

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM AND THE FUTURE OF U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONS

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Due to its geopolitical prominence, Iran has been the focus of great-power policies during the entire course of modern history. The Russian-British rivalry over Iran that began in the mid-1800's lasted a century. With the end of World War II, Britain's role in the region diminished, and the vacuum was filled by the United States.

Iran gained full sovereignty over its territory by 1947. Two major factors shaped U.S. policy on Iran in the post-war period. First, Iran's geopolitical significance made it even more important for the United States to contain the USSR on its southern flank.¹ Second, Iran possessed rich oil and gas resources.² In order to control the flow of this strategic commodity to Western economies and military forces, the United States determined to maintain "friendly" regimes in Iran. Prime Minister Mohammad Mossaddeq, who nationalized the country's petroleum reserves in 1951, was allegedly toppled by the CIA.³ With Shah Reza Pahlavi's return in 1953, Iran regained its status as the United States' number one ally in the Middle East. Un-

der American protection, Iran became a regional power in the period leading up to the Islamic revolution in 1979.

With the Islamic revolution, the United States lost its closest ally in the region. What made this even more dramatic was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the same year. Suddenly, the United States lost its two most important intelligence areas against the USSR, faced the significant risk of disruption of the oil supply from the region, and faced the serious strategic threat of a destabilization in the region. Iraq perceived the situation as a great opportunity to regain the territories ceded to Iran in 1974. With U.S. support, Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980. The Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, after ruining both countries.⁴ In the following period, two important events shaped the course of regional politics: first, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the gulf war that followed, and, two, the fall of the USSR the next year.

The new situation offered both risks and opportunities for Iran. On the one hand, Iran aimed to increase its control of the newly independent republics in Central

Asia by using religion as a tool of influence. On the other hand, Washington supported Turkey's greater role in the region and excluded Iran from oil and gas projects. In return, Iran approached Russia and Armenia for support on regional matters in the post-Cold War period. Iran's support for radical groups in the Middle East, its sabotage of the Middle East peace process, its establishment of a partnership with Syria, and its demonization of Israel were other factors that contributed to tense relations with United States.⁵ In this context, Washington continued to formulate policies, such as "dual containment" to contain Iran and thwart the military and political influence of both Iran and Iraq.⁶

The September 11, 2001, attacks and subsequent shifts in American foreign policy brought another dimension to U.S.-Iranian relations. Although the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2002 and Saddam Hussein in 2003 eliminated the Iranian regime's two major regional rivals — Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively — it also caused the country to be encircled by U.S. forces on the east, west and north. In addition, energy and military agreements between the United States and the Central Asian republics made Iran feel even more contained. With the exposure of Iran's secret nuclear program in 2002, relations between the two countries deteriorated greatly. Some experts believe the threat posed by the United States caused Tehran to secretly accelerate its nuclear program.

EARLY HISTORY

Iran's pursuit of a nuclear capability goes as far back as the 1960s. Ironically, the United States was the first country to help Iran gain nuclear technology. It supplied a five-megawatt research reac-

tor to Iran that began operation in 1967. Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 and ratified it in 1970.⁷

The Iranian nuclear program was ambitious from the beginning. Oil prices soared, especially after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, allowing the Iranian government to invest more in nuclear-energy development. Under Shah Muhammed Pahlavi's administration, the Iranian government made deals with German and French contractors. Germany's Kraftwerk Union (a subsidiary of Siemens) agreed to build two 1,200-megawatt nuclear reactors at Bushehr, and a French company agreed to supply two 900-megawatt reactors. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) also signed a contract with the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to train the first cadre of Iranian nuclear scientists in 1975. Iran's domestic nuclear cycle included an advanced nuclear research center and the development of uranium mining and ore processing.⁸

