

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

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As the various threats posed by Iran's nuclear efforts become increasingly clear to the international community, most published assessments of the regime's strategy continue to overlook the role of religion. Because Iran is a theocracy, any attempt to fashion an effective policy toward its nuclear program must account for the religious values, beliefs, and doctrines that shape the country's decisionmaking.

In this Washington Institute report, Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji scrutinize popular assumptions regarding Ayatollah Khamenei's longstanding fatwa banning nuclear weapons. Examining the process by which fatwas are issued and modified, they discuss the often contrary forces that could pull Tehran in unexpected directions as the nuclear program advances: the pragmatic doctrine of regime expediency, which often trumps religion, and the less-flexible doctrines of resistance and Shiite messianism that have been embraced by certain hardline factions.

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Michael Eisenstadt is director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. A specialist in Persian Gulf and Arab-Israeli security affairs, he has published widely on irregular and conventional warfare and nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East. His recent publications include [The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Operational and Policy Implications \(/templateC06.php?CID=1679\)](/templateC06.php?CID=1679) (Marine Corps University, 2011), [Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach \(/templateC04.php?CID=342\)](/templateC04.php?CID=342) (Washington Institute, 2011; with Michael Knights and Ahmed Ali), and [The Missing Lever: Information Activities against Iran \(/templateC04.php?CID=321\)](/templateC04.php?CID=321) (Washington Institute, 2010).

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. Prior to joining the Institute, he worked as a political analyst on Iranian affairs for BBC Persian and as a

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