

# U.S.-Iran Relations: A Danger to Gulf Stability

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

Jan 6, 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.

---

**R**emarks delivered at the second annual conference of the Gulf Research Center in Dubai.

As the organizers of this conference have indicated in their description about this session, the most important issue Iran poses for the Gulf and the central issue in U.S.-Iran relations is Iran's nuclear program. So that will be the main focus of my remarks today.

Why Does the United States Care about a Nuclear Iran?

When I speak about a "nuclear Iran," I mean an Iran which everyone worries may have a bomb. To achieve that status, Iran does not have to actually test a bomb; after all, everyone knows Israel has nuclear weapons even though it has never tested a bomb. The key indication of about whether or not Iran has achieved nuclear status is: how do other states act towards Iran? If other countries form their own policies on the assumption that Iran has nuclear weapons even though Iran has not declared or tested a nuclear bomb, then Iran has achieved a nuclear breakthrough. Indeed, Iran may find it useful to create ambiguity about its nuclear status, claiming that it only has a wide range of nuclear capabilities rather than an actual bomb, while broadly hinting it could speedily develop a bomb if the outside world presses it too hard.

To the extent that Iran wants nuclear weapons to deter perceived threats in its unstable neighborhood, then it might be possible for the United States, in conjunction with its allies and friends, to propose means to address Iran's legitimate security concerns and its worries about potential attack from the United States or Israel. However, Iran's objectives in pursuing nuclear weapons seem not to be solely defensive in nature. Rather, they appear to include the acquisition of nuclear weapons as a symbol of national pride and as an instrument for the assertion of power in the region. These Iranian objectives for nuclear weapons – especially to the extent that Iran wants them to impose its will on other states – are not acceptable to the United States.

Stopping Iran short of achieving nuclear status is a vital U.S. interest for several reasons. First, Iran's hardliners have a history of aggression. They have worsened territorial and natural resource disputes with Arab states of the Gulf. They have meddled in Iraq, including close ties to some of the most extreme elements there. They are unrelentingly hostile to the United States, and they have attacked U.S. forces repeatedly. They bombed the barracks of U.S. Marines sent to Beirut to protect Lebanese Muslims after the Sabra and Shatila massacres. They bombed Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia to stop the United States from protecting Saudi Arabia against the Iraqis. They regularly threaten to

wipe off the map a fellow U.N. member and U.S. ally, Israel. They allowed Al Qaeda members on their soil to coordinate the terror attacks in Riyadh last year. Iran's brinkmanship on the nuclear issue only worsens the prospects for Iranian behavior on all these fronts. Far from being a moderating factor on Iranian behavior, Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability – should it come to pass – will almost certainly make a problematic situation even more difficult.

Second, the United States has a vital interest in preventing a nuclear arms race throughout the region. There is the grave risk that if Iran's neighbors are uncertain about how strongly the United States will deal with the Iranian nuclear threat, then the regional states will have to consider whether they need to proliferate themselves. There are signs that Iran's two largest neighbors are already debating this question. First, there is Turkey. Mustafa Kibaroglu, a distinguished professor at Bilkent and Harvard Universities who is close to Turkish military circles, warned this month, "voices are starting to be heard from within Turkish society promoting the idea of going nuclear" in response to developments in Iran.[1] Then there is Saudi Arabia. A September 18, 2003 report entitled "Saudis Consider Nuclear Bomb" in the British Guardian newspaper was based on serious Saudi thought about the implications of Iran developments, and there are widespread rumors Pakistan might help Saudi Arabia on nuclear matters.[2] And consider Egypt. Egypt's nationalist sensitivities and security perceptions may combine to oblige it to join the nuclear club once several others in the region have already joined.

Third, a consensus has emerged in the United States that proliferation of weapons of mass destruction poses the most serious threat to U.S. national security. A major reason for heightened concern about Iran's nuclear program is that failure to resolve the challenge of Iranian proliferation would itself seriously weaken the global non-proliferation regime. If all the effort devoted to the Iran problem by the IAEA, European countries and the United States still fails to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, then many states are likely to draw the conclusion that there are no effective barriers stopping proliferation.

Let me say a word about: why worry more about Iran's nuclear program than Israel's? One answer is that Iran has solemnly promised in a treaty not to develop nuclear weapons, while Israel never did. If we think that treaties and international organizations make a difference, then we have to be concerned when Iran ignores its treaty obligations. Another answer is that Israel is the only country in the UN whose very existence is denied by other governments. If Iran wants Israel to give up nuclear weapons, then it needs to stop saying that Israel is an illegitimate country which should be wiped off the face of the earth.