The United States also supported Iran's plans to build a nuclear-energy capacity. According to declassified confidential U.S. government documents,⁹ the shah's government planned to purchase eight nuclear reactors from the United States for electricity generation purposes. In July 1978, only seven months before the Islamic revolution, the final draft of the U.S.-Iranian Nuclear Energy Agreement was signed. This agreement was designed to facilitate Iranian-American nuclear cooperation, including the purchase of equipment and material from the United States and help in the search for uranium deposits. The political upheaval preceding and following the revolution halted the Iranian nuclear program. By 1979, one

nuclear reactor, Bushehr 1, was 90 percent complete, with 60 percent of its equipment installed; Bushehr 2 was 50 percent complete. The first prime minister after the revolution, Mehdi Bazargan, concluded that Iran did not need nuclear energy and discontinued the project.¹⁰

The second factor that prevented Iran from developing a nuclear capacity earlier was the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88. Iraq bombed Iran's nuclear reactors and research centers, hitting the two reactors under construction in Bushehr six times. With the end of the war, Iran's need for electricity significantly expanded. According to the official Iranian line, this led President Hashemi Rafsanjani's government to review its policy and decide to continue with the quest for nuclear-energy projects. The Iranian government sought international technical assistance and collaboration to complete the nuclear facilities from Germany, Argentina, Spain, the Czech Republic, Italy and Poland.¹¹ However, these attempts were prevented by the United States as a part of the dual-containment policy.

In 1995, after long negotiations, an Iranian-Russian agreement over Iran's nuclear program was signed. It called for finishing the reactors at Bushehr, which, under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), would have been capable of producing a maximum of 180 kg of plutonium per year. According to the agreement, Bushehr 1 was supposed to be completed by 1999, but it is still only partially finished. Russia announced it will finish the Bushehr power plant in 2009, according to Reuters (November 27, 2008). The agreement also stipulated that Russia would provide further technical assistance and the training of Iranian nuclear scientists.¹²

Russian completion of the Bushehr reactors is an immensely complex task. Back in the 1970s, the Kraftwerk Union did not provide any technical documents for the installation of the reactors. In addition, Russian and German reactors are significantly different technologically. The Iranian nuclear program is highly dependent on foreign technology transfer, and it seems that it will continue to be.¹³ Another point that raised concern about Iranian intentions has been the rapid developments in Iranian missile delivery capabilities. Iran's middle-range ballistic-missile capabilities can reach all the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Israeli and American analysts, in particular, suggest that the development of these capabilities poses a security threat to the region. Iran's efforts to develop missile capabilities in parallel with its nuclear program have led many analysts to believe the latter is intended for military purposes rather than energy production.

THE CURRENT CRISIS

The current crisis began in August 2002, when an Iranian exile opposition group, the National Council of Resistance (Mujahedin-e Khalq), accused Tehran of hiding a uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy-water plant at Arak. The existence of the sites was confirmed by satellite photographs. This was followed by Iran's announcement that its nuclear program had peaceful aims and that it would allow IAEA inspections.¹⁴ In November 2003, Iran suspended its nuclear program and announced it would allow stricter IAEA inspections. The IAEA concluded that there was no evidence of the program, but the United States insists that Iran ultimately aims to produce nuclear weapons, particularly as the

country possesses enormous fossil-fuel reserves and does not need nuclear energy in the short and medium term. In addition, three other factors discredit the “peaceful nuclear energy” argument: (1) Iran kept its nuclear program secret until it was discovered in 2002; (2) there are alleged military connections and weaponization studies connected to the nuclear program as well as missile development; (3) and from an economic perspective, indigenous enrichment is not logical.¹⁵

To mediate between Washington and Tehran, the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Britain (the EU3) visited Iran in October 2003. They asked Iran to stop enriching uranium and suggested that it sign an additional protocol to the NPT and provide full cooperation with the IAEA. The EU3 offered economic concessions, if these conditions were met. The rest of the world, including the United States, supported the EU3 initiative and a diplomatic solution to the problem. In August 2005, Iran rejected the proposal, and the talks were stopped. In fall 2005, Iran resumed uranium conversion at its Isfahan plant, and an IAEA resolution declared it in violation of the NPT. During fall 2005, Iran was encouraged to resume talks with the EU-3, to refrain from enrichment at other nuclear facilities and to halt enrichment at the Isfahan plant.

