

Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program: Status and Implications

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Brief Analysis

Iran is pursuing a strategy of flexible acquisition, keeping multiple options open. It wants to take advantage of any opportunities to obtain required materials out of the former Soviet Union. At the same time, it aims to develop a nuclear infrastructure over the long term, pursuing the whole process of understanding nuclear weapon design and production.

Iran will be overtly scrupulous in its adherence to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but in fact will have no scruples whatsoever about violating it. Iran is unlikely to be inhibited or constrained by concerns about international reaction to the discovery that they are not adhering to the NPT. Iran wants to have a public face of compliance while obtaining a nuclear capability. This provides Iran with the opportunity for the possession of capability in time of crisis without having to pay a price for possession of the capability in non-crisis periods. Iran does not need to advertise its capabilities, because there are plenty of those in the United States will do that.

Do Iranian Nuclear Weapons Matter? Many question the utility of nuclear weapons given the central role of the United States in the region and the disparities between the extensive U.S. nuclear arsenal and the probably small Iranian nuclear inventory. This argument misses the point. Even a small number of nuclear weapons would enhance Iranian military options. To be sure, Iran is unlikely to employ those weapons directly. But the weapons would have an impact on U.S. conventional options in a limited war. Iran's nuclear weapons would also increase the usability of its chemical and biological arsenal, influencing what the United States might do in response to the use of these weapons. Furthermore, the possession of nuclear weapons magnifies the importance of a disparity in commitment and in the magnitude of interests at stake. Some analysts credibly make the point that the U.S. calculus during the 1990-91 Kuwait invasion would have been different if Saddam had had nuclear weapons.

Today, if Iran were thought to have nuclear weapons this would enhance its ability to conduct negotiations in the region, as the smaller states would take preemptive steps to avoid any crisis. The North Korean example illustrates that nuclear weapons would cause the United States and others to treat Iran with greater respect; they may even provide positive inducements to Iran.

Prospects for Program Reversal. A reversal of the nuclear program would be more likely if five conditions prevailed:

- Reassessment of the utility of nuclear weapons. In the context of the uncertainties Iranians must feel about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, such a reassessment seems unlikely.
- Domestic pressure. Although there is a debate about the utility of nuclear weapons in some Iranian circles, it is unclear to what extent this includes the people who have real influence on decision making. It seems unlikely that there is much effective domestic pressure to reverse the nuclear program.
- External Pressure. While the West--especially the United States--focuses attention on the Iranian nuclear program, Russia and China do not seem to care much about the issue.
- Admission of possession. Iran is unlikely to overtly admit to a nuclear program.
- Economic crisis. Iran lacks money, which probably constrains the development of a nuclear program. On the other hand, it has even less money to acquire conventional weapons. On balance, this factor works marginally against continuing the nuclear program.

In weighing all these factors, Iran is not likely to give up its nuclear program. Iran is on a course to acquire nuclear weapons, and will almost certainly acquire them. The United States can delay, but not stop the program. U.S. policy should be to establish a credible deterrence relationship with Iran and a credible reassurance relationship with its allies in the region. At the same time, the United States should enhance its defenses against Iranian nuclear weapons, especially missile defense.

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Most specialists believe that Iran is pursuing some kind of nuclear option. The question is how far advanced its efforts are, and what the implications are for the Middle East.

The diversion of fissile material from the former Soviet Union could put Iran on the fast track to a nuclear capability, and the United States might not find out about such a diversion until long after it has occurred. However, such an approach might provide Iran with only a few weapons. For a more robust nuclear capability, Iran would need an indigenous nuclear infrastructure capable of producing fissile material. Iranian efforts to assemble such an infrastructure, however, have been both delayed and thwarted, in large part due to U.S. efforts.

Because Iran is an NPT signatory, it faces a number of difficult choices as it considers how to approach and perhaps cross the nuclear threshold. Basically, Tehran has three options:

- Create a rapid breakout capability, that is, acquire all the building blocks needed to produce nuclear weapons, but cross the nuclear threshold only in the event of a dramatic and threatening change to the regional security environment. The downside here is that Iran's threat environment might change more quickly than it would be able to produce nuclear weapons, resulting in a window of vulnerability.
- Acquire all the elements for a nuclear weapons program, and once they are in place, cross the nuclear threshold. Thus, if Iran's program were compromised, a cut-off in foreign assistance would not disrupt the effort. This approach, however, entails an element of delay.
- Create a clandestine parallel weapons program concurrent with efforts to build up civilian nuclear infrastructure while looking for opportunities to acquire diverted fissile material. Although this is the quickest route to the bomb, Iran could be sanctioned, isolated, and left without a bomb if the effort were prematurely compromised. This is probably the route that Iran is pursuing.

Iran's clerical leadership is relatively united on the importance of a nuclear capability to Iran's national security. To the degree that both reformists and hardliners are Iranian nationalists, both sides are likely to seek the status and capabilities that nuclear weapons confer. On the other hand, reformers might be more concerned than conservatives

about jeopardizing foreign ties and investment by a nuclear program that violates Iran's NPT commitments.

Were Iran to cross the nuclear threshold, it would face a dilemma concerning whether to declare its nuclear capability or not. To deter or intimidate, one has to advertise its nuclear capabilities. On the other hand, were a nuclear Iran to publicize its capabilities in violation of its NPT obligations, it could be subject to harsh sanctions and renewed isolation. Iran is therefore more likely to remain silent, while displaying its missile capabilities as a surrogate for the full range of WMD capabilities it possesses but cannot brandish.

A race is on between Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons and the evolution of the country's political system. U.S. policy should therefore seek to delay Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, while encouraging the peaceful evolution of its political system.

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