In fact, Israel, like every other government in the Middle East, supports the objective of establishing a region-wide WMD-free zone. However, it is not practical to implement this objective until all the states in the region are at peace with each other. Specifically, that means no such initiative can be implemented until all Middle East countries recognize Israel's right to exist in secure boundaries. But even before that diplomatic breakthrough is achieved, it is possible to begin specific discussions on what such a WMD-free zone would look like. In this regard, it would be useful if Gulf states proposed to the United States and other major powers to conduct studies and dialogue exploring the contours and requirements of a WMD-free zone. In particular, much work will be needed to define the precise preconditions for and timing of the establishment of such a zone; the procedures for verification by member-states as well as by international bodies; and the role that outside powers may need to play in this undertaking.

#### Diplomatic Response to the Iranian Proliferation Challenge

The heart of the Bush administration's response to the Iranian proliferation challenge is coordination with key allies in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In light of the Iraq experience, Washington will devote much efforts to reach a common international assessment of the state of Iran's nuclear program. While the Bush administration has many differences about politics with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Mohamed El Baradei, Washington is in fact quite impressed with the quality of the IAEA's staff technical work and with their tenacity in

exploring questionable Iranian explanations. Those of us who support stronger cooperation between the United States and UN organizations have a strong interest in seeing that the U.S.-IAEA relationship over Iran remains good.

The United States would like to find means to persuade Iran that acquisition of nuclear weapons would come at a price too high to be worthwhile – either because they prevent Iran from achieving its objectives or because they open Iran to penalties it is not prepared to accept. This will not be an easy task. To achieve it, Washington will have need to a deeper and broader international consensus about Iran's nuclear program, working as closely as possible with Europe. On Iraq, U.S.-European cooperation is preferred but not essential; on Iran, U.S.-European cooperation is a necessary prerequisite, especially if this problem is to be resolved through diplomatic and economic means alone. Specifically, the United States needs to develop a consensus with its European allies that it is unacceptable for Iran even to be on the brink of a nuclear weapon.

Another actor – Russia – has a key role, too. Moscow is critical to underscoring to Iran the high price the Iranians will pay should they maintain their current nuclear policies and this issue should figure prominently in U.S.-Russian relations. The Bushehr nuclear power which Russia is building is a matter of great symbolic importance to the Iranian regime. If Russia were to say that the Bushehr plant could not be completed until there has been a satisfactory completion of an Iranian-European agreement on nuclear issues, that would be a powerful inducement for Tehran to reach such an accord. Therefore, the Bush administration is likely to place Iran high on the agenda in its relations with Russia.

There has been much speculation about whether the United States would offer Iran inducements, or what are referred to as “carrots.” In point of fact, the recent agreement with Libya shows that the Bush administration is quite prepared to offer inducements to governments which it has previously sharply attacked. The extent of those inducements depends on the extent of the action by the other government.

Some have suggested that the best way to stop Iran's nuclear program is direct U.S.-Iran negotiations or a grand bargain which resolves all outstanding issues between the two governments. That would require Tehran to abandon not only its nuclear programs but all support for terrorism, including against Israel, in return for full normalization of U.S.-Iran relations and settlement of all outstanding financial claims. Such an initiative stands a very slim chance of success. Given the deep ideological, political and material investment Iran has made in groups like Hizbollah, Islamic Jihad and other organizations committed to fighting a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is difficult to see the Islamic Republic radically change 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.

In general, the appropriate role for Washington is to coordinate with Europe and inject further incentives and disincentives into the European talks with Tehran. The Euro-Iranian Paris Accords call for discussions in the first part of 2005 about the nuclear program and also about regional security. The best and most likely U.S. role in those talks is to work behind the scenes with the Europeans, especially to secure greater consensus with Russia and China, who are the other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. When Iran has seen that the major powers are unified, Tehran has been prepared to make considerable concessions.

The Europeans and Iranians have also agreed that their discussions will cover a wide range of questions other than the nuclear program. In fact, in the latest round of European-Iranian talks on December 21-22, the European side raised not only weapons of mass destruction but also terrorism, Arab-Israeli peace, and human rights. Europe has been insisted that progress with Iran requires progress on all four fronts – which shows just how much the Europeans and the Bush administration agree about what Iran needs to do. Indeed, in June 2003, Europe suspended negotiations with Iran about a trade agreement when there was no progress on the full range of European concerns. The Paris Accords which set out the agenda for this round of European-Iranian negotiations highlighted the need for

progress on terrorism, irrespective of whether the two sides agree about nuclear issues. The Europeans are likely to insist that Iran cease providing safe haven for Al Qaeda members and do something about those who organized the Riyadh bombings, who are still on Iranian soil.

