

Evaluating the Options Regarding the Iranian Nuclear Threat

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Articles & Testimony

Testimony before the U.S.-Israel Joint Parliamentary Committee

The United States has for years judged Iran to be the world's foremost state-sponsor of terrorism. While the most direct way to sever the link between Tehran and its main terror arm -- Hizbollah -- is via Damascus, Washington is vigilant about Iran's support for a network of Islamist terrorist organizations and persistent in pressing Iran to end its financial, political, material and operational support to them. At the same time, the gravest threat Iran poses to both American and Israeli interests is not terrorism, but instead its pursuit of nuclear weapons and the long-range missiles with which to deliver them.

The IAEA's Disturbing News

Iran's nuclear program has long been a matter of concern. But 2003 brought a sharp change in the perceived urgency. The February 2003 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) visit to the Natanz facility revealed that Iran's centrifuge enrichment program was vastly more advanced than had been suspected by Western intelligence services, plus the fact that such a sophisticated facility had been largely if not completely overlooked by those intelligence services raised the disturbing possibility that Iran may have successfully concealed other facilities as well. Then came the Iranian failure to be forthcoming to the IAEA, not only about how it had developed the centrifuge technology but also about the import and subsequent use of 1.8 tons of natural uranium from China in the early 1990s. The June IAEA report raised many disturbing questions about Iran's nuclear activities, questions made more worrying by Iran's resistance to opening its facilities (e.g., repeated refusals to permit environmental sampling at suspected facilities).

Although the next IAEA report in August tried to put as positive a spin as it could on Iran's actions, the facts it reported were highly troubling. After listing a long set of issues on which the agency is either awaiting further information or evaluating Iran's response, the report acknowledged, "information and access were at times slow in coming and incremental, and ... some of the information was in contrast to that previously provided by Iran." The report was silent, however, on the key problem raised by Iran's actions, namely, the prospect that Iran is stalling while it races ahead to complete its nuclear program -- which it would then present as a fait accompli.

It was not reassuring to learn that Iran has changed its account regarding its centrifuge program. Iran's current story

is that it imported key parts for its centrifuges. This story conveniently explains the IAEA's detection of highly enriched (weapons-grade) uranium at Iran's centrifuge facility by blaming the presence of this uranium on contaminated foreign (i.e., Pakistani) equipment. If true, that means Iran has in fact had substantial foreign assistance and has been effective at concealing that assistance. If this continues to be the case, Iran could be in a position to develop nuclear weapons on a much faster timeline than the three-to-five years that some intelligence services predict would be needed without foreign assistance.

But the current story may be a cover-up: it is not clear that Iran could actually obtain key Pakistani nuclear equipment, given that Pakistani-Iranian relations have not been close and that Pakistan has many reasons to be cautious about exporting such material. The true story may be the older Iranian account, according to which Iran developed the centrifuge technology on its own, using Pakistani blueprints. This scenario would be at least as troubling, because the presence of highly enriched uranium at the Natanz centrifuge plant would mean that Iran has already begun to enrich uranium up to weapons grade. If this is the case, Iran has made much more progress toward acquiring a nuclear weapon than previously thought. And that would mean that Western intelligence agencies -- which knew little if anything about the huge Natanz facility until pointed in that direction by the Iranian Mujahedin-e Khalq opposition group -- would have once again underestimated Iranian nuclear activities.

The IAEA has set an October 31 deadline for Iran providing full information about its nuclear activities. If, as seems likely, Iran continues its current course of minimalist cooperation with inspectors and constantly changing stories, the IAEA will have to decide whether to declare Iran noncompliant with its obligations under the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). What the world does about Iran's nuclear program will largely determine the future of efforts to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The Policy Options

It is worth evaluating the pluses and minuses of each possible policy options for responding to Iran's nuclear program. Those options range from military action to regime change, multilateral diplomacy, deterrence of weapons assembly, and a "grand deal." Each option has many problems and unclear advantages.

Military action

Military action need not be an Osirak-like bombing raid. At the low end, the United States might declare that the closer Iran gets to having nuclear weapons, the more America will counter the potential Iranian threat, such as directing more assets against Iran and providing more support to friendly countries near Iran. Or the United States could use special forces to mount covert attacks designed to look like industrial accidents.

However, it is unclear if either covert operations or an all-out air attack would be capable of stopping Iran's nuclear program for long. Iran's known program involves several large facilities far inland which could be hard to destroy. Iran may well have other unknown facilities, and it could probably reconstitute most destroyed facilities (other than Bushehr) within a few years.

