Inside Iranian Politics and Nuclear Strategy:

A G20 Briefing

by **Mehdi Khalaji (/experts/mehdi-khalaji)**

Sep 24, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mehdi Khalaji (/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

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

Brief Analysis

On September 18, 2009, Stephen P. Rosen and Mehdi Khalaji addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss how Iran's postelection turmoil affects international perceptions of the Islamic Republic and its nuclear program. Stephen P. Rosen, an expert on nuclear strategy, is the Beton Michael Kaneb professor of national security and military affairs in Harvard University's department of government. Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, where he is currently writing a biography of Iran's supreme leader. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Stephen Rosen

Studying the behavior of states with nuclear weapons may give some insight into what Iran would do if it acquires nuclear weapons capabilities. Every state that has nuclear weapons, with the exception of India, has shared the technology and the know-how -- not the weapons -- with other states: the United States shared technology with Great Britain and then, in the 1950s, provided nuclear weapons for German fighter jets on German bases flown by German pilots; Israel and France shared nuclear energy technology in the 1960s; China assisted Pakistan; North Korea aided Syria; and Pakistan assisted many countries through the A. Q. Khan network. In short, states transfer nuclear technology because it is easy to accomplish, difficult to track, and returns very high rewards.

Historically, many states have misstated their actual nuclear weapons capability. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union noticeably exaggerated the capabilities of its bomber forces. In its initial years after acquiring nuclear weapons, the United States acted similarly by concealing the small size of its arsenal. North Korea also used a similar strategy. Thus, it would not be unprecedented if Iran were to manipulate the perception of its nuclear capabilities.

Few countries with nuclear capabilities have made overt threats; rather, nuclear-armed states tend to become bold and make tacit threats. Former U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, did not directly threaten to use nuclear weapons if North Korea and China did not agree to an armistice during Korean War; instead, he threatened that "the United States would employ all means at its disposal" and sent nuclear-capable B-29 planes to bases in the Pacific. During the Suez crisis of 1956, the Soviet Union made similar vague threats if France and the United Kingdom did not withdraw. In an effort to put pressure on the United States, the Soviet Union deployed nuclear

weapons to Cuba in 1962. Since Pakistan has acquired nuclear weapons, the frequency and intensity of hostile incidents between Pakistan and India have significantly increased. In 1988, India may have deployed its nuclear arsenal to several battlefield positions during the largest military mobilization exercise in its history to date, a development closely observed by Pakistan. In short, when states get nuclear weapons, they become more confident and push their interests more aggressively.

Iran has a clear tendency to act indirectly through proxies, allowing the Iranian government plausible deniability. For example, Iran's acquisition of nuclear arms could encourage Hizballah to take additional action against Israel to advance Iranian interests.

Iran has significant incentives to test a nuclear weapon, which have only grown since the June 12 election. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) may opt to test a nuclear weapon earlier rather than later, since they want to say to the Iranian people: "We have asked you to make sacrifices for this program, and we have succeeded in making Iran a great power." Nuclear testing will increase confrontation between Iran and other countries, enabling the regime to make the case that it is protecting the Iranian people against hostile, foreign pressure. Since preparation for underground tests takes months and is easy to detect, Tehran may conduct a test above ground to elude Western intelligence prior to detonation and demonstrate its newly found power more clearly to the region.

Mehdi Khalaji

Since 1979 the Islamic Republic has promoted the last Friday of Ramadan as Quds Day (Jerusalem Day), a celebration of solidarity with Palestinian rejectionism and a protest against the United States and Israel. Quds Day has become symbolic of the Islamic Republic's effort to present itself as the leader of the world Muslim community in rejecting what it perceives as Western and Israeli plots against Islam. Due to his earlier support for the protestors, Ayatollah Akbar Rafsanjani was prevented from performing the Friday prayer during Quds Day for the first time in thirty years.

State television stopped broadcasting the Quds Day demonstrations due to the intense protests against the government; during a state television interview of Ahmadinezhad, for instance, the crowd could be heard chanting, "Resign, resign." Despite blunt IRGC threats and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's statement that the government has the right to crack down violently, protestors turned out in large numbers on Quds Day in many cities. During the protests, two popular chants were "I will sacrifice my life for Iran, not Lebanon or Palestine" and "Ahmadinezhad nuclear hero, get some rest" (both rhyme in Persian).

Ahmadinezhad was not the sole focus of the protests: 80 percent of the slogans targeted Khamenei and the institution of velayat-e fagih -- "rule of the jurisprudent." Many Iranians agree with Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri's assessment of the Islamic Republic as neither Islamic nor a republic, but as a military dictatorship.

Khamenei and the Iranian leadership are looking at nuclear negotiations through a distorted lens. For them, the current protests and the political turmoil take priority over the nuclear negotiations -- a trend that is likely to continue. Now that Iranians have learned how to hijack revolutionary occasions to promote their own agenda, the near future is likely to witness more resistance from the people and more violence from the government, which will weaken Khamenei, further impeding successful negotiations.

Even though Khamenei says that his regime does not need the West's stamp of legitimacy -- implying he sees no need for the nuclear negotiations -- he also believes that if the West were to make an offer, it would invariably be part of a plot to undermine Iran. For him, the nuclear program is not the only issue at stake -- the very existence of the Islamic Republic dominates his view of the negotiations. Khamenei does not believe that sorting out the nuclear crisis will normalize relations with the United States or Israel, who oppose the very nature of the Islamic Republic.

Khamenei's nightmare extends beyond direct negotiations with the United States -- he fears that the West will penetrate Iranian society. In a recent speech, he deplored the fact that Iran has two million students in colleges studying humanities and social sciences, describing those subjects as dangerous Western tools to colonize Muslim minds. Khamenei subsequently mandated that Islamic sciences replace the humanities.

Since the June election, the Iranian people's view of the nuclear talks has changed. Until recently, the nuclear program and Palestine were perceived as national causes; as a result of the elections, they are now seen as Ahmadinezhad's causes, not those of the Iranian people. Many Iranians now believe that the nuclear program works against the national interest and is a political tool of Ahmadinezhad. In the televised pre-election debate between opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi and Ahmadinezhad, Mousavi said that Iran -- instead of fighting the world -- should first gain the confidence of the world before proceeding with its nuclear program.

This rapporteur's summary was written by Yurter Ozcan. ❖

Policy #1586

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)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)