The Iranian Nuclear Threat and U.S. Policy (Part IV)

by **Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)**

Sep 19, 2003

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In-Depth Reports

To begin, I would like to make three points. First, it has become clear in recent months that Iran has a clandestine nuclear program, parts of which were recently revealed and parts of which may remain hidden. Second, Iran may be just two to four years from getting the bomb, though such estimates are notoriously unreliable. Some say it could happen even sooner; others say the end of this decade. The bottom line is that the time to act on this issue is now. Finally, we are in the early phases of a nuclear crisis with Iran that is likely to be protracted and difficult, and which may very well resemble the decade-long negotiating process with North Korea. In other words, North Korea might offer a model of future U.S.-Iranian relations.

I have just a few comments about what a nuclear Iran might mean for the region and why this is an issue of great concern for the United States. First, there are several possible models for the impact of Iranian nuclear weapons on the decisionmaking calculus of Iran's leadership. One is the relationship that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which many have argued was characterized by caution and prudence. Even so, we know from the Cuban missile crisis that such a model does not preclude a crisis with a nuclear dimension. Such a scenario can bring even prudent and cautious decisionmakers to miscalculate or to make reckless judgments that bring them to the brink of disaster.

Another model is that of India and Pakistan. Despite the fact that both countries carried out nuclear-weapons tests in 1998, we still see a degree of conflict in Kashmir. In fact, some have argued that Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons has emboldened that country to ramp up its support for independence fighters in Kashmir.

The last model is that of Iraq. Iraq was not and is not a nuclear-weapons state. However, an analogy can be made to Iraqi decisionmaking in the late 1980s, as Iraq's chemical- and biological-weapons programs matured. I have argued for some time now that the increased activism and adventurism of Iraqi policy after the Iran- Iraq war was due in large part to the self-confidence Saddam Husayn derived from his maturing chemical- and biological-weapons programs. In Iraq's case, these weapons of mass destruction bred adventurism. Nuclear weapons would have created an even greater danger.

In the case of Iran, we do not yet know what model to apply. I would point to a well-known statement made in December 2001 by Iran's former president and current chairman of the Expediency Council, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Nuclear weapons, he said, might offer a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict because Israel cannot afford

to be hit by even one nuclear weapon, whereas the Muslim world can survive a nuclear strike. That statement may have been a bluff, but it also may suggest a serious vision for the role of nuclear weapons in Iranian foreign policy.

There is also the possibility of additional proliferation if Iran goes nuclear. Smaller states in the Persian Gulf, for instance, might try to leverage their petrochemical industries to manufacture chemical weapon precursors and to build small chemical arsenals in order to deter Iran. Saudi Arabia, for example, might be tempted to buy a nuclear weapon from Pakistan. So we could see growing proliferation in the region as a result of Iranian nuclear weapons.

Moreover, there is the question of what might happen to Iran's nuclear stockpile in the event that widespread internal dissatisfaction with clerical rule leads to extensive unrest and perhaps revolutionary violence. What would happen to the stockpile? Would it be lost? Would it be passed to terrorist groups? Would some true believers within the regime be tempted to strike out at those they believe are behind the domestic unrest, possibly including the United States or Israel?

The bottom line is that, at the very least, a nuclear Iran will alter the political dynamics of the region, complicate U.S. power projection there, and reduce American freedom of action. It would also probably complicate Iran's security situation. Rather than bolstering Iranian security, nuclear weapons would likely harm it by leading to greater isolation, economic pressure, and perhaps military pressure.

My guiding assumption with regard to Iran's goal vis-à-vis its nuclear program is that the regime is not developing nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip. Some have said the North Korean program is being used to get a better deal with the United States—a "grand bargain" for normal relations, security guarantees, and the like. That may be so. Korean experts differ on that point. But North Korea has a large and capable military, which Iran does not. Whereas North Korea might have the luxury of trading away nukes while retaining the ability to conventionally deter the United States and South Korea, Iran views nuclear weapons as a shortcut to regional power. Remember that, for the last decade, Iran has lacked the funding and ability to modernize and expand its military. It sees its nuclear program as a pillar of its future defense policy.

