

# Implications of a Nuclear Iran

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Articles & Testimony

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The emergence of a nuclear Iran could alter the balance of power in the Middle East, leading to a heightened risk of conflict, and possibly nuclear war. This raises several questions: How close is Iran to acquiring the bomb? What are the potential implications of a nuclear Iran for the U.S. and the region? And what are the prospects of Iran providing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to terrorist groups it supports?

Iran's Nuclear Timeline. Should Iran obtain fissile material from abroad, it could conceivably build a bomb within a year (assuming it has plans for a viable design, and the special materials and components-beyond fissile materiel-needed to build a device or weapon). If North Korea were to enter the market as a purveyor of nuclear weaponry, Iran might be able to buy a bomb even sooner.<sup>2</sup> In the event that Iran's reactor at Bushehr is finished in 2006 (as promised by the Russians), Iran could produce enough fissile material for its first bomb within 2-3 years. If forced to fall back on its gas centrifuge program for fissile material, it might not acquire the bomb for another 5-10 years.<sup>3</sup> More than a decade of experience in Iraq, North Korea, Iran, and Libya, however, has served to highlight the unreliability of such estimates.

The range of these divergent estimates, moreover, highlights the uncertainty regarding the scope and status of Iran's nuclear program. Accordingly, Iran's true nuclear status is likely to be characterized by ambiguity for the foreseeable future; if and when it acquires the bomb, it is not clear that Iran will announce the fact, or test a new weapon-at least initially. Because of this uncertainty, Iran's neighbors and adversaries are increasingly likely, in the coming years, to see Iran as a 'threshold' nuclear weapons state (i.e., capable of rapidly acquiring nuclear weapons), if not a de facto nuclear weapons state, and to treat it with the caution and deference that such status merits.

Implications of a Nuclear Iran. There are two schools of thought regarding the impact of nuclear weapons on the behavior of states. One argues that the acquisition of nuclear weapons induces greater prudence and caution among possessor states, and adduces U.S. and Soviet behavior during the Cold War as proof (though post-Cold War revelations concerning how close the United States and Soviet Union were to nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis has diminished the appeal of this model). The other argues that the acquisition of nuclear weapons (or more generally, weapons of mass destruction) can lead to an increased propensity for risk-taking. Thus, Iraq's

growing arsenal of chemical and biological weapons may have emboldened Saddam Hussein to pursue a more aggressive regional policy in 1989-90 and to invade Kuwait in 1990. Similarly, the confidence that Pakistan's leadership drew from the demonstration of that country's nuclear capability in its May 1998 weapons test, may have emboldened it to attempt to seize a portion of Kashmir from India during the Kargil Crisis of May-July 1999.

Though it is impossible to predict the impact of acquiring nuclear weapons on Iranian policy, Iranian gunboat diplomacy vis-a-vis Azerbaijan in 2001 (to halt Azeri effort to explore for oil in contested portions of the Caspian Sea), its repeated rebuffs of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and its recent humiliation of British servicemen detained in the Shatt al-Arab, gives reason for pause. Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons might further embolden its hard-line conservative leadership to bully its neighbors, stiff-arm Europe, and sponsor terrorism against Israel, and American interests in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Instability and unrest in a nuclear Iran could have dire consequences for the U.S. and the region. Should anti-regime violence escalate to the point that it were to threaten the survival of the Islamic Republic (unlikely in the near term, but a possibility in the future, should popular demands for political change continue to be ignored by conservative hardliners), diehard supporters of the old order might, in a parting shot, lash out at perceived external enemies of the doomed regime with all means at their disposal (including nuclear weapons).

An Iranian bomb is also likely to spur additional proliferation in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is likely to try to purchase a nuclear weapon, perhaps from North Korea or Pakistan, while some of the smaller Gulf states might leverage their petrochemical industries to produce modest chemical warfare (CW) stockpiles for deterrence. Israel is likely to continue its successful policy of nuclear opacity, though it is likely to find ways to bolster its deterrent posture by further reducing the thin veneer of ambiguity regarding its nuclear status; this could cause Egypt and Syria to reevaluate its nuclear options-though Syria might already be traveling down this path.<sup>4</sup> Finally, it could cause a post-Saddam Iraq to evaluate its nuclear options if and when a degree of stability returns to that country.