The talks between Europe and Iran will be difficult and may break down. If that happens, then Europe will have to decide what to do next. In fact, Europe would be under great pressure to show that it is willing to take strong actions against proliferation. Europe wants to show that it takes proliferation as seriously as does the United States, and that it can be more effective about proliferation than was the United States in Iraq. To that end, last year, the European Council adopted an EU "Strategy Against Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction." That strategy states that "coercive measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and international law (sanctions, selective or global, interceptions of shipments and, as appropriate, the use of force) could be envisioned" when political and diplomatic measures are unable to stop WMD proliferation. This European strategy has much in common with the Bush administration approach about proliferation.

If the West is united in its stance, the measures it adopts could have considerable impact on Iran's leaders. Even the most hardline do not want Iran labeled an international pariah. That said, the harsh reality is that there is no guarantee that diplomatic or economic measures could prevent Iran acquiring a nuclear bomb if it is prepared to pay a sufficiently high cost.

#### Supporting Change in Iran

At the same time that it concentrates on the nuclear issue, the United States has other interests vis-B-vis Iran. An important U.S. interest – both strategic and moral – is to support Iran's pro-democratic forces, which are the most vibrant and pro-American in the region. Despite complaints from hardliners in Iran that vocal support for reformers and democrats is a cover for a policy of "regime change," Washington will persist in its frequent and frank criticism of the Islamic Republic's failings on human rights and the rule of law and find ways to lend material and moral aid to those reformers and democrats. In this regard, the Bush administration is likely to expand its program of internet, radio and television broadcasting to bring Iranians the news and the cultural programs their government will not.

That said, it would neither be appropriate nor prudent for Washington to base its policy on the assumption that Iran's regime will fall soon. For that reason, the United States must deal with the current Iranian government so long as it is in power. This is especially apparent vis-B-vis Iraq, where Iran wields considerable influence. But recognizing the necessity of dealing with the current government does not mean the United States will take any steps that might prolong the life of the Islamic Republic. A serious problem with any negotiations with Iran is that talks might be used by hard-line mullahs to advance their domestic political position vis-B-vis those seeking change in Iran. This is especially the case concerning the ambitious, multi-faceted agreement some urge Washington to negotiate directly with Tehran. 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.

Other issues on the U.S. agenda with Iran are Iraq and terrorism. Iran's contributes to instability in Iraq, providing moral, political, and even material support to anti-regime elements. At the same time, there are important commonalities in the U.S. and Iranian agendas in Iraq. Both governments want to see the upcoming elections succeed, although for different reasons – Washington wants ballots rather than bullets to decide who will rule Iraq, while Tehran wants to prevent the re-emergence of a pan-Arabist Sunni government which would be hostile to the Islamic Republic. Even though it acts for reasons Washington dislikes, the fact is that Tehran is actively encouraging Iraqis to vote – and that means that Iran is on the same side as the United States on the main issue facing Iraqis today. So the most likely U.S. stance about Iran's role in Iraq is to be wary but to do little.

As for terrorism, Iran is the most active state sponsor of terrorism. It provides safe haven to numerous terrorists from al-Qaeda. It actively supports the operations of such organizations as Hizbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. But terrorism does not come at the top of the U.S. policy agenda regarding Iran. That said, the United States is likely to step up its use of the tactic of “naming and shaming” – used so successfully against individual terrorist financiers. As Tehran’s reaction to the IAEA resolutions on Iran’s nuclear program show, Iran does not want to be in the international spotlight, with its name dragged through the mud. As was the case with the recent UN Security Council resolutions on Syria and Sudan, when Arab members of the Security Council broke ranks and did not support a fellow Arab state, an especially important target of U.S. diplomacy will be to convince Arab and other Muslim states of the urgency of joining with leading members of the international community when the charge against Iran is so stark and so clear.

#### What If Iran Makes a Nuclear Breakthrough?

Let me close by returning to the nuclear issue. I want to discuss the U.S. military options. Everyone agrees that the use of military force against Iran’s nuclear program is not an attractive option, however, at some point, the other options may be even less attractive.

The key factor which could lead the United States to consider a military option would be if Iran did something stupid. If Iran looked like it was achieving the status of “nuclear ambiguity” which I discussed earlier, the United States would take action to prevent Iran from being able to take advantage of this status.