At the same time, military operations could involve a substantial cost. Iran could retaliate, e.g., with terrorism. And military action could lose the United States the sympathy of the Iranian people. But despite these disadvantages, it is not likely that the United States will rule out the use of force. After all, leaving open the possibility that military action would be required may be Washington's best approach for persuading Europe to take tougher action against Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Faced with Iranian nuclear progress, Israel might decide this constitutes a threat to the very existence of the Jewish state and so take military action, which many in Iran and the region would assume was approved by the United States. This would be most likely were Western nations to do little besides deploring Iran's actions. There would be many disadvantages for the West were Israel to do so, not least of which could be Iranian retaliation via Hezbollah

attacks which in turn seriously set back the Israeli-Arab peace process. Any policy towards Iran's nuclear program should therefore include consultations with Israel to ensure that its security concerns are adequately addressed -- if Israel is to be asked to live with an Iran that has disturbing capabilities, then it is only appropriate to provide Israel with enhanced security measures that reinforce the deterrence against Iranian nuclear attack.

Regime change

Until recently, the expectation had been that if Iran's dangerous weapons programs could be slowed down enough, then political change could come before Iran became a nuclear power. That seemed a reasonable proposition in the late 1990s when the reform movement was moving from strength to strength and Iran's nuclear program seemed to be advancing at a snail's pace. But now the hardliners are resurgent and the nuclear program is racing ahead. It would be optimistic to count on political change -- either changed policy at the instigation of reformers, or power seizure by a popular movement -- in the few years before Iran becomes a nuclear power.

Washington will be tempted to promote the victory of democratic forces in Iran. But there are few good policy instruments available. Presidential statements of encouragement and increased radio/television broadcasting are to be expected, but that is a far cry from the kind of vast covert regime-change operations conjured up by overly active imaginations in Iran and Europe.

The United States is unlikely to receive much support from industrial country allies for a regime change policies. European leaders do not seem to think the regime in Tehran is either fragile or ripe for counter-revolution. Europeans are more likely than Americans to consider the risks in setting the state against the people, which can miscarry a la Tiananmen Square in China. Indeed, EU members are so convinced of the need to reinforce the reformers in the largely powerless executive branch that they would actively work at cross-purposes to any U.S. efforts to sideline or replace those reformers.

If regime change succeeded, that would only be step one in a process of ending the Iranian nuclear program: a democratic government would be intensely nationalist and so would be loathe to give up nuclear programs until it better understood the strategic cost such programs entail, especially the suspicion they cause.

Multilateral diplomacy

In recent months, the United States has made considerable progress at persuading the European Union, the IAEA, and even Russia that Iran's nuclear programs are troubling. But it is optimistic to think that Iran will cease or reverse nuclear proliferation because of diplomatic efforts.

It would be nice to think that West diplomacy could persuade Tehran that its WMD programs actually worsens Iran's security rather than enhances it. Iran's nuclear program is remarkably inappropriate from a realpolitik perspective. Unlike proliferators such as Israel, Pakistan, or North Korea, Iran faces no historic enemy who would welcome an opportunity to wipe the state off the face of the earth. Iran is encircled by troubled neighbors, but nuclear weapons does nothing to help counter the threats that could come from state collapse in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, or Azerbaijan. And Iranian acquisition of nuclear arms would set off a chain reaction -- increased U.S. assets directed against Iran, active Israeli planning for Iran contingencies, and quite possibly nuclear proliferation by Iranian neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey -- which would leave Iran worse off than if it had never developed nuclear arms. Rather than acquiring nuclear weapons, Iran would be strategically much better off if it pressed instead for agreements to limit arms throughout the Gulf: to restrict the size of the new Iraqi army, to freeze and reduce the size of the Arab Gulf monarchies' militaries, and to phase down the size of the U.S. force in the area. However, Iran's leaders seem remarkably impervious to careful strategic thinking, intent instead on reinforcing the strategic loneliness which has characterized the Islamic Republic from the beginning.

Besides persuasion, diplomacy can involve pressure, with threats and inducements. To date, Iran's response to

diplomatic pressure about its nuclear program has been a combination of bluster and minimal cooperation -- just enough to delay further international pressure. That is likely to be the continuing Iranian path. Certainly, the harsh rhetoric was loud in the days after the recent IAEA resolution. Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the leading hardline newspaper Keyhan, wrote on the front page on 13 September,

"Departure of the Islamic Republic of Iran from it [the NPT] is the most basic and necessary step....But this is not sufficient. The officials having the minimum sense of honor and capability must expel immediately the ambassadors of Japan, Australia, and Canada, the three countries which proposed the resolution. And they must not be allowed to return as long as their governments have not apologized... Today the United States is in the most difficult and weakest conditions in its life...The U.S. has become bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan and is facing the intense hatred and disgust of the Moslem nations. [I]f something happens [against Iran], American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq will be easily at the disposal of the Moslem nations for taking revenge."

