

# Speaking about the Unthinkable: The Nuclear Debate Iran Needs to Have

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Brief Analysis

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## A public airing of the potential consequences of Iran's nuclear program could alter the terms of debate and possibly encourage greater restraint within the Islamic Republic.

**T**his week, Iran and the Great Powers start marathon negotiations to conclude a long-term deal by July 20 to defuse the decade-long crisis over Iran's nuclear program. Yet, while Iran pursues an agreement that would confirm its status as a nuclear threshold state, there has been little discussion in the Islamic Republic about the potential risks posed by its current nuclear policies. The public debate about its program is highly circumscribed, focusing mainly on the regime's proclaimed "right to enrich" and the supposed benefits of nuclear energy and technology.[1]

The debate has addressed neither the vulnerabilities -- to accidents, earthquakes, terrorism, or military strikes -- of the kind of nuclear infrastructure Iran seems bent on acquiring, nor the possibility that its current program (even if capped for a number of years) could spur neighboring states to pursue a nuclear weapons option of their own, making an Iranian bomb more likely. And because the regime has disavowed any interest in nuclear weapons -- even while acquiring the means and the know-how to build them -- it has eschewed public discussions about the horrifying realities of nuclear war. For an assessment of what nuclear war would mean for Iran, see the accompanying graphic, "*Glass Houses: Iran's Nuclear Vulnerabilities.*"

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This makes it easier for senior Iranian officials to get away with irresponsible talk that blithely ignores the risks inherent in Iran's current nuclear policies. Thus, in his 2013 Nowruz speech, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei threatened to destroy the cities of Tel



Aviv and Haifa if Israel launched a preventive strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure -- a threat subsequently repeated by other officials.[2] More recently, deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Brig. Gen. Hossein Salami warned, "Today, we can destroy every spot which is under the Zionist regime's control...right from here...Islam has given us this wish, capacity and power to destroy the Zionist regime so that our hands will remain on the trigger from 1,400 km away for the day when [a confrontation with Israel] takes place."

It is highly doubtful that Khamenei really believes Tehran could destroy Tel Aviv and Haifa or that Salami believes Iran could destroy Israel with its current arsenal of conventionally armed missiles (except in animated propaganda videos shown on Iranian state television).[4] And it is highly unlikely that under normal circumstances Iran would ever dare try.

Iran has traditionally talked tough while acting with caution toward Israel, working through proxies when possible, due to Israel's robust conventional and nonconventional military capabilities, including an arsenal of one to two hundred nuclear weapons that Israel is widely assumed to have produced to deal with the kinds of doomsday scenarios threatened by Iranian officials. Yet the psychological environment created by this kind of bluster could heighten the potential for miscalculation during a crisis or war, if Iran were to get the bomb.

Senior Iranian officials do not seem to appreciate the risks inherent in the country's current nuclear trajectory. Thus, during a recent public talk, IRGC commander Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari responded as follows when asked whether Iran could defend itself from a nuclear strike: "Preventing an atomic attack is not possible, but of course [Iran's enemies] would not make this error. The capabilities created in Iran and many points of the world to respond to any type of military action against Iran are very great and [serve as a] deterrent. The atomic threat is a ridiculous threat." [5]

Yet one does not have to believe Iran's leadership is "irrational" or part of an "apocalyptic cult" to be concerned that if Iran gets the bomb, a nuclear exchange could result from a miscalculation or inadvertent escalation between Iran and Israel stemming from a crisis in the Levant, or between Iran and the United States as a result of a conventional conflict in the Strait of Hormuz.

During the Cold War, the world came close to nuclear war on several occasions -- during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and as a result of a number of false alarms and accidents. Similar scenarios could arise if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons.[6] Risks would be magnified and matters complicated even further if Iran's nuclear hedging eventually produced a destabilizing regional nuclear arms race, with the possibility that Iran could be dragged into a nuclear war -- a danger that does not exist today.

Given short missile flight times and the absence of crisis hotlines between Tehran and its adversaries, regional states might adopt nuclear postures, including launch-on-warning procedures or predelegation of launch authority to military commanders. Such steps could increase the risks of accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons during a crisis or war, or war through miscalculation.[7] Reckless and incendiary rhetoric by Iranian military officials could make such an eventuality even more likely.

