

Delay, Deter and Contain, Roll-Back: Toward a Strategy for Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Ambitions

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Articles & Testimony

Recent revelations regarding Iran's nuclear program have reinforced suspicions that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons option, and may be a few short years away from acquiring "the bomb." While senior Iranian officials have repeatedly stated that Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons and that the possession and use of such weapons would be contrary to Islam. Iran's efforts spanning nearly two decades to acquire the means to produce both plutonium and enriched uranium would seem to cast doubt on these claims.

Estimates of when Iran could acquire nuclear weapons vary from 2-3 years, to "within the decade." The range of these divergent estimates underscores the uncertainty regarding the actual scope, nature, and status of Iran's nuclear program. What is clear, however, is that in light 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 acquiring nuclear weapons in short order), if not a de facto nuclear weapons state, and to treat it with the caution and deference that such status merits.

Accordingly, U.S. efforts to delay Iranian progress toward acquiring nuclear weapons should be complemented by efforts to prepare for the possible emergence of a nuclear Iran. To deal with such an eventuality, the U.S. will need to bolster its ability to deter the use of nuclear weapons by the Islamic Republic, and enhance its ability to contain a nuclear Iran. Finally, though circumstances may not yet be right, the U.S. should work toward establishing conditions for nuclear roll-back in the Islamic Republic (i.e., the voluntary abandonment by Iran of its nuclear ambitions or nuclear weapons). Libya's decision in December 2003 to abandon its weapons of mass destruction programs offers a glimmer of hope that a similar policy turnabout in Iran may someday be possible -- even if the latter eventuality seems highly unlikely at present.

In light of these developments, the disarray in U.S. policy toward Iran is especially disconcerting. As with many other foreign policy issues, the Bush administration is deeply divided over how to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions, and by all appearances, it has yet to formulate a long-range approach for dealing with this challenge. This paper thus suggests the broad outlines of a strategy for dealing with Tehran's nuclear ambitions and the consequences of nuclear proliferation by Iran. . . .

Iran's Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives

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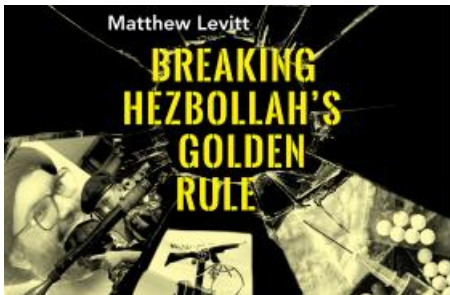
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