

When Will Iran Be a Nuclear Power?

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

Feb 18, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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.



Articles & Testimony

When will Iran achieve "nuclear status"? When other states form their own policies on the assumption that Iran has nuclear weapons—whether or not it has declared or tested a nuclear bomb. The earliest warning will probably come from Iran acting in a more assertive manner. Despite all the concern in Israel about Iranian action against Middle East peace, and despite the speculation about Iranian action in Iraq or Afghanistan, the most likely place for Iran to flex its muscle is the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Iran has several territorial and natural resource disputes with those countries, and Tehran could become more active in destabilizing Arab Gulf governments; the Islamic Republic has a long history of working with terrorists aiming to overthrow the Arab Gulf monarchies.

Another sign that Iran has made a nuclear breakthrough would be if its neighbors start to proliferate themselves. Already there are the first signs of a debate about nuclear reaction in Iran's two largest neighbors, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. And Egypt's nationalist sensitivities and security perceptions may combine to oblige it to pursue some nuclear capabilities once several others in the region have gone that route.

Yet another sign that Iran has nuclear status would be if Iran's perceived successful evasion of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) leads other countries to see the global non-proliferation system as lacking teeth. If a range of medium-sized powers starts to wonder whether there are effective barriers stopping proliferation, it will be time to act to show that violating the NPT brings serious consequences.

What can be done to stop Iran? The United States would like to persuade Iran that acquisition of nuclear weapons would come at a price too high to be worthwhile. This will not be an easy task. To achieve it, Washington needs a deeper and broader international consensus about Iran's nuclear program, working as closely as possible with Europe.

Another actor—Russia—also has a key role. The Bushehr nuclear power reactor that Russia is building is of great symbolic importance to the Iranian regime. A Russian position by which the plant could not be completed until the satisfactory completion of an Iranian-European agreement on nuclear issues would be a powerful inducement for Tehran to reach such an accord.

Some have suggested that the best way to stop Iran's nuclear program is direct U.S.-Iran negotiations or a grand

bargain that resolves all outstanding issues between the two governments. It is difficult to see the Islamic Republic radically changing course in exchange for an agreement with the "Great Satan."

Furthermore, the effort itself would require so much time and high-level attention that it could amount to a diversion, providing Iran with a stalling tactic to delay pressure while its nuclear program moves ahead.

At the same time that it concentrates on the nuclear issue, the United States has an interest—both strategic and moral—in supporting Iran's pro-democratic forces. Despite complaints from hardliners in Iran about a "regime change" policy, Washington will persist in its frequent and frank criticism of the Islamic Republic's failings on human rights and the rule of law. It would be a grave setback to Washington's reform agenda in the region if the United States were perceived to have abandoned Iran's beleaguered pro-democratic forces by doing a deal with hardline autocrats to secure U.S. geostrategic interests.

The key factor that could lead the U.S. to consider a military option would be if Iran did something provocative, such as announce a withdrawal from the NPT. In such a situation, the military options against Iran are much broader than an Osirak-style raid or an invasion. In an ideal world, the U.S. could disrupt Iran's nuclear program through covert means, such as corrupting software programs. But it is not clear if American intelligence is in a position to do this.

What America can do—both alone and with allies—is contain and deter Iran. The goal of enhanced U.S. military presence in the region would be to show Iran that its security would be worse off if it continues with its nuclear programs, and also to increase the U.S. ability to use military force if the need were to arise. Possible steps in this effort include selling Arab states in the Persian Gulf more advanced weapons, such as anti-submarine warfare systems and anti-missile systems. The U.S. may also propose more active and realistic combined U.S. and regional exercises aimed against the Iranian threat. Washington may also make an open statement—a "declaratory posture" about its policy of defending the region against a nuclear Iran.

There are many reasons why the actual use of military force against Iran is not an attractive option, from the imperfect intelligence about what to hit and Iran's potential for large-scale retaliation against U.S. and allied interests, via terrorism and other means. But allowing Iran to achieve a nuclear status would be a worse option. Let us all hope that we do not have to face such an eventuality.

The author is deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Persian-speaker. He most recently visited Iran last August. ❖

Haaretz

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

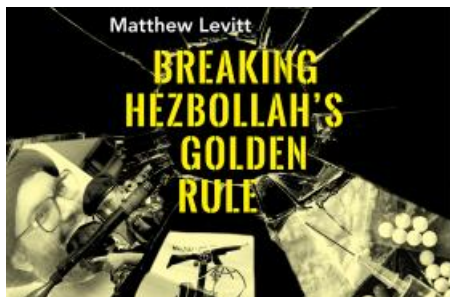
Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

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



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)