

## Iran's Defiance:

### The West Has More Options than Just the Extremes, Attack or Appease

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Articles & Testimony

**G**iven the fiasco over Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, it is only natural that many people are suspicious about the crisis atmosphere around Iran's nuclear program. But the worries about what Iran is doing are based on U.N. inspections of what Iran proudly shows off to the world. Iran's "nuclear fuel cycle" facilities let it dig uranium ore out of the ground, "convert" it into a gas, and then "enrich" the uranium in centrifuges, increasing the proportion of the most weapons-usable type.

Once Iran's fuel cycle facilities are complete, making the actual bomb would take Iran only "a few months" in the informed estimate of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General and Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed ElBaradei. Right now, only a few countries have nuclear fuel cycle facilities, and most of them have nuclear weapons. ElBaradei has proposed to "put a five-year hold on additional facilities for uranium enrichment." Further, he argues "there is no compelling reason to build more of these facilities" anywhere in the world.

On top of which, Iran spent 18 years lying about what it was doing, instead of fully reporting its activities as required by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The IEAE Board of Governors has condemned "Iran's many failures and breaches of its obligations" and requested additional information -- a request that the U.N. Security Council backed up. This last week, Iran has defiantly refused to provide the requested information about its past and present nuclear activities, much less to freeze its program.

The discussion in the media on what to do next concentrates too much on the extreme solutions: either attack or appease. There is a wide range of intermediate policy options that hold much more promise.

The international community needs instruments of persuasion and dissuasion. Persuasion does not have to mean offers of direct negotiations, which would convert the dispute into a bilateral Iran-U.S. confrontation instead of a problem between Iran and the world, as well as feeding European suspicions we were undercutting the negotiating effort they have been leading. Better would be to offer security measures designed to counter the argument that Iran needs nuclear weapons for its defense. There are many confidence- and security-building measures and arms control measures that would provide gains for both Iran and the West, similar to the way such steps reduced tensions between the old Warsaw Pact and NATO during the Cold War. One example would be an agreement to reduce the risk of incidents at sea between the U.S. and Iranian navies.

As for instruments of dissuasion, they may not have much effect on Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who seems to welcome even an attack on Iran as a means to rekindle the lost fervor of the early revolutionary days. While he represents a dangerous and growing element in the Iranian elite, the real power holder has been the Supreme Leader (who is exactly what the title suggests), Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. For the last 18 years, Khamenei has preferred low-level confrontation with the West -- just enough to keep the revolutionary spirit alive, but not enough to risk open hostilities. For now, Khamenei seems to think that the West for all its rhetoric will do nothing to stop Ahmadinejad, so why not let him push ahead.

Our task is to show Khamenei and others in the revolutionary institutions that hold power in Iran, behind the facade of the elected president, that Iran is paying a high price for Ahmadinejad's intransigence. There has been some real progress to this end. The Bush administration has been able to forge a broad international coalition that Iran's program is a bad thing; no mean feat, given that the Europeans and Russians spent the entire 1990s laughing at U.S. complaints about Iran's nuclear program. But getting that coalition to do anything about the Iranian program is a time-consuming process that may in the end fail. In the meantime, many things can be done on our own or with our best friends. To show the Iranian elite that they are paying a price for their nuclear activities, we have to step up the pressure on three fronts:

**Economic pressure.** While we await a U.N. decision on formal international sanctions, we and our friends can apply "de facto sanctions." For instance, strict U.S. Treasury application of existing rules to prevent transfer of funds to terrorists led the two largest Swiss banks to decide recently that Iran was just not an attractive place to do business, so they closed up shop there.

**Security pressure.** Iran has felt emboldened by its nuclear progress to step up its threats against its neighbors and the West. We need to show Iran's military, especially the powerful Revolutionary Guards, that this is a dangerous tack. Since Iran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf through which one-fourth of the world's oil flows, we should conduct military exercises there to show we can and will deter any Iranian aggression.

**Political pressure.** Iran's reformers and student groups have spoken out in favor of freezing Iran's nuclear program, contrary to the myth that all Iranians support the program. We need to do what little we can to help them. The Bush administration has proposed \$75 million for more Voice of America broadcasts and Internet programs in Persian, scholarships for Iranian students and support for human rights and civil society groups. Such modest measures hardly deserve the hysterical reaction of those who claim Bush's real goal is "regime change." In fact, the Bush proposals are all building on earlier European initiatives in each of these areas.

At the end of the day, diplomacy may not be enough. The best explanation about why force has to remain an option on the table comes from Nobel Peace Prize winner ElBaradei, who recently said, "Diplomacy has to be backed up by pressure and, in extreme case, by force. We have rules. We have to do everything possible to uphold the rules through conviction. If not, then you impose them. Of course, this has to be the last resort, but sometimes you have to do it."

Clawson, the deputy director for research of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is the author most recently of *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (Palgrave Books; co-authored with Michael Rubin). ❖

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