Some have argued that if we engage Iran and address national-defense issues like these, Tehran might be willing to give up or freeze its nuclear program. My feeling is that security concerns form only part of Iran's motivation for acquiring nuclear weapons. There are also complicating issues of power, prestige, and influence; deterrence and defense; self-reliance; and the ability to overcome economic constraints. U.S. security assurances alone would not hold much weight with Iran's leadership; moreover, the whole idea of accepting foreign security assurances runs contrary to the ethos of self-reliance, a fundamental ideal of the Iranian revolution. Therefore, I do not believe we can look forward to a situation in which Iran trades away its nuclear weapons for incentives in other areas.

I see there being two sets of options open to Tehran. One is—and I use this term reservedly—a kind of "cheat and retreat," Tehran style. That is the term we used in reference to Iraq during the 1990s. Iran might try to placate its critics internationally and isolate the United States by answering some of the questions raised by the International Atomic Energy Agency, while signaling its intention to sign the Additional Protocol. The regime might hope that in this way, under United Nations supervision, it could retain what nuclear infrastructure it already possesses while preserving the option of a nuclear breakout down the road. But if Tehran signs the Additional Protocol and the protocol is implemented, the international community will have better tools than it has ever had in the past to detect clandestine Iranian programs. So this course of action entails a certain degree of risk for the regime.

Alternately, after letting the diplomatic process run its course, Iran could either threaten to or actually withdraw from the NPT and then continue its clandestine program. This could be described as a variant of the North Korean strategy. The NPT does allow signatories to withdraw when extraordinary circumstances arise and the supreme interests of the nation are threatened. This option might appeal to some Iranian decisionmakers because it couches

such a move in the language of international law.

If we look at the North Korean precedent, though, a decision by Iran to withdraw from the NPT will not necessarily mark the end of the road for diplomacy. North Korea threatened to withdraw in 1994 and did not do so. It claimed to have done so in 2002, yet we are now engaged in a diplomatic process with North Korea over its nuclear program. There might even be some in Tehran who see withdrawal from the NPT as the beginning of diplomacy, believing that nuclear-power status might be a prerequisite for fruitful negotiations with the United States. In other words, developing a nuclear weapon, some in the Iranian leadership might say, could allow Iran to engage the United States with something closer to equal status, allowing for a better deal on the full range of issues that separate the two sides.

It is not clear that the United States has specifically defined its Iran policy. Washington clearly wants an Iran free of nuclear weapons, but it has not necessarily decided how to get there. I fear that, at least for now, what Iran is willing to do is not acceptable to us, and what might be acceptable to us, Iran is unwilling to do at this point.

U.S. options include preventive action, sanctions, negotiation, and regime change. Preventive action is often popularly portrayed in terms of repeating Israel's 1981 raid on Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility. I believe the age of "Osiraks" has passed, at least when talking about a country like Iran. Iran has learned the lesson of Osirak and has accordingly dispersed and hidden its program. We probably do not have sufficiently detailed or accurate intelligence on which to base preventive action. And because the program is dispersed, the long-term impact on Iran's program would be limited. Preventive action might also bring international criticism and an anti-American backlash among the pro-American majority of the Iranian public. Iranian retaliation in the form of terrorism is also a possible price for an outcome that does not address the long-term problem. Still, the preventive action option needs to remain on the table as motivation for more effective diplomacy. We might yet reap an intelligence windfall that would allow preventive action to occur, and conditions might develop in which this kind of action becomes a viable, perhaps necessary, option.