Iran and Terrorism. According to the U.S. Department of State, Iran remains the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism.<sup>5</sup> During the 1980s and early 1990s, members of Iran's security services participated in terrorist operations overseas, particularly against anti-regime dissidents in Europe and elsewhere. Tehran, however, eventually realized that these operations isolated it internationally. Accordingly, it has become much more careful about masking its involvement in terrorism, providing safehaven, logistical support, funding, training, and weapons to Islamic as well as secular nationalist terrorist groups whose interests are aligned with its own. Terrorist groups that benefit from Tehran's patronage include:

- The Lebanese Hizballah, and its associates such as Saudi Hizballah, which carried out the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing.
- The Palestinian Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) and, most recently, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, belonging to the mainstream Fatah organization of Yasser Arafat.
- Al-Qaida and its affiliates, such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

A number of these groups have, in recent years, evinced a growing interest in WMD and in conducting mass-casualty attacks-particularly since 9/11. Hamas has shown an interest in chemical and, more recently, biological weapons. It has tried to poison Israeli water supplies and food in restaurants, investigated ways to disseminate cyanidal agents in public places, and assessed the potential of biological weapons.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, a PIJ activist was recently arrested for planning to poison the water supply at a Jerusalem Hospital.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in recent years, there have been several suicide bombings in which the metal bomb fragments (screws, nails, etc.) were tainted with rat poison, while a number of suicide bombers have been infected with Hepatitis-B and AIDS, which some believe to be part of an

intentional (and unsuccessful) effort to infect bombing victims.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to his involvement in conventional terrorism, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi has long shown an interest in poisons. In Afghanistan he ran a camp near Herat whose specialty was poisons. Following the fall of the Taliban, he spent some time in Iran, before establishing another camp in the village of Sargat, near Khurmali, in northeastern Iraq, in conjunction with the Ansar al-Islam group (which has also benefited from Iranian support), where members of his organization experimented with cyanide compounds and ricin.<sup>9</sup> Following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, Zarqawi reportedly fled to Iran, before relocating to central Iraq, where he is believed to be leading the fight against coalition forces.

Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida have intensively pursued the acquisition of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons for a number of years now, and bin Laden has frequently declared his interest in obtaining such means.<sup>10</sup> Al-Qaida operated a camp in Afghanistan (part of the so-called Darunta Camp complex near Jalalabad) where it produced and tested poisons and chemical agents on animals.<sup>11</sup> It has shown an interest in radiological weapons, and operated a lab in Herat, Afghanistan, where it tried to build one (it also sent an operative to the United States to detonate a so-called 'dirty bomb').<sup>12</sup> Prior to the fall of the Taliban, al-Qaida was in contact with two Pakistani nuclear scientists formerly associated with Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, seeking their assistance in acquiring chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, several terrorist organizations that enjoy the support of Tehran have shown a strong and abiding interest in WMD, but have thus far not succeeded in employing such means. A state sponsor with experience in the production and weaponization of WMD, such as Iran, could make a major contribution to these efforts. Thus far, there is no evidence that Tehran has provided know-how, materials, or actual WMD to any of these groups, although there is insufficient information in the open sources to speak confidently on this subject.

Tehran enjoys a long history of collaboration with Hizballah on the most sensitive terrorist operations undertaken by either party (including the 1983 Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, a series of deadly bombings in Paris in 1986 during the Iran-Iraq War, the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia). For this reason, should Tehran consider transferring such capabilities to others, Hizballah is the most likely recipient. However, by transferring to Hizballah, in the past several years, thousands of artillery rockets capable of ranging all of northern Israel, it has succeeded in creating a conventional deterrent balance with Israel that has greatly constricted Israel's military freedom of action vis-a-vis Hizballah as well as Iran. It is not clear that the transfer of WMD to Hizballah would yield significant benefits at this time.

