

Understanding Iranian Intentions and Capabilities

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

May 11, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



In-Depth Reports

On May 11, 2007, Mehdi Khalaji, Sami al-Faraj, and Neil Crompton addressed The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium. Mr. Khalaji is the Institute's Next Generation fellow. Dr. al-Faraj is president of the Kuwait Center for Strategic Studies. Mr. Crompton is the Iran coordinator at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. [Download a free PDF of the entire symposium proceedings \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=278\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=278).

MEHDI KHALAJI

It is common practice to divide Iran's decisionmaking apparatus into two parts: decisions made by the elected part of the government and decisions made by nonelected authorities. The elected part has always been the focus of Western hopes, as it was with the elections of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami as president in 1989 and 1997, respectively. Rafsanjani ran on promises of economic reform; Khatami, of political reform. But the 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmedinezhad, who ran on an ambitious religious agenda, made the West anxious.

However, the core of Iran's decisionmaking process is the nonelected part of the regime -- more specifically, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who has the final word on both internal and diplomatic issues. For the last ten years, the West has paid too little attention to Khamenei, relying instead on the elected part of government -- especially its diplomats -- to open negotiation channels with Iran. To date, this method has failed. Khamenei does not tolerate independent contact between diplomats and Westerners. He sees himself as the final decisionmaker.

Khamenei's religiosity must be understood -- namely, the extent to which religiosity plays a role in his decisionmaking. Khamenei is a politician first, an ayatollah second. He is the state's supreme leader and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He is not motivated by religion; rather, he justifies his political decisions with religious arguments. For Khamenei, the Islamic texts are open to interpretation and theology is a product of society. Some of the implications of this fact are disturbing. For instance, Khamenei has announced that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are prohibited by Islam. But this could change: what is outlawed can be made legal again by reinterpretation. In principle, there are no fixed principles.

Khamenei is the final decisionmaker in Iran. This means that Ahmedinezhad is not especially influential, though he has some say. Khamenei holds his position for life, and he has an inflexible personality. Yet he is pragmatic. He

thinks of the survival of the regime above all else. Khamenei is ready to override sharia (Islamic religious law) if the interests of the regime are threatened; indeed, the regime's founder, Ruhollah Khomeini, stated flatly that any principle of Islam could be set aside if necessary to preserve the Islamic Republic. Khamenei is ready to compromise about God's existence if necessary for the security of the regime.

SAMI AL-FARAJ

Kuwait has much experience with attacks from Iran's Islamic regime. Few in the West recall that Iran hit Kuwaiti and Saudi oil tankers in the tanker crisis of 1986-1987, during the Iran-Iraq War. Iran could repeat this tactic in another crisis. Iran has a history of using terrorism against Kuwait, including sponsoring attacks on important buildings in Kuwait during the 1980s. Given this history, Iranian capabilities and intentions are taken very seriously around the Gulf.

Iran's intentions toward its neighbors in the Persian Gulf are to spread its model of government -- namely, an Islamic republic, rather than a traditional or constitutional monarchy -- and to change the balance of power in Iran's favor. In addition, Iran has terrorist and guerrilla cells operating in Iraq and inflicting damage on U.S. forces there. These Iranian-sponsored cells are similar to those that long inflicted damage on the Israeli army in southern Lebanon. Kuwait is home to at least 65,000 Iranian expatriates, so secret Iranian cells could very well be working in Kuwait City.

Kuwait City falls within the range of the shortest and most outdated missiles in Tehran's arsenal. Kuwait's population is highly concentrated, living on only 12 percent of the country's already small territory. American forces in Kuwait are making use of two-thirds of the country's land; those forces could be a prime target for Iranian attack in a crisis, which would bring Kuwait into the conflict from the beginning.

Furthermore, the Gulf is a closed sea where environmental factors are important. The Gulf's currents flow counterclockwise. In case of a nuclear accident at Iran's Bushehr nuclear plant, southern Iraq and the whole of Kuwait City, including all of Kuwait's six desalination plants, will be in danger. Iran refuses to provide any information on what it is doing; therefore Kuwait has no way to control what is coming from the Iranian side. Even aside from the technical competence of the Iranian nuclear program, the region in question is prone to damaging earthquakes. Any Iranian nuclear accident would endanger three million people in Kuwait, two million of whom are expatriates who speak 128 languages. It would be a very complicated task to warn the population in the event of an emergency.

Because of the 2006 Lebanon war and the attempt by Iran to change the balance of power in the region, there has in practice been a rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar), Egypt, and Jordan. The Iranian threat is not theoretical but actual for its neighbors in the region. This is why it is necessary to plan for the worst-case scenario. The Lebanon war was a wakeup call that it may not be possible to stop Iran without some type of coercive response. The United States needs to demonstrate that it will use force as a last resort if Iran does not accept the conditions laid out in the framework of negotiations about Iran's nuclear program.

NEIL CROMPTON

From the British perspective, Iran is the single biggest foreign policy challenge of the next few years. The stakes are very high if Iran were to acquire nuclear-weapons capability. A WMD arms race in the Middle East could cause irreparable damage to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the idea of a rules-based nonproliferation system. It would also cause significant damage to the authority and credibility of the UN Security Council.

Iran's nuclear aspirations are a great challenge to the West. But Iran does not want to be seen as a pariah state and does not want to be isolated. This means that international censure is an effective point of leverage with Iran.

It is not necessarily clear that there are distinctions between the pragmatists and the ideologues of the regime in terms of the nuclear program. But the pragmatists are more concerned about what that policy might mean for Iran's longer-term survival, and so they are open to persuasion. To persuade Iran to change course, the West needs to convince a number of Iranian constituencies that the cost of pursuing their current nuclear policy is too high. This can be done by offering the pragmatists a way out with a face-saving negotiated solution.

Ahmadinezhad today is in a worse position than six months ago. Diplomatically, the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1737 was a real shock to the regime in Tehran. The U.S.-led military operations against Iranian influence in Iraq and the deployment of an additional carrier battle group to the Persian Gulf have sent well-calibrated messages to the Iranian establishment. Ahmadinezhad's populist economic policies have caused considerable inflation and have not raised Iran's low average incomes. There is also a financial squeeze as Western banks pull out of Iran and western European governments reduce their export credit exposure.

The international community needs to stick with its two-track approach of offering Tehran incentives and penalties. International consensus is important and should be maintained with creative diplomacy. The international community should be prepared to apply further sanctions if necessary to persuade the Iranians to change course. But while the international community should be robust on substance, it should also be flexible in its approach to the Iranians. Channels of communication should remain open. The international community should keep testing Iran for its interest in doing a deal because that in turn influences the debate inside Iran. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

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

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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