But the harsh rhetoric does not necessarily reflect what Iran will actually do. More likely, Tehran will do just enough to split the international community, while continuing with clandestine nuclear programs. Iran may well be able to divide the United States from Europe over the Iranian nuclear issue. Nerves remain frayed because of the differences about Iraqi WMD, exacerbated by the lack of evidence to date that Iraq's WMD program was as large or as advanced as the United States and Britain described it pre-war. To be sure, in stark contrast to the Iraq case, the intelligence about the Iran threat is coming from a UN agency, namely, the IAEA -- and there is no doubt that Iran is developing worrisome capabilities, such as centrifuges for enriching uranium. But there is a profound trans-Atlantic difference about how to deal with Iran. Iran takes advantage of the split between its formal, largely powerless government and its aggressive, revolutionary institutions to argue that the state should not be sanctioned for the actions of hardliners, even when endorsed by Iran's supreme leader. Washington is unimpressed by such an argument, whereas European governments place high priority on reinforcing President Mohammed Khatami. This trans-Atlantic difference could well resurface if Iran's formal government offered concessions which Washington thought Iran's more powerful revolutionary institutions would not respect.

A "grand deal" with Tehran

The United States is in a bad position to work out a deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The obstacles are many. There is little reason to think that Iran's hardliners, who for years refused to even talk to Washington, are interested in a deal with the United States. Based on their history (e.g., the release of hostages in Lebanon), Iran and the United States are each convinced the other cheats and refuses to respond to overtures. Any deal might involve terms so generous it would look like Tehran was being rewarded for being a proliferator, which could encourage others to proliferate. Plus, any deal would look like Washington was supporting Iran's hardliners, thereby selling out the democratic forces.

That said, Europe is well placed to work out a deal. Indeed, the on-going negotiations for a Trade Cooperation Agreement (TCA) between Brussels and Tehran provide the EU with a vehicle. Iran badly wants the TCA, and it has already agreed to discussions about nuclear issues in conjunction with the TCA talks. The cynical analyst might suspect that Iran's strategy is to get the EU to agree to a TCA in return for Iran doing what it planned to do all along, namely, to acquire a wide range of nuclear capabilities, such as a fully closed fuel cycle with enrichment and reprocessing, while holding off on actually building a nuclear weapon. If in fact Iran is able to secure significant economic concessions from the EU in return for Iran doing what it had all along planned to do, that could be a powerful bad example to others considering proliferation: construct a threatening nuclear program, agree to "limit" it to what had been the plan all along, and receive a significant reward from Europe. Such an approach will not be praised in Washington.

Deterrence of Iranian weapons assembly

Iran is well on the path to acquiring the fissile material needed for nuclear weapons. That will give Iran troubling capabilities to assemble a bomb quickly. But perhaps Iran could be deterred from taking that last step, that is, perhaps Iran could be persuaded to remain in the ambiguous nuclear situation that long characterized Pakistan if not India's nuclear programs.

There are many grave risks in accepting Iran's acquisition of dangerous capabilities while concentrating on preventing Iran from taking the final step of assembling nuclear weapons. One is that Iran would be tempted to provide terrorists with a nuclear weapon. After all, mass casualty terrorism done by proxies has worked well for Iran to date. Iranian assistance to the terrorists who blew up the U.S. and French barracks in Beirut in 1983 was a grand strategic success, forcing the United States and for a while France out of Lebanon while not bringing any retaliation down on Iran. Similarly, the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia brought the Saudis to make a strategic reconciliation, and once again, Iran faced no retaliation.

Another risk is that Iran acquires nuclear weapons, further nuclear proliferation is likely--indeed, the NPT system might begin to seriously fray. Other rogue states may decide that nuclear weapons acquisition entails few strategic costs and confers considerable strategic benefit. Iran's neighbors might become nervous enough to decide they needed nuclear protection; for instance, Saudi Arabia could ask Pakistan to station nuclear weapons on Saudi soil, perhaps to be deployed on the long-range Chinese missiles the Saudis bought in 1988 on the model of U.S. deployment of nuclear weapons on German soil to fit on German missiles during the Cold War (note that such an arrangement would be fully consistent with the Saudis' NPT obligations). To forestall these dire outcomes, the most promising anti-proliferation tool would be closer Western security ties with allies threatened by the Iranian proliferation breakthrough, such as: changing declaratory posture, e.g., extending a nuclear umbrella over its regional friends; enhancing access to advanced conventional weapons, such as missile/air defenses; and expanding U.S. presence in the region.