The first way to do this is to step up the U.S. military role in the region so as to deter Iran from proceeding down the nuclear path and to contain Iran if it goes in that direction. Deterrence and containment were very effective during the Cold War for dealing with a nuclear threat, and there is much from that Cold War experience which can be used in the Iranian case. For instance, the military can be used to show Iran that its security will be worse off if it continues with its nuclear programs, and to increase the U.S. ability to use military force if the need were to arise later.

If Iran makes a nuclear breakthrough, much of the U.S. deterrence and containment would come in the Gulf. Possible steps in this effort include selling Arab Gulf states more advanced weapons such as precision-guided munitions and anti-submarine warfare systems. Particularly important will be enhancing the numbers, capabilities and effectiveness of anti-missile systems in the region and anti-missile systems. The United States may also propose more active and realistic combined U.S. and regional exercises aimed against the Iranian threat. U.S. forces in the region could also be strengthened in ways aimed specifically at deterring Iranian attack on Gulf states, for instance, by the regular deployment to the Gulf of naval anti-missile systems. Washington may also make an open statement about its policy of defending the Gulf against a nuclear Iran. Such a statement is known as the U.S. “declaratory posture” and is regarded as a very serious indication about what the United States will do. The main question is whether the United States would provide explicit security guarantees that it would defend states threatened by a nuclear Iran.

Another step would be to dramatically strengthen the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a program in which more than 20 countries are participating to interdict proliferation activities, as well as to develop a system to track down the companies and individuals responsible for the proliferation problems. The reinforcement of the PSI could be done in the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1540 of April 2004 required all states to establish and enforce legislation to secure nuclear materials, strengthen nuclear export controls, and criminalize nuclear trade. Resolution 1540 was adopted under Article VII of the UN Charter, which warrants all necessary means to ensure compliance. Since black-market proliferators have in the past used some Gulf states – including the U.A.E. – for their illicit activities, the United States would probably press Gulf states to become more active in the PSI.

At the same time that it uses military force for deterrence and containment, the United States would also use diplomacy. France has proposed a variety of actions that the Security Council should take to enhance and strengthen the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). One idea is to have the Security Council reaffirm the principle that any state considering withdrawal from a treaty, such as the NPT, remains accountable for violations committed while it was party to the treaty. Another proposal is that the Security Council clarify that any country that leaves a treaty, such as the NPT, must give up the benefits it received by virtue of having been a signatory to that treaty. That would require the departing country to dismantle, put under seal, or ship back to the supplier any nuclear technology that it received while it was an NPT member. France has also proposed that the international community exercise greater control over uranium enrichment and plutonium separation, to prevent other states from imitating Iran's example.

Depending on circumstances, the U.S. President may also decide to use military force directly to disrupt Iran's nuclear weapons program. Unlike Israel's 1981 strike at Osirak, no military operation is likely to be able to destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program, given its advanced state, the dispersal of its constituent parts, and the numerous elements of the program. But the President may determine that the acquisition of nuclear weapons capability by Iran would be such a grave threat to U.S. national interests that merely postponing that process was a worthy goal, despite the attendant costs. 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 there are also substantial problems with relying solely on diplomatic and economic measures, even if done through the UN Security Council, and even greater problems with doing nothing effective to stop Iranian proliferation.

I am sorry to close on such a somber note, but it is important to point out why the Iran nuclear problem is so important. If this problem is not effectively addressed, it could dramatically change the security situation for the Gulf. We all have an interest in redoubling our efforts to persuade Iran's hardliners that they should cooperate with the world community and live up to their obligations under the NPT.

#### Notes

1. Kibaoglu, "Iran's Nuclear Program May Trigger the Young Turks to Think Nuclear," Carnegie Endowment Non-Proliferation Project, December 22, 2004.
2. See The Washington Institute's PolicyWatch 793, "Toward a Saudi Nuclear Option" by Simon Henderson, October 16, 2003; Thomas Lippman, "Saudi Arabia: The Calculations of Uncertainty," in Mitchell Reiss, Robert Einhorn, and Kurt Campbell (editors), *The Nuclear Tipping Point*, Brookings Press, 2004, pp. 111-144; "Will Saudi Arabia Acquire Nuclear Weapons?," Akaki Dvali, Monterey Institute Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, March 2004 ([www.cns.miis.edu](http://www.cns.miis.edu) (<http://www.cns.miis.edu/>)); and Bruno Tertrais, "Riyad: la tentation nucléaire," *Politique internationale*, n° 103, printemps 2004. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



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)

### TOPICS

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)

