

# Nuclear Fatwa: Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt), [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Sep 27, 2011

## 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.



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**O**n September 26, 2011, Mehdi Khalaji and Michael Eisenstadt addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute spotlighting their new Policy Focus (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=354>)

**Nuclear Fatwa: Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy**

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=354>). Mr. Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Institute, is the author of *The New Order of the Clerical Establishment in Iran (2010, in Farsi)* and is currently working on a political biography of Ayatollah Khamenei. Mr. Eisenstadt, director of the Institute's Military and Security Studies Program, is the author of *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Operational and Policy Implications (/templateC06.php?CID=1679)* (Marine Corps University, 2011). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## MEHDI KHALAJI

**A**s concern mounts regarding Iran's nuclear intentions, it is ever more important for U.S. policymakers to understand the role of religion in Iran's policy decisions. While some analysts have cited fatwas and various aspects of Islamic jurisprudence to argue that the regime does not intend to produce, stockpile, or use nuclear weapons, the truth is that the Islamic Republic's policy is ultimately not constrained by its previous fatwas nor by an absolutist interpretation of Sharia law. Two trends in Iranian decisionmaking bear special consideration:

- *The changeable nature of fatwas in the Shia tradition.* A fatwa is defined as a legal opinion given by an Islamic jurist, ayatollah, or other religious expert, and every fatwa carries the same religious validity regardless of the ayatollah by whom it is issued. Although each cleric's followers are religiously bound to abide by their fatwas, fatwas themselves are changeable, and ayatollahs are not considered infallible. Their fatwas are considered declarations of their understanding of God's will, not of God's will itself. Even Khomeini revised some of his

fatwas after debate. Thus, fatwas issued against production, stockpiling, or use of nuclear weapons are subject to future revision.

- *The prioritization of regime survival over Islamic concerns.* Ayatollah Khomeini formally institutionalized the doctrine of *maslahat*, or state interest, as a higher principle above Islamic law. The ruling jurist, as head of state, is authorized to overrule Islamic law when such action is deemed essential for the survival of the Islamic Republic. Iran can thus be expected to undertake policy actions on nuclear weapons issues with a view toward preserving its interests free from the constraints of Islamic law.

Several other factors essential to Iranian decisionmaking shed light on the regime's nuclear proliferation activities. First, Iran's juridical texts contain no statements expressly prohibiting the production and stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction. In fact, military might is a central component of the juridical worldview of Iranian religious scholars. Current debates revolve around the issue of use, and many jurists maintain that the deployment of nuclear weapons is permissible as a last resort.

Second, deception is an essential principle of Iranian political thought, and most Islamic jurists assert that lying to deceive enemies in war is obligatory. Since Iran views its nuclear program as an essential tool to assert its supremacy in the region, a perceived threat by the United States becomes justification for deceptive activities and denial of Iran's attempts to develop nuclear weapons.

Third, national pride and public opinion play a very small role in Khamenei's decisionmaking process. The official stance of the Islamic Republic since the days of Khomeini has posited nationalism as heresy against Islam. Khamenei has stated that Iran's national identity is fundamentally Islamic, downplaying nationalism in favor of Islamic principles.

Lastly, in the past five years Khamenei has been successful in transforming the Iranian Republic from a sophisticated revolutionary government into a classic, conventional dictatorship. While Khamenei was weak at the beginning of his rule and relied on consensus with the many centers of power in Iran, he currently feels free to discredit Ahmadinezhad and Rafsanjani and does not tolerate disagreement. It is difficult to find any figure in Iran who can influence Khamenei against his will. Thus, any nuclear decisions will ultimately be made by Khamenei in accordance with his personal perception of the interests of the Islamic Republic.

## MICHAEL EISENSTADT

**A**lthough religion is central to Iran's politics, published studies of its nuclear program rarely, if ever, consider this factor. Any attempt to assess the implications of Iran's nuclear program must examine the religious beliefs, values, and doctrines that are likely to decisively influence its nuclear decisionmaking.

Policy decisions in Iran are grounded on *maslahat* -- regime interest -- which trumps the tenets of Islam. For the regime's supporters, its survival is the highest religious value. Accordingly, Iran has repeatedly abandoned embattled Shiite communities (Iraq in 1991, Afghanistan in 1998, Lebanon in 2006, and Bahrain in 2011) rather than risk potentially costly foreign adventures. And in November 2003, Iran temporarily suspended aspects of its nuclear program to avoid potential United Nations sanctions or a U.S. attack. Although Tehran has sometimes demonstrated a propensity to miscalculate and take reckless risks, the principle of expediency has generally been interpreted to permit the implementation of the Islamic Republic's anti-status-quo agenda in a relatively cautious, circumspect manner.

Recent years, however, have seen the emergence of a doctrine of resistance and a current of political mahdism (messianism), resulting in a more assertive and confrontational foreign policy.

The doctrine of resistance -- a concept adopted and redefined by the Palestinian national movement, given quasi-

religious significance and strategic meaning by the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hizballah, and appropriated by Iran -- is rooted in the belief that conflicts with Islam's enemies are zero-sum affairs. It exhorts its practitioners to stand fast, to push boundaries, and to never yield on matters of principle in its attempt to create societies that are energized and strengthened by protracted conflict. The doctrine's perceived recent successes in Lebanon and Gaza have emboldened Tehran to pursue a more assertive foreign policy -- particularly regarding its nuclear program -- escalating tensions with the United States and the international community.

The upsurge of messianic devotion in Iran dates to the late 1990s, when conservative clerics quietly promoted the cult of the Mahdi in response to the emergence of the reform movement. President Ahmadinezhad has taken matters a step further, politicizing the cult of the Mahdi in order to advance his own political agenda. Ahmadinezhad's belief in the Mahdi's impending return (and his embrace of the resistance narrative) may account for his hardline policy positions. After all, if the Mahdi's reappearance is nigh, one must stand strong for one's beliefs. It is difficult to judge the depth and breadth of support for the politicized messianic current in Iranian society, although extreme, violent apocalyptic sects constitute a miniscule, fringe phenomenon. Messianic movements are inherently unpredictable, however, and the ambience of messianic expectation in some circles in Iran today provides reason for concern.

The operational imperatives that flow from the resistance doctrine and from political mahdism -- to stand strong, stand fast, and eschew compromise -- coexist uneasily, at best, with the pragmatism and flexibility embodied in the principle of expediency. Combined with the rise of a new generation of largely nonclerical, ideologically hardline officials with roots in the Revolutionary Guard and the Islamic Republic's propensity for miscalculation and risktaking, this trend does not bode well for current efforts to negotiate an end to the impasse with Iran over its nuclear program. And should Iran eventually acquire nuclear weapons, neither does it bode well for future efforts to establish a stable deterrent relationship.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Rebecca Gruskin. ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

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

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

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



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,

Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

### TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)