In January 2006, Iran broke the IAEA seals at its Natanz facility, and the IAEA referred the matter to the UN Security Council (UNSC). Iran also declared that it had resumed its uranium conversion at Natanz. On March 30, 2006, the UNSC demanded that Iran suspend uranium enrichment within 30 days. In April 2006, President Ahmedinejad announced that uranium enrichment had been successfully

achieved. As a response, on December 23, 2006, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 1737, imposing sanctions specifically on the Iranian nuclear program, calling for Iran to suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, and to take all steps required by the IAEA to ensure that its program is for peaceful energy production only. Iran did not comply and has continued with its enrichment activities. On March 24, 2007, the UNSC unanimously accepted Resolution 1747 tightening sanctions against Iran and giving Tehran 60 days to suspend its uranium enrichment program. Iran did not comply, declaring that it had begun “industrial scale” enrichment.¹⁶ As of early 2009, the IAEA estimates that industrial-scale enrichment involving about 4,000 fuel rods is ongoing.¹⁷

To summarize, Iran is still a member of the NPT and, under the terms of this agreement, member states have the right to develop a nuclear program for peaceful purposes, including enrichment. This is why Iranians repeatedly emphasize that they are simply doing what they are allowed to do: enrichment. However, the fears of the United States, the EU and regional actors are not all groundless. As the IAEA has confirmed, Iran maintained a secret enrichment program for 18 years, until it was discovered in 2002. Even though Iran has categorically denied allegations that its program is for producing nuclear weapons, Iranian officials have not convinced others, most of all the United States.

U.S. INTERESTS AND POLICIES

Although the current crisis between the United States and Iran seems to be about the latter’s nuclear program, we argue that

the actual problem stems from the conflicting interests in the Middle East. According to the National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2006, the major interests of United States are (1) providing security for the oil and gas supply, (2) eliminating threats from terrorist organizations, (3) preventing the spread of WMDs, and (4) maintaining Israel's existence and qualitative military advantage.

Successive American administrations have claimed that a major U.S. goal is to promote democracy and economic liberalization in the region. However, even if this is the case, it can only be as a means to achieve these four genuine security-oriented goals above. They are truly intertwined; losing out in one of them can induce serious costs in others. For example, the spread of WMDs would make terrorist threats more critical. Similarly, terrorism is a threat to both energy security and Israel. Therefore, interests must be considered together.

A striking fact about U.S.-Iranian relations is that these four U.S. interests all conflict with Iran's goals. First and foremost, Iran is not under U.S. influence when it comes to oil and gas production and transportation. In fact, Iran is capable of interrupting the transport of oil from the Hormuz Strait and making its own energy-export deals with Russia, China and Turkey (and perhaps also the EU in the future). Second, Iran is the greatest supporter of Hamas and Hezbollah in the region. Third, the United States claims that Iran is meddling with Iraqi Shia groups and preventing the stabilization of Iraq,¹⁸ and represents the biggest obstacle to thwarting radical Islamic groups in the region. Meanwhile, the harsh rhetoric used by these groups and the Iranian regime against

Israel also goes against the American desire to protect Israel's security. Lastly, the possibility that Iran could produce nuclear weapons is a nightmare for the United States. It would give Iran an enormous strategic tool, secure the Islamic regime's survival, threaten Israel, and fuel a nuclear arms race in the region while holding the potential to be transferred to terrorist groups. As a result, Iran's influence in the region would increase immensely, shifting the precarious balance of power.

IRAN'S INTERESTS AND POLICIES

The Iranian state has two primary interests: to protect its territorial integrity and the Islamic regime, and to become the leading power in the region. We argue that Iran perceives American influence as the greatest threat to the survival of its regime and uses its nuclear program to gain leverage in its relations with the world.

