

# What Else Can Be Done about Iran's Nuclear Program?

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt), [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Nov 23, 2005

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.

---



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

---



## Brief Analysis

On November 18, 2005, Michael Eisenstadt, Patrick Clawson, and Henry Sokolski discussed policy options regarding Iran's nuclear program in light of the November 24 meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the publication of *Getting Ready for a Nuclear Ready Iran* (U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute), edited by Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson. Henry Sokolski is executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center and author and editor of numerous books on proliferation issues. Michael Eisenstadt is director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program and author of "Deter and Contain: Dealing with a Nuclear Iran," an essay in the new volume. Patrick Clawson, The Washington Institute's deputy director for research, is coauthor with Michael Rubin of *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (Palgrave).

Henry Sokolski

For several years, Iran has probably had what it needs to eventually build nuclear weapons. It has people with the knowledge needed to build these weapons as well as, probably, the necessary materials. Thus, Iran casts a diplomatic shadow as far as the reach of its missiles, which already means as far as Israel and potentially as far as much of Europe. If the United States is unable to stop Iran from proceeding further with its nuclear program, then other countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt, may well reconsider their nuclear options, which would be an even worse development than an Iranian nuclear program.

It is unwise to label Iran's nuclear development "unacceptable" unless one has in mind a clear approach for how to prevent Iran from proceeding. It is not appropriate only to think about what the United States will do; careful consideration is needed of how Iran would react to steps the United States would take. In particular, bombing Iranian nuclear sites would almost certainly lead to Iranian military reaction that would escalate into a war. Iranian officials say that if threatened or attacked, they would close the Strait of Hormuz -- an action that could reduce U.S. GDP by 7 percent after thirty days, which would be an extraordinary blow. But there are measures the United States could take

now to reduce Iran's ability to impede shipping through the Strait and to prepare ways to ship Gulf oil without going through the Strait (such as using emergency pipelines and antidrag chemicals that double the effective capacity of existing pipelines). These are examples of the kind of steps the United States should take now to ensure that it is prepared if things get worse with Iran.

In addition, it may be appropriate to consider initiatives to isolate Iran diplomatically. One controversial possibility would be for Israel to consider suspending production of additional fissile material, if Israel judges it has sufficient material on hand, as a way to press Iran to suspend its plans for enriching uranium. However, Israel would certainly need assurances that were it take some initiative, its actions would be welcomed by the West and the Arab world rather than being used as an excuse to demand that Israel do even more.

Michael Eisenstadt

Contrary to the fears of some that Iran's government is an irrational actor that cannot be deterred, in fact the actions taken by the state -- unlike the wild rhetoric periodically issuing from the regime -- suggest that cold calculation rules its behavior. Since the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran has avoided direct military involvements. It did not enter the first Gulf war in 1991, nor did it become involved in Afghanistan in 1998, despite Tehran's bluster, after the Taliban assassinated Iranian diplomats there.

However, the United States needs continually to reassess its assumption about Iran. Beyond his call to wipe Israel off the map, the new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, has made some disturbing references in his speeches, including his address to the UN General Assembly in September, to the return of the Twelfth Imam. This religious language may be a sign that those in power in Iran are ready to undergo the painful birth pangs necessary to usher in this messianic figure and that they would be willing to put the country at risk and act in a reckless and violent way.

Iran has the power to affect world events by disrupting the flow of oil, supporting and orchestrating terror, and using unconventional weapons. If it developed nuclear capabilities, it would be able to add extra force to each of these methods. In response to the Iranian nuclear challenge, the United States could threaten the survival of the regime. But Iran's political authority and security apparatus are diffuse enough to make an invasion difficult, and the experience in Afghanistan and Iraq encourages the United States to look for alternative approaches.

In fact, there are excellent prospects for deterring and containing Iran. One important element would be to develop the resources and agreements necessary to monitor the flow of ships and dhows in the Persian Gulf and to check for weapons and nuclear technology. Another option is to continue developing the framework of the Cooperative Defense Initiative with the Gulf states, strengthening their antimissile and anti-aircraft capabilities by, for instance, placing advanced radar systems afloat in the Gulf, and generally improving their protection against weapons of mass destruction. On another front, measures should be taken to deter Hizballah from acting as Iran's proxy. Simultaneously with containment initiatives, Washington could propose measures to build stability and confidence, such as exchanges of observers at military exercises, which could lead to positive interaction with Iran.

Patrick Clawson

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty does not bar Iran from developing a nuclear fuel cycle; however, at the latest IAEA Board of Governors meeting, there was broad international consensus that such a step would be unacceptable because it would give Iran the dangerous capability to make fissile material for a nuclear weapon -- a capability with which Iran cannot be trusted in lights of its eighteen-year record of concealing the full extent of its nuclear program from the IAEA. The consensus that Iran's nuclear program is a problem does not yet extend to an agreement about what to do about the program, but time is on the U.S. side. In particular, Russia has stepped forward with proposals that the United States has accepted, and Russia can be expected to pursue the matter vigorously so that Iran is not a source of disagreement among the G8 countries when they meet for their 2006 summit in Moscow.

If a diplomatic settlement is not reached soon, many options remain open. The Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) of countries exporting nuclear technology unanimously voted in June that if a country is found to have violated its IAEA safeguards agreement -- as the IAEA Board says Iran has done -- they would stop peaceful nuclear cooperation with that country. If the NSG were to invoke this agreement, Russia as a member would be asked to stop construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant -- an action that would be a deep shock to the Iranian leaders.

An Iran with advanced nuclear capabilities that put it close to having a bomb would likely be a more assertive Iran. Iran might well want to throw its weight around. For example, it could claim that the fate of Jerusalem is a matter that concerns all Muslims and therefore Iran should have a say in any settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Iran might become active in the many disputes in the Caucasus region, such as in Chechnya; after all, this is territory Iran lost to Russia less than two hundred years ago.

The United States and Iran may well become involved in a cold war. While comprehensive sanctions are not an effective solution, more targeted economic pressure could be considered. For example, Iran imports more than one-third of its gasoline because its refineries have limited capacity. Just as the Cold War with the Eastern bloc only ended when those regimes ended, so a cold war with Iran would likely end only as the regime evolves. The United States can modestly encourage that process through such steps as increased radio and television broadcasting; current efforts are remarkably limited.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cecile Zwiebach.

Policy #1056

---

## 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

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

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

#### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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