

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

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In-Depth Reports

**D**iscussing U.S.-Iranian relations in the aftermath of the Iraq war and in light of recent international pressure to rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions is not an easy task. There are contending players and policy options that both countries may pursue -- depending on their respective political dynamics at home. The nature of the game will undoubtedly vary depending on which combination of policies is played out. For instance, a hardliner-hawk dynamic in either country will have very different policy implications than a hardliner-nonhawk dynamic. I apologize for using the very inelegant term "nonhawk," but I cannot bring myself to use the term "dove" for Secretary of State Colin Powell or Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.

In these tense times, some have entertained the possibility of hardliner-hawk confrontation in Iran. Some outside of Iran hope such a confrontation would lead to the downfall of the Islamic regime. Some inside Iran fear it would lead to a "grand bargain," with the Islamic regime promising to back down on its opposition to Israeli policies in the occupied territories and perhaps curtail its nuclear ambitions; in exchange, the regime would be left alone to crush domestic opponents and embark on a Chinese model of economic and social liberalization.

But I would like to argue here that politics, both in Iran and in the United States, are a bit too complicated to allow for the realization of either of these extreme options. I make this argument believing that, despite strong political rhetoric against one another, the United States and Iran have frequently compromised in a give-and-take manner. There is no reason to believe that things will turn out otherwise here, given current circumstances surrounding the nuclear issue. I will leave it to the other distinguished panelists to talk about U.S. policy options in response to Iranian moves on the nuclear issue. I would like to talk about the intricate political game currently being played out inside Iran, and what impact, if any, the political game played out in Washington will have on it.

In Iran, the issue of the nuclear-energy program, which up to now has benefited from a relative consensus, has become a source of immense public contention. Public debate has centered on the issues of signing the Additional Protocol of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), agreeing to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency, and possibly entering further negotiations. In this debate, a few well-known and well-placed hardliners to whose actions and words many in Iran and the outside world are particularly sensitive have made a coordinated effort to threaten leaving the NPT as North Korea did. At the same time, they have worked to muddy foreign relationships laboriously nurtured by President Muhammad Khatami's government -- particularly with the British, whose embassy has been attacked by vigilante forces.

The hardliners' strategy can be interpreted in two ways: either as part and parcel of posturing against the United States in light of the problems Washington is facing in Iraq, or as part of domestic maneuvers against proponents of political change. In terms of posturing against the United States by threatening to leave the NPT, it could be argued that the hesitancy and insecurity the Iranian hardliners felt in the immediate aftermath of the American military victory in Iraq has given way to comfort with what they consider to be American difficulties there. They have become increasingly confident that events in Iraq have dampened the American appetite, if not the American will, for similar operations. But they have not minded a bit of deflation in American hubris. The hardliners have longstanding links

to major players in Iraq, including some Shi'i organizations and Kurdish groups. Yet, they have not seen long-term instability in Iraq as a good thing, knowing that problems there will ultimately spill over into Iran.

Meanwhile, using the formidable resources under their control, particularly Iranian national television, the hardliners have not missed an opportunity to show Iranians the misery of everyday life in Iraq, an effective response to the yearning some Iranians might have expressed early on for a similar operation. This is also an effective political strategy against domestic opponents accused of promoting the Iraqization of Iran in the face of an insatiable international opponent. Within this context, the U.S. threat of military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities and the Pentagon's on-and-off flirtation with the much-despised People's Mujahedin (MEK) (as well as with almost unknown ethnic separatists) have acted as a godsend for hardliners, who know that such support will coalesce many forces behind them, including dissidents.

Domestically, hardliners seem intent on doing one or a combination of at least three things with their outright rejectionist stance. First, they seek to shift the debate from the merits of Iran's nuclear program to a discussion of national sovereignty and Iran's right to independence. This is something that, given international double standards on the issue, resonates well among the population and is a favorite dominion of hardliners. This strategy has been at least partially effective insofar as it has put the reformists on the defensive, making them sound and look as though they support signing the Additional Protocol for fear of deteriorating relations with the European Union, Russia, and Japan, not because they have Iran's national interest in mind.