Iran has some geopolitical advantages. It has access to the world's two energy-rich regions, the Middle East and the Caspian Basin. North-south and east-west control of energy transit lines and the ability to control the Strait of Hormuz increase Iran's leverage over other actors. Its great land mass and inhospitable terrain are enormous advantages against foreign military penetration.

In addition, Iran holds the world's second-largest oil reserves (11.4 percent of the total reserves), as well as gas reserves (15.5 percent). In 2006, Iran was the fourth-largest producer of oil and natural gas in the world, while current oil production is estimated to be 4.3 million barrels per day (about 5.4 percent of global output). Its reserves of oil and gas have not yet been revealed.¹⁹ Despite an underdeveloped technological capac-

ity in production and a lack of adequate investment, Iran has the ability to influence world energy markets. The third factor that gives Iran an advantage is its young and comparatively well-educated population: two-thirds of its 72 million inhabitants are under the age of 30.²⁰ The weakness of the Iranian population is its multiethnic character. For example, about a quarter of it is ethnic Azeri, mostly in the north.²¹ Foreign influences can use ethnic groups to interfere with the Islamic regime. Finally, Iran's long history as a nation and its bureaucratic competence make the regime stronger. It is opportunistic and flexible. The economy is the regime's weak point.²²

The United States regards Iran as the greatest threat to its regional interests.²³ According to the Bush administration, Iran supports terrorism, denies its people human rights, seeks to acquire WMDs, destabilizes the region and is a serious threat to Israel.²⁴ To eliminate this "threat," Iran must be saved from the current authoritarian regime, and a democracy must be established that would be integrated politically and economically with the rest of the world. If Iran were to produce nuclear weapons, its military capabilities would insure the Islamic regime from attack. Iran perceives acquiring a nuclear-weapons capability as the only way to eliminate the American threat.

The problems between the United States and Iran are all intertwined with the nuclear issue. For the United States, the real aim is regime change; however, to achieve that, Iran must first be prevented from producing nuclear weapons. Iran is trying to acquire a nuclear capability to thwart U.S. aims, just as North Korea did.²⁵

POLICY OPTIONS

We will present four scenarios for U.S.-Iran relations, all of which share some common phases and thresholds. The most critical is the "time that Iran requires for its nuclear capabilities to produce a weapon." We assume a military-strike option depends on the "nuclear threshold." As the four scenarios suggest, if the United States decides to use military power against Iran, it will happen right before Iran acquires a nuclear-weapons capability. In all scenarios, we assume the first mover is the United States rather than Iran, which will respond to the superpower. Considering the vast gap in military capabilities, we assume Iran's response will be asymmetrical. Note that in all scenarios, time phases are defined contextually. We cannot make an accurate prediction about when one phase will end and the other begin.

DIPLOMACY/POLITICS

The United States has been using diplomacy and politics to isolate Iran since the crisis began in 2002 and will continue to do so. We hypothesize that these efforts will focus on organizations such as the UN, the IAEA, the EU and possibly NATO. Specifically, the Obama administration might attempt to push for tighter sanctions by the UN Security Council and continue cooperating with the other five countries involved in the debate (Russia, China, France, Great Britain and Germany). The United States has been concentrating on Russia and China due to their veto power in the UNSC. Iran's diplomatic response will be limited to trying to prevent an international consensus on its nuclear program. If Iran cannot achieve this, it will try to delay such a consensus until it actually acquires nuclear weapons

capabilities. Therefore, we expect Iran to cultivate closer relations with Russia and China. Prolonged hostilities between the United States and Iran carry benefits for Russia. The longer the crisis, the more conventional weapons and nuclear technology Russia can sell to Iran. Russia can also use this crisis against the United States on other issues, such as NATO expansion to the Caucasus or American plans to deploy embryonic missile-defense systems to Eastern Europe. Chinese officials have repeated many times that, although they do not want Iran to be punished for its civilian nuclear program, they insist that Iran's program not aim to develop weapons. We estimate that China will try to balance American pressure on Iran; yet, due to its economic interdependence with the United States, China may shift to a more pro-Western position. Iran may offer special energy supply deals to China in order to gain its support. Finally, Iran might use anti-Israeli propaganda in its support of Islamic nations.