Deterring Iranian assembly of nuclear weapons may be an attractive option to Europeans. It is after all consistent with the spirit of the NPT. The NPT allows countries to acquire a wide range of troubling capabilities in return for being open and transparent. The NPT gives Iran every right to have a full closed fuel cycle, with large uranium enrichment facilities and a reprocessing plant that can extract substantial amounts of plutonium -- capabilities which would permit Iran at any time to rapidly "break out" of the NPT, building a considerable number of nuclear weapons in a short time. To date, Europe's focus has been on getting Iran to live up fully to the NPT deal, specifically, to be more open and transparent, especially to sign and implement the IAEA Additional Protocol (the final stage of Program 93+2). It is by no means clear that the United States can live with this, that is, with an Iran that develops all the capabilities permitted under the NPT. Perhaps a way can be found to preserve trans-Atlantic consensus about the NPT deal through enhanced safeguards, that is, through making Iran the test case for a new set of country-neutral rules (i.e., rules which will eventually extend to all countries) which reinforce the present IAEA system based on periodic inspections with more up-to-date safeguard technologies based on real-time electronic monitors and sensors, more along the lines of what the IAEA was doing in Iraq. Enhanced safeguards would maintain the basic NPT deal -- troubling capabilities are permitted to those who are transparent about what they are doing -- but provide greater reassurance of advance warning if a country is preparing to break out of the NPT by using those capabilities to build nuclear weapons.

Security Council Options

Much progress has been made in exposing Iran's nuclear program and in forging an international will to respond vigorously. Now the time has come to move to the next stage, that is, to develop a consensus on possible Security Council actions if the IAEA Board condemns Iranian noncompliance. Developing such a consensus will be of great

importance -- for the Bush administration, for the Security Council, for the global nonproliferation regime, and for preserving peace in the Middle East. Given the high stakes, the effort should soon move into high gear.

The Security Council's options are not reassuring: it is not clear that the council could reach consensus about what to do, nor is it clear that any measures the council might adopt could persuade or force Iran to abandon its nuclear program. The worst option, however, would be for the council to do nothing effective. A summary of options that might -- with sufficient U.S. lobbying -- gain Security Council support would include:

- Banning the export to Iran of nuclear and military technology. A Security Council resolution would provide Russia with a good opportunity to block the first shipment of nuclear fuel to the nearly completed Bushehr power plant. The council could also block Iranian access to technologies for its missiles, which are of just the design needed to carry nuclear weapons and which serve little purpose unless armed with WMD. If a comprehensive ban on access to military technologies were imposed on Iran, it might fuel internal debate about whether nuclear weapons contribute to Iran's security or instead isolate the country to such an extent that its security is undermined.
- Freezing new economic agreements with Iran. The European Union has stated that in the event of no progress on the nuclear front, it will break off negotiations with Iran for the TCA badly wanted by Tehran. The United States would certainly continue to block Iran's application to join the World Trade Organization. And Japan would presumably continue to suspend the multibillion-dollar investment by its oil companies in the giant Azadegan oil field. At a minimum, the Security Council could give its blessing to such measures. A further step would be to call for a suspension of new international agreements with Iran -- the most important of which would be new investment agreements in the oil and gas industry, which provide the Iranian government with the vast majority of its revenues.
- Imposing broader economic sanctions on Iran. This seems a less fruitful course. France, Russia, and China are leery of open-ended economic sanctions, which they think were ineffective or counterproductive in the Iraq instance. In any case, Iran has long, open borders already much used by smugglers, so trade restrictions might not work well. Neither are restrictions on new loans likely to make much difference, given that Iran has more than \$20 billion in foreign-exchange reserves.
- Declaring unacceptable any Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons. At a minimum, the Security Council could adopt a strong statement to deter Iran from taking the final step of acquiring nuclear weapons. More effective at deterring Iran would be a resolution which implies that, failing all else, use of force could be appropriate to stop Iran from assembling or testing nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

All the policy options for responding to Iran's nuclear progress are seriously flawed: they may not be particularly effective and they may come at a high price. It is easy to criticize any one of the policies, but the worst policy would be to do nothing, which would lead to further WMD proliferation. The Middle East will become a very dangerous state if many states acquire nuclear weapons.

In the long run, the prospects for stopping Iranian proliferation and terrorism are good, because the Iranian people hate the current system, want democracy, and are friendly to the United States. Therefore, any policy should reach out to the Iranian people to support their hopes for change while taking a tough stand against those who engage in repression at home and terror abroad. Ultimately, an end to the rule by hardliners is the best solution for Iranians, Israel, and the United States. The question is what must be done until the day when the Iranian people are free to choose their own government. And the answer to that question is not easy. ❖

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