

# The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Articles & Testimony

**T**he Institute's director of research reviews three recent studies on Iran's nuclear ambitions and how they fit in with the regime's wider regional strategy and negotiating stance: *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir* by Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *Iran: The Nuclear Challenge* by Robert Blackwill (ed.), and *U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition* by Anthony Cordesman, Adam Mausner, and Aram Nerguizian.

Few issues in recent years have seen as intensive high-level, international negotiations as Iran's nuclear program. Unfortunately, the account by Mousavian, an Iranian policymaker and scholar, will probably become the definitive book about that effort. A more important work, but one unlikely to get as much attention, is from a team led by Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which examines in detail how Iran's nuclear program fits within the broader challenge to U.S. interests from the Islamic Republic.

Mousavian's account gains credibility from his previous position as spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiating team as well as through the vigorous promotion of his views on U.S. television and at lectures in elite venues. His personal story is intriguing: An important official on Iran's Supreme National Security Council, he was, in effect, jailed for his opposition to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and is now a fellow at Princeton, though clearly still deeply supportive of the Islamic Republic. But the reason his book will become the standard reference is not necessarily due to his pedigree: It is the care with which it was prepared, with 1,113 footnotes to all the right sources. On question after question, Mousavian recounts the facts in detail, providing the references to check up and follow further.

But for all that Mousavian gets the details right, he casts the nuclear impasse in a profoundly misleading way. The fundamental problem has always been that Iran has not lived up to its obligations under the international agreements to which it is a party. At its heart, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is a trade-off: Countries have the right to dangerous nuclear technology if they accept the responsibility to be fully transparent about what they are doing. The irony is that had Iran, an NPT signatory, followed through on the requirements of the treaty, Washington may have been profoundly unhappy about Iran's nuclear progress but could have done little to mobilize international pressure. On this, as so many other issues, the Islamic Republic's leaders have systematically miscalculated where Iran's national interests lie. Their attitude, shared by Mousavian, is the profound arrogance of asserting rights but refusing responsibilities.

In Mousavian's account, Iran never did anything worse than miss some tactical opportunities. And in his telling, that only happened after he left the job. Mousavian makes a persuasive case that Iran was better served by his policy, which was to blow smoke in the West's eyes rather than to spit into them. The prolonged negotiations he describes persuaded Europe that Iran should be offered incentives and not penalized so as to entice it into further negotiations and temporary concessions. His team understood the importance of looking reasonable, whereas Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i's priority seems to be what the ayatollah called resistance to "global arrogance" (see Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008, pp. 3, 23; see also Khamene'i's speech in Tehran on Sept. 9, 1998).

In contrast to Iran's excellent track record, Mousavian presents the West—especially the United States—as continuously taking unreasonable positions and missing chances to improve relations. But not surprisingly, there is a telling omission: The George W. Bush administration is often castigated for spurning an alleged May 2003 Iranian "grand bargain" to open talks with Washington about all the issues separating the two sides. Mousavian makes no mention of it whatsoever.

While Mousavian recognizes that many issues besides the nuclear program separate Washington and Tehran, the Council on Foreign Relations' (CFR) *Iran: The Nuclear Challenge*, edited by Blackwill, simply ignores that strategic context. While it could be argued that the CFR report is intentionally only about the nuclear issue, the obvious response is that Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is not isolated from its other activities, nor are vital U.S. interests about Iran confined to its nuclear program: Most U.S. sanctions on Iran can be justified as reactions to its state support of terrorism, not just its nuclear program.

This narrow focus on Iran's nuclear program is all the more striking given the main theme in Blackwill's insightful concluding essay: Consider carefully and do not jump to conclusions. He warns against unanticipated consequences, artificial analogies, false certainty, and short-term thinking that ignores longer term repercussions. He suggests eleven pertinent questions to focus thinking about a potential preemptive attack, bringing great depth of knowledge to the subject. Regrettably, he hardly mentions how actions on the nuclear issue could affect broader U.S. interests regarding Iran. In particular, his essay is infused with the implicit view that the Islamic Republic is a given, not an unnatural system whose days may be numbered. If one concludes that the Islamic Republic will, at some point in time, disappear, then U.S. policy thinking ought to be much more about timing: Delaying the nuclear program becomes a potential route to successful resolution of the problems between the two states, depending on what nuclear policy a successor regime might pursue.

The six other authors in the CFR volume offer much insight about sanctions, negotiations, military options, regime change, the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran as well as what is known about the Iranian nuclear program. But their lens is so centered on the nuclear issue that everything else is essentially left out of the picture. For instance, Elliott Abrams' essay on regime change, while presenting a thoughtful evaluation of current U.S. programs and practical suggestions for alternatives, devotes exactly one sentence to the nonnuclear advantages for U.S. strategic interests were the Islamic Republic to fall. Surely the end of the mullahcracy would have vast repercussions on world Islamist movements and on the Middle East. To take one point that preoccupies U.S. Persian Gulf allies: Were Washington to form a close working relationship with a friendly Tehran, might that make relations with the gulf monarchies less important to U.S. administrations? Under those circumstances, Washington might choose to be more supportive of the forces calling for democratic reform in those countries, a prospect the ruling families find profoundly unsettling.

In comparison to the tight focus of the CFR volume, the great strength of *U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition* is that Cordesman et al. capture the full character of U.S.-Iran relations. They demonstrate that the United States and Iran are in a low-level war, or in "strategic competition," a phrase often used in national security circles. That war

has many fronts, which the authors cover in great (sometimes excessive) detail. Separate chapters, generally coauthored by Cordesman and one or more collaborators, cover the nature of the strategic competition in general, as well as sanctions and energy, the gulf military balance, and competition between Washington and Tehran in various parts of the world including Iraq, the Levant, Turkey, the Caucasus, "Af-Pak," Europe, Russia, China, Latin America, and Africa. The concluding chapter, on policy implications, stresses that U.S. administrations must compete with the Iranians in a wide array of geographic arenas and with many policy instruments. That is, in effect, something Washington is now doing, but not always with a conscious understanding of how all these disparate efforts should fit together.

Cordesman is led to the pessimistic conclusion that the mullahs' pursuit of nuclear weapons is part of a concerted strategy around which the entire military and national security strategy is built. Restrictions on Tehran's enrichment activities, he argues, are not likely to impede Iran's nuclear progress much because it has developed such a varied and robust set of nuclear weapons-related programs (including delivery options) that it could break down the remaining work into compartmentalized programs. Each is readily concealed and could be presented to a credulous international community as peaceful in intent. He concludes that if one studies the full range of strategic competition between Washington and Tehran, the current P5+1-Iran negotiations—even if fully successful—would make only a small difference in the mullahs' challenge to U.S. policymakers and not much of a difference to its nuclear pursuits.

Cordesman's message is not likely to have the resonance of Mousavian's. Too many in the West seem inclined to assume that Iran is being reasonable in the current nuclear impasse and that more understanding of the developing world is needed. Unfortunately, if history is any guide, few international problems can be solved through the greater display of empathy, especially toward rogue regimes.

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