INTERNATIONAL LAW

The international legal regime and the role of the United Nations have been criticized in the post-9/11 era by much of the world — and ignored by the United States. The decision to intervene in Iraq without international legitimacy has made America's work there much more difficult. Therefore, Washington will probably try to achieve international support next time it intervenes in the region and has been using legal arguments against Iran from the beginning. According to this point of view, Iran is developing a nuclear-weapons capability that is in breach of the NPT signed by Iran in 1968. Iran's response is that its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes and that it is simply doing what it is allowed to.

ECONOMICS

The United States has used and will continue to use economic and financial sanctions against Iran. Its aim is not only to damage Iran's international transactions, but also to increase pressure on its domestic economy. Extended sanctions that target the whole Iranian economy might put the Islamic regime in a difficult position with its citizens. Social unrest can trigger political demands, especially from the young reformist students. The 2007 gas shortage in Tehran is illustrative. When economic and financial sanctions are combined with other political-psychological means, the regime might have to crack hard on the protesters, which would diminish its legitimacy. Such a series of events might be "useful" to U.S. strategies of regime change. Iran's economic responses would be limited. First and foremost, it could attempt to disrupt the supply to international energy markets. However, considering how much Iran depends on oil revenues, this is not a realistic option. Second, Iran could threaten to change its dollar reserves to euros to hurt the American economy; however, Iranian currency reserves are limited.

PSY-OPS

The use of psychological tools to mobilize the public for political change requires minimal resources. Media and internet discussions questioning the legitimacy of the regime can be promoted. The regime's opponents already broadcast such opinions.²⁶ Moreover, opposition civil society groups can be supported, as they were in the Ukraine and Georgia. For example, in 2003, the U.S. Congress authorized \$1.5 million for Iranian domestic NGOs that work for democracy and human rights.²⁷ Second, both clandestine and

overt operations might be supported by U.S. intelligence services, with the aim of destabilizing the domestic order and questioning the Islamic regime's legitimacy.

There are three fault lines that the United States could use against the Iranian regime: religious/sectarian, ethnic and socioeconomic. About 90 percent of Iranian population is Shia; the rest are the Sunnis, who have been denied equality by the Shia regime. The Sunnis are also Turkmens and Kurds, which brings ethnicity into the equation. Iran is also multiethnically diverse. Persians and Azeri Baluchis are the largest and most influential groups, and they are also located in the capital. The Kurds are in the west, the Arabs in the south, the Turkmens in the northeast and the Baluchis in the east. The Persian elite is particularly concerned about their Azeri minority, since the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan is now independent. Finally, economic hardships and inequality can cause unrest. Public finances can only be maintained by higher energy prices, and high unemployment in the country has been persistent.²⁸

As a response, Iran can attempt to mobilize Shia and terrorist groups in the Middle East. Iran is capable of affecting the Shia minorities living within the borders of American allies in the Gulf. This influence might spread across the region to Lebanon (Hezbollah), Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Turkey, not to mention Iraq, where the Shia population is dominant.

MILITARY FORCE

Military force is the last resort for both the United States and Iran. However, if all other policy tools prove ineffective and the likelihood of Iran's acquiring nuclear-weapons technology increases, the use

of force may rise to the top of the U.S. agenda. The political aims, geographical constraints and military capabilities of the two countries will shape the characteristics of the use of force. The United States will rely on advanced military technologies, while Iran will respond with asymmetrical warfare. Also, U.S. strategic goals will shape the type of military conflict. Will the United States aim only to stop the nuclear program or try to push for regime change?