A convincing case can likewise be made that Tehran would think long and hard before providing WMD to groups with which it does not enjoy a similar degree of trust and confidence, and that are engaged in ongoing operations against their American or Israeli enemies, for fear that such a step could put Tehran at risk of retaliation. Conversely, the fact that Tehran has never faced military retaliation in response to acts of terror might lead some Iranian decision makers to believe (or miscalculate) that they could transfer know-how, materials, or WMD to Palestinian groups, or al-Qaida and its associates, with impunity.

The bottom line is that due to the importance that Tehran has traditionally attached to maintaining deniability and creating ambiguity about its intentions and actions, it is likely to seek, when acting against more powerful adversaries, the ability to deliver nonconventional arms by nontraditional means (for instance, by intelligence operatives or terrorists). Because such methods offer the possibility of covert delivery, they are likely to become important adjuncts to more traditional delivery means such as missiles, and in situations in which deniability is a critical consideration, they are likely to be the delivery means of choice. The threat such a capability could pose for effective deterrence, is reason enough to treat such an eventuality with the seriousness it deserves.

Policy Options. There is no clear-cut policy solution for dealing with the challenges posed by Iran's nuclear program. The U.S. faces difficult choices, and success is uncertain, at best. U.S. policy should seek: to disrupt Tehran's activities in the area of proliferation and terrorism; to convince Tehran that acquiring nuclear weapons will harm, rather than enhance its security, and; to bolster the ability of the U.S. and its allies to deter and contain a nuclear Iran. To this end it should:

- Continue efforts to disrupt Iran's nuclear procurement in order to delay its nuclear program. In particular, press Russia to avoid completing the Bushehr reactor, and disrupt efforts to acquire centrifuge components that it cannot yet produce on its own.
- Keep the option of preventive military action on the table as a spur to diplomacy, though the lack of accurate intelligence, the possibility of an anti-American backlash by a heretofore friendly Iranian public, and the dangers of Iranian retaliation in Iraq will limit the appeal of this option. Recognize that should actionable intelligence become available at some future date, preventive action might not be an unthinkable option.<sup>14</sup>
- Seek support for economic sanctions on Iran should it refuse to abandon its nuclear program. Iran's oil sector accounts for 40-50% of government revenues, and 80% of its export earnings, and a ban on investment in its oil industry or the purchase of Iranian oil (sanctioned either by the UN Security Council, or voluntarily adopted by a broad-based "coalition of the willing") could induce Iran to reconsider its nuclear program.<sup>15</sup> (However, gaining support for such a measure at a time when oil is \$40 a barrel could prove difficult, if not impossible.)
- Continue efforts to encourage political change in Tehran. While political change may not eliminate Iran's nuclear ambitions, it might make the problem somewhat easier to manage, should a new leadership emerge that eschews terrorism and does not actively work to undermine Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.
- Lay the basis for an enhanced deterrence and containment regime in southwest Asia by enhancing early warning capabilities against traditional and nontraditional delivery platforms (aircraft, missiles, dhows, trucks), and regional air and missile defenses. Expand and deepen participation in the Cooperative Defense Initiative.
- Intensify the surveillance of Iranian embassies around the world, and encourage countries to pare back the Iranian diplomatic presence overseas beyond the minimum necessary to run an embassy.
- Continue global efforts to identify, and detain or expel, members of terrorist groups with ties to Iran. In particular, intensify efforts to disrupt fundraising and organizational activities of the Lebanese Hizballah and Hizballah affiliates wherever they may be.
- Clearly define U.S. "red lines" (in Iraq, the Gulf, and the Arab-Israeli arena) whose violation by Iran will prompt U.S. military action, to bolster deterrence and avoid a tragic miscalculation by Iran.

