

# On Iran, Pressure Works

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dec 24, 2011

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

---

## Washington and its allies can still prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons through nonmilitary means.

**P**resident Barack Obama, like President George W. Bush before him, has stated that it would be unacceptable for Iran to have nuclear weapons. Recently, Mr. Obama has taken this a step further by declaring that he is determined to prevent the Iranians from acquiring the bomb.

Does that mean that the use of force against the Iranian nuclear program is inevitable? No, nor should it be. I don't say this because I believe we can live with a nuclear-armed Iran; I do not. An Iran with nuclear weapons would confront the world with many dangers, including the very real danger that it will trigger a nuclear war in the Middle East.

Consider that once Iran has nuclear weapons, nearly all of its neighbors will seek them as well to counter Iranian power and coercion. Israel, given Iranian declarations that it should be wiped off the map, will feel it has no margin for error and cannot afford to strike second in the event of a war.

But Israel won't be the only country operating on a hair trigger. Each country, lacking the ability to absorb a nuclear strike, will adopt a launch-on-warning posture in a region that has many local triggers for conflict and enormous potential for miscalculation. Containment does not address that risk. Even the offer of a nuclear umbrella, with its implicit promise to obliterate the Iranians after a strike, can provide small comfort for any country in the Middle East, particularly Israel.

I do not doubt that the Iranians are making progress on their nuclear program. According to the most recent International Atomic Energy Agency report, released last month, the Iranians have accumulated roughly 4,900 kilograms of low enriched uranium (LEU), enough for three to four bombs if enriched further. They have 6,200 centrifuges operating at Natanz, with a production rate of about 125 kilograms a month, and have now installed 174 centrifuges in two tandem cascades and 64 in a third in their facility near Qom.

And, while the bulk of their LEU is enriched to 3.5%, the Iranians are now enriching some of their material to nearly 20% -- a move that would shorten the time they would need to create weapons-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU).

Notwithstanding this very real progress, there are several reasons why we have the time and space needed to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear-weapons capability through nonmilitary means: First, Iran does not have HEU, and the IAEA inspectors at both Natanz and Qom would be able to spot the telltale signs of the repiping of centrifuges that would provide several months of warning that Iran was enriching to weapons grade.

Second, the Iranians continue to have problems developing the next generation of centrifuges they need to dramatically accelerate their production of enriched uranium. These problems stem from difficulties in obtaining specialized materials due to sanctions as well as the regime's technological inability to perfect the design of the more advanced centrifuges. Here again, IAEA inspectors would in the course of regular inspections detect if more advanced centrifuges were operating.

Third, Iran must also be able to turn HEU into a weapon. While the recent IAEA report makes it clear that the Iranians had a comprehensive and integrated program for developing such a weapon until 2003, Iran's efforts since that time have been more limited and less systematic. That could indicate an Iranian belief that they have already made sufficient progress to be able to develop a weapon quickly. But that is not the assessment of Meir Dagan, the former head of Israel's Mossad, who has no interest in downplaying the Iranian nuclear threat and has publicly said that Iran is a few years from being able to produce a nuclear bomb.

None of this argues for relaxing our guard. On the contrary, we need to be vigilant about the indicators that Iran is moving more quickly either on HEU or weaponizing. And we must use the time we have to apply greater pressure on the Iranians.

The history of the Islamic Republic reveals one thing clearly: pressure works. Iran's leaders make adjustments in their behavior when they feel they must. Ayatollah Khomeini, recognizing the high costs, ended the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in 1988, even though he likened doing so to being forced to drink poison from a chalice. The Iranian policy of assassinating dissidents in Europe stopped in the 1990s when it became clear that the price, including sanctions, made it too expensive to continue. The Iranians accepted a suspension of enrichment and even offered an interesting proposal for negotiations on their nuclear program and our other differences in 2003 when we defeated the Iraqi army in three weeks and they believed they could be next.

Today, Iranian leaders are again feeling real pain. They are discredited in the region both because they are out of step with the Arab Awakening, and because they support the Assad regime's killing of Syrian citizens. They are more isolated internationally than ever before -- witness last month's vote in the U.N. General Assembly calling on Iran to protect diplomatic personnel. And they are suffering from international sanctions that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently referred to as the most severe economic onslaught that any nation has experienced -- clearly an exaggeration but a far cry from last year's rhetoric when he said Iran "sneezed" at the sanctions.

Iran is vulnerable, and over the next few months joint efforts with the Europeans to stop buying Iranian oil and doing business with the Iranian Central Bank would dramatically add to the pressure Iran's leaders are already feeling. These two steps would mean a loss of revenue and further destabilization of Iran's already shaky currency -- consequences that Iran's leaders can ill afford. This could be achieved without a spike in oil prices if phased in as additional oil is coming on the market from Libya, Iraq and a limited increase in Saudi production.

With the Iranian regime reeling, an increase in pressure can once again put Iran's leaders in a position where they seek a way out. That way out must not leave the Iranians with the capability to produce nuclear weapons at a time of their choosing. They can have civil nuclear power. They cannot have the means to translate that into nuclear

weapons.

*Ambassador Dennis Ross, the counselor at The Washington Institute, previously served as special assistant to President Obama and senior director for the central region at the National Security Council.* ❖

*Wall Street Journal*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

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

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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