The United States will probably use strategic air forces and long range missiles.²⁹ A conventional ground attack seems a remote possibility because of the strained capacity of U.S. forces, the experience of Iraq, negative U.S. public opinion on the use of force, and the Obama administration's reluctance.

We assume there are three different targets in Iran: first, Iran's nuclear capability, the target that will provide the justification for use of force. The second would include strategically important economic institutions and the country's infrastructure in order to damage the economy and increase public discontent. The third target would be the Iranian armed forces and Revolutionary Guard, the two institutions that provide the regime with control over the people. For the United States, the military option would be necessary to induce regime change as well as prevent the development of nuclear weapons. However, the Iranian nuclear program is not concentrated in one location, and, according to some Western intelligence reports, the facilities are so deep underground that high-technology bunker-busters would be needed.³⁰ Therefore, the United States might only be able to slow down the development of the program. Other strategically important economic targets might include

petrochemical plants, energy and energy-transit structures, and communication and transportation facilities such as ports and airports. Israel's targets in Lebanon in 2006 are an example of how the use of force may be directed to non-military targets in order to achieve political aims. Although it was not completely successful, the idea was to hurt the infrastructure to limit Hezbollah's ability to rule in southern Lebanon.

Considering the vast technological and military disparities between the two countries, we project that Iran's response to a U.S. attack would be asymmetrical. Although both geographical distance and technological problems limit its options, Iran can threaten American forces in the Gulf and across the Middle East. Iran can also aim its long-range missiles at Israel. However, the limitations on Iran will push policy makers to use Iran's political and religious influence in the region and support non-state groups for this aim. Iran's possible support for terrorist groups and covert-operation capabilities may hurt American interests in the region. In particular, Iran might try to play the Shia card in Iraq to further destabilize Iraqi society.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

Four scenarios are likely: (1) a regime guarantee, in which Iran is provided with assurances by major powers; (2) a nuclear Iran, in which the country reaches the nuclear threshold before the United States or others prevent it; (3) unforeseen regime change from within, and (4) induced regime change, in which the United States uses force to destroy the nuclear program.

Regime Guarantee

The regime-guarantee scenario is based on eliminating the primary U.S.

and Iranian concerns through diplomacy. According to this model, the United States, the EU, Russia and China pledge to decrease political pressure and diplomatic attacks on Iran and establish the necessary mechanisms to make this policy work. In return, Iran would be expected to give all necessary assurances that its program is only for peaceful purposes, ensure full cooperation with the IAEA inspections, soften the tone of its rhetoric on Israel, end support for terrorist groups, and promise not to intervene in Iraq's domestic affairs.

Two fundamental dynamics are necessary for such a scenario to happen. First, the parties would need to create the appropriate political climate using economic, diplomatic, legal and psychological tools to keep tensions manageable. Second, this scenario is only possible if the bargaining is finished before Iran acquires a nuclear-weapons capability. After this stage, providing such guarantees to the Iranian regime would be almost impossible. Therefore, this scenario's success depends on its timing, in that all parties have to believe in the others' good intentions.

An important aspect of this scenario is that it provides an opportunity for major policy shifts for both Iran and the United States. At different stages, it might look as if the negotiations (overt and covert) are advancing. However, Iran or the United States might use this as an opportunity to buy time. For example, Iran might behave cooperatively during negotiations but use the time frame to advance its nuclear program. Although this scenario seems to be the most peaceful, least costly and most desirable in the eyes of many, there are doubts about its feasibility. If we are correct in assuming that regime change is the major U.S. goal, this scenario will only delay the crisis.

Such a scenario can therefore only be a temporary solution. However, if the Obama administration convinces Iran that its aim is not regime change, such a diplomatic solution to the problem might be possible. Yet, due to the nature of relations between the two countries, it would be very difficult to convince Iranians that such a policy would be pursued by future administrations.

