

# Preventing a Cascade of Instability: U.S. Engagement to Check Iranian Nuclear Progress

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Brief Analysis

**O**n March 4, 2009, the Presidential Task Force on Iranian Proliferation, Regional Security, and U.S. Policy released its final report at a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. The release also included a discussion led by three task force members, Gen. (Ret.) Eugene Habiger, Dr. William Schneider, and Ambassador Nancy Soderberg. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

William Schneider

The international community's prolonged hesitance to intervene has allowed Iran to acquire the industrial capability to enrich uranium. Iran has sufficient yellow cake -- uranium that has been milled, the first step toward enrichment -- to produce enough highly enriched uranium to fuel fifty nuclear weapons. Moreover, Iran's path toward nuclear weapons capability is facilitated by its access to Pakistan's nuclear know-how.

The unpopularity of the Iranian regime affords the United States a renewed opportunity to exercise leadership. Washington must promote stiffer economic and financial sanctions, including those that jeopardize Iran's ability to export oil and import refined petroleum products. In addition, the global recession and the oil market meltdown offer some unique short-term opportunities to implement crippling sanctions on Iran's ability to sustain its nuclear program.

Iran's nuclear progress has assumed great urgency in Israel, which perceives the Iranian nuclear program as an existential threat. Whatever the U.S. view may be, Israel currently thinks that it has a military option to slow down Iran's nuclear quest, despite the recognition that military means alone cannot permanently stop the program. Israel may be driven to exercise that option sooner than it otherwise would because of concern over improved Iranian air defenses. The crucial issue is the potential Russian sale of the S-300 air defense system. The transfer of the S-300 system to Iran would likely trigger unilateral Israeli action, which would be detrimental to U.S. regional interests. This possibility raises the importance of American engagement with Russia to defer or prevent the transfer of the air defense equipment to Iran until the nuclear issue is resolved.

The U.S. strategic position vis-a-vis Iran affords Washington far greater diplomatic leverage than it has employed in the past. The large U.S. military presence in the region, for example, can be utilized at the diplomatic level to great advantage. The period following the election of President Obama and before the Iranian election in June may provide a particularly good opportunity to strengthen this engagement. Exploitation of carrots (integration into the international community and ending multilateral sanctions) as well as sticks (more severe sanctions) -- could positively affect the preelection environment in Iran.

General Eugene Habiger

Deterrence is not just a Cold War concept; it is a viable strategy today. The question is how to use deterrence to prevent a cascade of instability stemming from Iranian nuclear progress. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that the United States would deter nuclear threats not only to itself and its formal allies, but also to its "friends,"

which is a new dimension that could include countries such as Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. On the campaign trail in 2008, Hillary Clinton offered a similar proposition.

Deterrence is the product of military capability and political will. If either is lacking, deterrence will not work. The United States has the military capability to deter Iran's nuclear progress, but it remains to be seen whether it has the political will. As it stands today, some in the Middle East have little confidence in the United States to execute its deterrent capability. The current administration must take quick and aggressive action to regain credibility on this issue.

Discussions of U.S. nuclear deterrence often center on extension of the U.S. nuclear umbrella to the region. Washington does not necessarily have to deploy nuclear weapons to this area to maintain an umbrella: although the United States has nuclear weapons embedded in some NATO-allied countries, its nuclear umbrella extends to Japan, South Korea, and Australia without deploying nuclear weapons in those regions.

Nancy Soderberg

The United States has lost the ability to intimidate its adversaries in the Middle East. Unless Washington regains that capacity, the region runs the risk of cascading instability in the face of Iranian nuclear progress. Some regional countries fear that the United States lacks the stamina and clout to resolve this pressing issue and are unconvinced that it will follow through on defense commitments. There is, however, a hunger in the region for U.S. reengagement both on the Iranian front and in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

For Israel, the most clear and immediate threat is a potential Iranian nuclear weapon, particularly if Iran installs an adequate air defense system or takes further steps to hide its capabilities. These scenarios would significantly advance Israel's timetable for action. The United States should consider providing Israel with a stronger strike capability to ease the pressure on Israel to strike Iran preemptive of its acquisition of an advanced air defense system from Russia. More importantly, the United States must reengage Russia and seek cooperation on this matter. For Israel, the freedom to act on its own timetable and develop its own military options are paramount; Israel is not interested in an American nuclear umbrella to deter an attack by a nuclear Iran.

Concerns about Iran in the Persian Gulf extend beyond the nuclear issue to the larger issue of Persian regional hegemony. Arab countries see the centuries-old struggle for regional supremacy shifting in Iran's favor. Arab states are worried that Iran will use proxies to dominate the region and are therefore urging the United States to engage Syria in order to block Iran's doorway into the Levant.

On a positive note, the threat of a nuclear Iran is promoting cooperation among the GCC countries, which is something Washington should continue to encourage. One repeatedly voiced fear in the GCC, however, is that the United States will sacrifice its interests in exchange for a U.S.-Iranian detente or, in a less extreme version, that U.S. concern about their interests will wane as Washington deals with a new partner in Tehran. GCC countries want to be treated as full partners, and the onus is on the United States to seize this opportunity for partnership and cooperation.

The urgency of the Iranian nuclear threat requires U.S. engagement with Tehran. The outcome of Iran's presidential elections later this year will affect the policy on some level: if President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad is voted out of office, a more moderate figure could take his place, altering the dynamic between the two countries.

Although an increased Iranian threat is a major problem, it provides an ideal opportunity to work with Arab states on a range of mutual issues, from counterterrorism and piracy to Persian Gulf security and Iraq. The United States must shore up cooperation among the Gulf countries and reiterate U.S. defense commitments in the Middle East -- all of which will help deal with a problematic Iran while reinforcing other U.S. regional interests. Open discussion of the U.S. nuclear umbrella has left Middle East leaders eager for protection assurances from Washington. The Middle East

is hungry for strong U.S. leadership and is looking to the new administration to help solve the problems that plague the region today.

This rapporteur's summary was written by Sana Mahmood. ❖

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