The emergence of a nuclear Iran should not be treated as a foregone conclusion; the U.S. must continue with efforts to forestall such an eventuality. At the same time, it must recognize that such efforts may not succeed, and commence work with its allies now, to lay the basis for a regional security architecture to deter and contain a nuclear Iran, and thereby mitigate the impact of a development that has the potential to destabilize a strategically vital region of the world.<sup>16</sup>

## NOTES

1 Senior Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. His recent publications include "Delay, Deter and Contain, Roll-Back: Toward a Strategy for Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Ambitions," in Geoff Kemp (Ed.) *Iran's Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives*, (The Nixon Center, 2004) and "The Challenges of U.S. Preventive Military Action," in Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson (Eds.), *Checking Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).

2 North Korea may have two bombs and is believed to be building 6-8 more from plutonium it recently separated from spent fuel. Glenn Kessler, "North Korea Nuclear Estimate to Rise: U.S. Report to Say Country has at Least 8 Bombs," *The Washington Post*, 28 April 2004, A1, A16.

3The estimate of 2-3 years is that of several respected proliferation specialists. See David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, "Iran, Player or Rogue?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September/October 2003, 52-58, and "Iran: Breaking Out Without Quite Breaking the Rules?" A Nonproliferation Policy Education Center analysis at: [www.npec-web.org/projects/iranswu2.htm](http://www.npec-web.org/projects/iranswu2.htm). By contrast, the consensus of the U.S. intelligence community is that if Iranian efforts to acquire technology to produce fissile material are successful, "Tehran will have a nuclear weapon within the decade." Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, USN, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, Statement for the Record, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 11, 2003 and Senate Armed Services Committee, February 12, 2003, at: [www.dia.mil/Public/Testimonies/statement10.html](http://www.dia.mil/Public/Testimonies/statement10.html).

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9Secretary of State Colin Powell, Address to the UN Security Council, 5 February 2003, at: [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/print/20030205-1.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/print/20030205-1.html); Sebastian Rotella, "A Road to Ansar Began in Italy," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 April 2003, A1.

10See, for instance, his interview with *Time* magazine, "Conversation with Terror," 11 January 1999, at: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/news/interview/0,9754,174550,00.html>.

11Judith Miller, "Killing for the Glory of God, In a Land Far from Home," *The New York Times*, 16 January 2001, A9.

12 Frank Gardner, "Al-Qaeda 'Was Making Dirty Bomb,'" *BBC News* at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/2711645.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2711645.stm).

13David Albright and Holly Higgins, "A Bomb for the Ummah," *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, March/April 2003, v. 59, no. 2, 49-55.

14 For more on the risks and challenges of preventive action, see: Michael Eisenstadt, "The Challenges of U.S. Preventive Military Action," in Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson (Eds.), *Checking Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), 113-128, at: [www.npec-web.org/books/CheckingIran.pdf](http://www.npec-web.org/books/CheckingIran.pdf).

15 For a more detailed discussion of the sanctions option, see: George Perkovich and Silvia Manzanero, "Plan B: Using Sanctions to End Iran's Nuclear Program," *Arms Control Today*, May 2004, at: [www.armscontrol.org/act/2004\\_05/PerkovichManzanero.asp?print](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004_05/PerkovichManzanero.asp?print).

16 For the core elements of a regime to deter and contain a nuclear Iran, see: Michael Eisenstadt, *Deter and Contain: Dealing with a Nuclear Iran*, paper prepared for the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center (NPEC) workshop: *Contending with a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, Washington, DC, 22-24 February 2004. ❖

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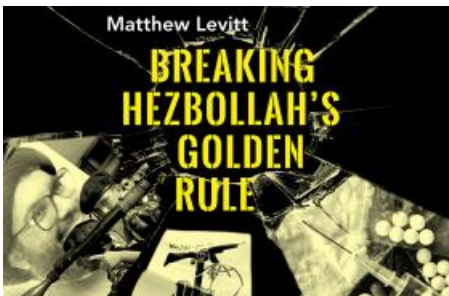
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