A Nuclear Iran

In this scenario, Iran makes use of the disagreements and lack of policy cohesion between the United States and the EU, draws more Russian and Chinese support, lies about its nuclear program and carries out a nuclear experiment (such as a detonation) at an unexpected moment. Such an experiment, of course, would have to take place earlier than anticipated to avoid a possible American military strike on its nuclear plants. Such a situation would change the balance in the region. All domestic and foreign actors would have to review their strategies and change their foreign-policy tools accordingly. For Iran, the greatest challenge would be to prove its nuclear test was successful, as nuclear experiments can be analyzed by other nations' intelligence communities using technical means, such as atmospheric tests. If Iran accomplished such a task, the United States and other regional powers would have to devise new policies to co-exist with a nuclear Iran. The international community observed a similar reaction by major and regional powers when India and Pakistan proved their nuclear capabilities. On the other hand, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey would be threatened by such a development and face a security dilemma. This would begin a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

Unforeseen Regime Change

A domestic opposition group could overthrow the Islamic regime and consolidate its power. Such a change would probably include guarantees from the new Iranian administration that the nuclear program would be halted and that Iran would establish closer ties with the international community and the United States. This would decrease the tension between Iran and the Western powers. Although such an option is the least costly and most desirable from the perspective of the United States, its probability is slim. The Iranian regime is quite effective in controlling domestic challenges. Although revolutionary enthusiasm is long gone and there are criticisms about how the regime handles domestic issues, we can foresee neither the necessary political climate nor a domestic group that has the potential to take over.

Forcible Regime Change

In all discussions of the future of U.S.-Iranian relations, the use of force by the United States has been a central part. Both the Bush and Obama administrations have suggested it is "one of the options on the table."³¹ In this scenario, Washington decides that the use of force is essential to its ultimate political aims in Iran. U.S. decision makers conclude that negotiations and other policy tools only give Iran more time to develop their nuclear capabilities. If decision makers are convinced that the critical threshold is very near, a military intervention might become possible, leading to the ultimate goal of regime change. It seems unlikely that the desired regime change would occur right after the military intervention. The United States is not likely to conduct a full-scale ground invasion, as discussed earlier. Therefore, the Islamic

regime would have a period to consolidate its power once again, attempting to retaliate while trying to control the domestic damage. The regime's legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian people and its ability to control the domestic opposition that would try to exploit the situation would determine its viability. The duration and characteristics of this period are difficult to foresee, for it will involve many variables.

CONCLUSION

Iran's nuclear program and the prolonged international debate over what to do about it are a function of the irreconcilable interests of the United States and Iran in the Middle East. The characteristics of U.S.-Iranian relations in the last three decades do not seem very promising for a resolution of the issue. Since the Islamic revolution, the United States has chosen to isolate and contain Iran. It is difficult to argue that this policy has worked effectively towards the U.S. security goals in the Middle East: energy security, prevention of terrorism and the spread of WMDs, and Israel's security. On the contrary, an isolated Iran has defied the United States on each of these four issues. In fact, the effort to develop a nuclear-weapons capability is the result of Iran's own need for security, its desire for legitimacy at home, and its increasing influence in the region.

No analyst can accurately know what Iran aims to achieve with its nuclear program. Given the limitations on information channels and the regime's lack of transparency, most researchers try to infer Iran's specific goals. Is Iran's ultimate aim to develop nuclear weapons at all costs or is it using the nuclear issue as a bargaining chip to end its international isolation? From our research and interviews with area experts,

we conclude that for the time being, Iran's major aim is to develop its nuclear capacity as soon as possible. Whether Iran will use technological advancements as a base for nuclear weapons is a decision for the future. The following analysis about Iran's short term goals is illustrative:

... Iran's leaders do not yet need to make a decision about whether to produce nuclear weapons. They can wait until the fissile material is produced to decide if and when to develop the physics package needed for a weapon. ... What Iran has certainly decided is to acquire the technical capability to produce fissile material. Its nuclear hedging strategy is designed to bring the country right up to the threshold of a break-out capability while remaining within the legal limits of the NPT.³²

Developments in late 2008 seem to confirm the view that Iran has advanced its nuclear program to a great degree. In September 2008, an IAEA report confirmed that Iran had significantly developed its nuclear capacity and did not allow required IAEA inspections. As to the nuclear-weapons experimentation plan allegedly found in an Iranian diplomat's computer, the report indicated that the IAEA "has obtained information indicating that the experimentation described in this document may have involved the assistance of foreign expertise."³³ For the first time in its report, the IAEA mentioned possible "foreign" technical assistance for weapons-technology development in Iran.