In light of these potential risks, Iran would benefit greatly from the kind of public discussion about nuclear weapons and nuclear war that occurred in the United States and other Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s. During the Cold War, the efforts of anti-nuclear activists, and movies such as *On the Beach* (1959), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *Fail-Safe* (1964), *The Bedford Incident* (1965), and *The Day After* (1983), helped educate Westerners about the potential limits of nuclear deterrence, and the risks and horrors of nuclear war. And public opinion eventually provided the impetus for efforts to wind down the arms race through arms control and nonproliferation agreements that helped

reduce tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union and led to dramatic cuts in the nuclear arsenals of both superpowers.[8]

It may seem unrealistic to expect such a public discussion in Iran to influence the government's policy, given the degree to which the nuclear issue has been politicized by the regime and the extent to which the regime controls public discourse on this topic. However, experience has shown that despite its authoritarian tendencies, the Islamic Republic is sometimes responsive to domestic opinion. Thus, Tehran has generally avoided potentially costly foreign entanglements, relying on Arab proxies to do its bidding whenever possible, given the lingering popular trauma of the Iran-Iraq War. At home, it has periodically relaxed enforcement of its Islamic dress code as well as its ban on satellite dishes, recognizing the unpopularity of these measures. And it is currently exploring a possible long-term nuclear deal with the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States, plus Germany) in order to obtain sanctions relief for its financially strapped citizenry.

Because the country's leadership appears to be divided between those who might be willing to live, at least for now, with restrictions on Iran's current program and those who would prefer an unconstrained program that could be quickly retooled to produce nuclear weapons, a public airing of the risks and dangers posed by its nuclear program could alter the terms of debate and encourage the Islamic Republic to exercise greater restraint in its words and actions. This might just help it avoid destabilizing steps that could pose a long-term threat to its own survival -- and that of all peoples of the region. It is not too late for such a nuclear debate in Iran to begin.

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## Notes

1. For more on the nuclear debate, see Nima Gerami, *Leadership Divided? The Domestic Politics of Iran's Nuclear Debate*, Policy Focus 134 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/leadership-divided-the-domestic-politics-of-irans-nuclear-debate> (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/leadership-divided-the-domestic-politics-of-irans-nuclear-debate>); 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 DC: Nixon Center, 2001), <http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/npp/nixoniranwmd.pdf> (<http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/npp/nixoniranwmd.pdf>).
2. Marcus George and Zahra Hosseinian, "Iran Will Destroy Israeli Cities if Attacked: Khamenei," Reuters, March 21, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/21/us-iran-khamenei-idUSBRE92KOLA20130321> (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/21/us-iran-khamenei-idUSBRE92KOLA20130321>).
3. Fars News Agency, "IRGC Commander: Iran's Finger on Trigger to Destroy Zionist Regime," March 11, 2014, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13921220000944> (<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13921220000944>).
4. Ilan Ben Zion, "Iranian TV Airs Simulated Bombing of Tel Aviv, U.S. Aircraft Carrier," *Times of Israel*, February 8, 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-tv-air-simulated-bombing-of-tel-aviv/> (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-tv-air-simulated-bombing-of-tel-aviv/>).
5. Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari at Imam Sadeq University, Fars News Agency, December 10, 2013, translated in Will Fulton et al., "Iran News Round Up," AEI Critical Threats Project, December 11, 2013, <http://www.irantracker.org/iran-news-round-december-11-2013> (<http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/npp/nixoniranwmd.pdf>).
6. Geoffrey Forden, *Reducing a Common Danger: Improving Russia's Early-Warning System*, Policy Analysis 399

(Washington DC: Cato Institute, May 3, 2001), <http://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa399.pdf> (<http://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa399.pdf>); Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organization, Safety, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

7. Colin H. Kahl, Raj Pattani, and Jacob Stokes, *If All Else Fails: The Challenges of Containing a Nuclear Iran* (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, 2013), pp. 20–21, 50, 52, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_IfAllElseFails.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_IfAllElseFails.pdf) ([http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_IfAllElseFails.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_IfAllElseFails.pdf)).
8. Lawrence Wittner, *Confronting the Bomb: A Short History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). See also Lawrence Wittner, "How Disarmament Activists Saved the World from Nuclear War" (talk delivered to the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, May 2013), <http://peacemagazine.org/archive/v29n4p06.htm> (<http://peacemagazine.org/archive/v29n4p06.htm>).

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