With regard to sanctions, options include a ban on arms and nuclear-technology transfers to Iran, a ban on new economic agreements, and comprehensive economic sanctions. Each of these options has important limitations. Iran has not purchased large quantities of conventional arms, so the ban on arms sales is unlikely to affect Tehran's military posture significantly. Likewise, a ban on nuclear-technology transfers could affect Bushehr, and that is important. But it probably would not affect the centrifuge program, which appears to have benefited from clandestine transfers and indigenous developments. A ban on new economic agreements basically perpetuates the economic status quo, and Iran has shown that it has the ability to muddle through. Certainly, Iran would like to improve its economy, but it can survive in its current state. Comprehensive economic sanctions are potentially Iran's Achilles' heel. This is the one area where the international community could really leverage its influence. But, at least at this time, there is no broad international support for this option.

If the negotiation route is pursued, either the EU or the United States could take the lead on this issue. There is still daylight between the U.S. and EU positions, however, and the United States may not be happy with an EU lead. In any case, it is not clear that Iran would engage the United States on the full range of issues of concern to the U.S.—from Iran's nuclear program to other topics related to terrorism. We have had narrowly focused talks with Iran about Afghanistan and Iraq. But even if Iran is willing to engage on this topic, the United States will have to decide whether to focus on the nuclear issue alone, or couple it with the full range of issues that divide the two countries. If the latter —perhaps the only way American domestic politics would allow these kinds of talks—then negotiations would probably be very protracted and complicated, with unclear prospects for success.

Regime change has been mentioned. The bottom line is that we do not have much influence. Developments in Iran have their own dynamic, and there is little that Washington can presently do to move things along.

So what is to be done? We have to work with our allies and with the international community to achieve consensus, not on the end goal—we all agree that Iranian nuclear weapons are unacceptable—but on how to achieve that common objective. Beyond this, we must convince the broadest number of countries to convey to Iran the message that acquiring nuclear weapons will adversely affect its political, economic, and security situation.

In the meantime, the United States has to strike a careful balance between keeping the option of preventive action on the table and avoiding overt threats that Tehran could use as a pretext for withdrawing from the NPT. Likewise, Washington must not allow Tehran to use the nuclear issue to foment anti-American sentiment, thereby undermining a key U.S. asset: the pro-American sentiment of large parts of the Iranian population.

For this reason, I believe a multilateral approach to dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue is highly desirable. Economic sanctions may give us the most leverage in any future negotiations with Tehran. This approach must be studied in more detail to see if there is a way to gain broader international support for it. We must also be prepared for diplomacy with Iran that will test whether a deal is possible. If not, our willingness to engage will at least strengthen our hand should we decide to pursue other options.

Finally, U.S. Iran policy must acknowledge that the Iranian and North Korean nuclear crises are linked. A decade of exasperating diplomacy with North Korea not only suggests one possible vision of future U.S.-Iranian relations, it also underscores the reality that without resolving the problem of North Korea's nuclear program and the possible emergence of that country as a merchant of nuclear arms, we may never feel confident about the durability of any bargain struck with Iran on its own nuclear program.

Read remarks by the other participants on this panel: **David Albright, (templateC07.php?CID=208)** **Farideh Farhi, (templateC07.php?CID=209)** and **Uzi Arad (templateC07.php?CID=210)** ❖

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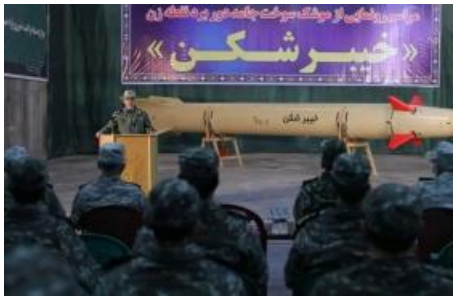

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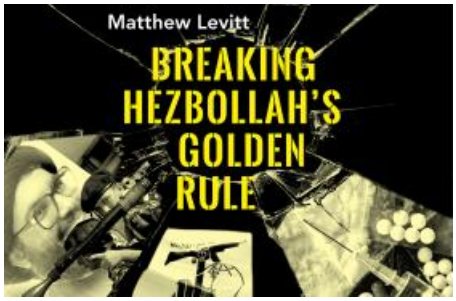

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