear-armed) missile force might undermine the military utility of Iran's conventional missile arsenal and increase the potential for miscalculation during a crisis or conflict—with adversaries such as Israel adopting a “launch on warning” nuclear posture. Finally, senior Iranian officials have noted Israel's vulnerability to a nuclear strike, but they should be reminded that their country is quite vulnerable as well due to its high rate of urbanization, its compact cities, and the political, economic, and military centrality of Tehran.

In sum, more needs to be done to shape Iran's proliferation calculus as it enriches ever-larger quantities of uranium to ever-higher levels. Otherwise, inaction could lead to the very outcome that the United States has been working for decades to avoid.

Mahsa Rouhi

The three pillars of Iran's deterrence strategy are its use of proxies, its missile force, and its nuclear program. The first two capabilities are immediately accessible and are being used today, while the nuclear weapons program is an aspirational, long-term pillar. Given the potency of the first two pillars, Iran has periodically been willing to curb its nuclear program in exchange for economic benefits while continuing to enhance its conventional military capabilities.

Washington does not have many options to curb the nuclear program in the short term, so it should focus on avoiding escalation with Tehran amid other challenges—from the anti-regime protests that are roiling the Islamic Republic, to the war in Ukraine and the rise of China. The United States and Israel have simulated limited strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities, but Tehran has focused its deterrence strategy on making clear that its response to such acts would not be limited—rather, they would result in very high costs for others in the region, if not all-out war.

The vision that Iran could eventually normalize economic relations with the West and avoid becoming a pariah state has all but evaporated. After the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the subsequent failures to restore the deal, Iran's leaders do not believe that nuclear compromise and sanctions relief will provide meaningful benefits. And because of new sanctions associated with the regime's latest human rights violations, it is unlikely that JCPOA-related sanctions relief would be enough to justify returning to the deal. These factors, combined with uncertainty about the policies of the next U.S. administration, mean that Iran is not going to give up the leverage gained from latent deterrence—in fact, there is currently more support for acquiring nuclear weapons among its leaders than ever before.

Going forward, the United States should clearly define the consequences of any further Iranian horizontal escalation (increasing its uranium stockpile) or vertical escalation (enriching to weapons grade). Regarding potential attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities, it is widely assumed that

any Israeli strike would likely be in tandem with the United States, but it is less clear what such an attack would look like. Washington should test Tehran by drawing less-consequential redlines elsewhere, then act when those lines are crossed in order to assess its reaction. This will give U.S. policymakers valuable insight while also gradually restoring the credibility of the military option.

Suzanne Maloney

The most significant aspect of the current nuclear debate is that it is no longer focused on the JCPOA. For more than two decades, U.S. policy on the Iran nuclear issue has led with diplomacy, but the subject has become so partisan in Washington that the debate has lost its focus. Diplomacy remains the most desirable option, but reviving the JCPOA does not seem to be in the cards at this point, so policymakers should start looking for other options. Put simply, the ground has shifted in both Iran and the United States since the seeds of the JCPOA were planted more than a decade ago.

For example, while the ongoing protests in Iran may not pose an existential threat to the regime at the moment, they do affect its decisionmaking, including on foreign policy issues. Geopolitical shifts have an impact as well. The rising influence of China and Russia directly benefits Tehran by offering it a viable economic and security alternative to the West. The regime is no longer interested in having Western companies as its primary trading partners and is counting on an economic future that relies on China, and a security future that relies on Russia. This may ultimately be a losing wager, but Tehran's growing willingness to engage in violence abroad—including attacks on dissidents and plots against Western officials—shows that it is not shying away from the increased risk of escalation.

Accordingly, the United States needs a viable Plan B, which entails clarifying its redlines and restoring the credible threat of military force. Yet it must be realistic about its ability to shape the regime's calculus. Although Washington should favor off-ramps over escalation, it should also recognize that Iran's leaders have held certain positions for many years unaffected by U.S. pressure or persuasion. One key factor in their decisionmaking is whether they believe the United States or Israel are genuinely willing to take military action in response to a given escalation. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the overt shift to strategic competition, the Biden administration appears to have little if any appetite for another Middle Eastern conflict. Yet it should still demonstrate that it is willing to take action if necessary.

On the domestic front, the pragmatists in Iran who once accepted the JCPOA were not necessarily in favor of abandoning the nuclear program—they simply saw more benefits to accepting the deal. Today, however, Iran's leaders do not appear to fear isolation from the West at all. Rather, they appear comfortable with maintaining the country's position as a threshold nuclear state, unwilling to give up the capabilities they have achieved. Ultimately, latent deterrence gives the regime a highly valued defense against coercion from outside powers.

This summary was prepared by Eric Feely. ❖

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