The second objective of the hardliners is to show that President Khatami's dÃ©tente policy has been ineffective in the international arena. Beating the drum of NPT withdrawal may be dangerous internationally, but not in the minds of certain groups in Iran who, in light of U.S.-Iraq problems, are convinced that while the international community can pressure Iran, it can do very little to loosen hardliners' grip on power.

The third and perhaps most cynical hardline objective is to take a hard, ideological stance on the nuclear issue now, so that they can blame the softness of reformists for the ultimate compromise they know has to come -- while maintaining the upper hand with regard to their nationalistic stance. The intent here is to reap any benefits of a compromise without paying the price. This approach makes perfect sense as leverage for later conflicts with reformers, particularly with parliamentary elections coming up in February 2004. In this way, the hardliners see themselves as benefiting from either signing or not signing the protocol. They are betting that the hawk-nonhawk dynamic in the United States will prevent the emergence of a creative U.S. policy vis-Ã -vis Iran that strengthens the hand of an organized opposition.

So are the reformers sitting ducks in Iran once again, losing the clever game played by the hardliners? Not exactly. What have they done as a countermove? Most important, they have exposed hardliners' plans in their reformist newspapers. What I just laid out for you is not my own analysis. These are ongoing discussions inside Iran. The reformers have stated publicly that they know what the hardliners are up to -- that they are trying to set up the reformist parliament to pass the protocol, opening it up to charges of paving the way for Iran's Iraqization.

Several members of parliament have already publicly pointed out that the question of accepting or not accepting the Additional Protocol is not a legislative decision but a matter of expediency -- of national interests in the face of foreign pressure. As such, it is the responsibility of the Expediency Council, a nonelected body, to make the decision through the referral of the Supreme Leader on the basis of consultations, preventing it from becoming fodder for factional conflicts. In other words, reformists have effectively declared that those who have put Iran in a confrontational path with the world should also take responsibility for the compromises -- and pay for them.

The second important step some reformers in Iran have taken is to come out as a political group in favor of signing the protocol -- not as individual reformers and citizens, as they have in the past. This step was taken, for example, by

the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF), which is headed by President Khatami's brother, and which currently constitutes the largest block of reformist deputies in the Iranian parliament. The IIPF publicly declared that signing the protocol is not against Iran's national interest since Iran has nothing to hide. It has argued that it is time for Iran to join the international community in a nonconfrontational manner, and it has publicly declared that the hardliners are endangering Iran's future.

In other words, the IIPF has framed the issue in terms of whether or not Iran wants to become a legitimate player in world politics. The dynamics that have led to this rather bold step are not exactly clear, but perhaps it has something to do with the Reuters report that, despite American opposition, Europeans have promised a quid pro quo of technological support in the nuclear field if Iran signs the Additional Protocol and stops uranium enrichment. I do not know whether the European offer will actually tip the balance in favor of signing the protocol and possibly curbing Iran's uranium-enrichment program, or even whether the Europeans are willing to follow through on their offer, given possible U.S. opposition. The Iranian political scene at this point remains too fluid for such definite predictions.

What I do know is that for the first time, outsiders have an opportunity to significantly affect the internal debate in Iran. But if the result goes the way the outsiders want it to, and yet Iran continues to be isolated, the hands of those Iranians working toward the protocol signing will be considerably weakened. Instead, a coordinated step by the international community that encourages the internal Iranian dynamic in favor of nonproliferation is bound to have a more lasting effect on Iran's international behavior, as well as the expansion of democracy in Iran.

Read remarks by the other participants on this panel: [David Albright, \(templateC07.php?CID=208\)](#) [Uzi Arad, \(templateC07.php?CID=210\)](#) and [Michael Eisenstadt \(templateC07.php?CID=211\)](#) ❖

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