As early as 2009, the crisis over Iran's nuclear program seems to have reached an equilibrium that favors Iran. Except for the least likely scenarios — regime change from within and a military strike

— all other options favor Iran. Acquiring the technical capability to make the bomb, making the bomb or getting assurances from the West and breaking its international isolation are all good results for Iran. On the other hand, except for the regime-change scenario, all other scenarios challenge U.S. interests in the Middle East. Therefore, the best option for the United States might be to engage Iran diplomatically to try to prevent the development of a weapons program. The Obama administration may be able to give assurances to Iran about regime survival, which would enable the more pragmatic Iranian position to prevail. This could lead Iran to cooperate with the international community on the issue.

If the Obama administration cannot achieve what the Clinton administration did with North Korea in 1994, time will

favor Iran. Regardless of whether or not it is developing a nuclear weapon, this protracted crisis increases the popularity of the Islamic regime in the eyes of people and nongovernmental groups in the Middle East, may spill over into a conflict with Israel, can create a security dilemma for other regional powers like Egypt or Turkey, and would damage the four major American interests in the region. In November 2008, an IAEA report confirmed that Iran had made 630 kilograms of low-grade uranium, which many experts consider adequate to make an atomic bomb.³⁴ Whether to convert this material and technology into the world's deadliest weapon and begin a new era in the Middle East is a decision in the hands of the Islamic regime's elite.

¹ Sharam Chubin, "Iran," Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The Cold War and The Middle East* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 216-249; Malcolm Yapp, "Soviet Relations with Countries of the Northern Tier," in Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha, eds., *The Soviet Union in the Middle East* (Heinemann Books, London, 1982), pp. 25-43.

² David G. Haglund, "Oil as a Factor in U.S. Policy toward the Middle East," in Paul Marantz and Blema S. Steinberg, eds., *Superpower Involvement in The Middle East: Dynamics of Foreign Policy* (London, 1985), pp. 175-197.

³ Mark Gasiorowski, "U.S. Foreign Policy toward Iran during the *Mussaddiq* Era," David W. Lesch, *The Middle East and The United States* (Oxford, Westview Press, 1996) pp.51, 66.

⁴ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1988).

⁵ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Hinnebusch A. Raymond, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (Routledge, 1997); Scheherazade Daneshkhu, "Iran and the New World Order," Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, eds., *The Gulf War and the New World Order: International Relations of the Middle East* (University Press of Florida, 1994); Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East*, (Brookings Institution Press, 1997), pp. 109-153.

⁶ Barbara Conry, "America's Misguided Policy of Dual Containment in the Persian Gulf," November 10, 1994. Cato Foreign Policy Briefing No. 3, <http://www.cato.org/pubs/fpbriefs/fpb-033es.html>.

⁷ IAEA Website, "In Focus: IAEA and Iran," <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/IaeaIran/index.shtml>

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- ¹⁶ Industrial scale enrichment means using thousands of centrifuges to enrich uranium. This way, Iran can produce enough material for nuclear weapons.
- ¹⁷ William J. Broad and David E. Sanger, "Iran Said to Have Nuclear Fuel for One Weapon," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2008.
- ¹⁸ General David Petraeus, Commander of the Multi-National Force in Iraq suggests: "... the destructive role Iran has played in funding, training, arming, and directing the so called Special Groups and generated renewed concern about Iran in the minds of many Iraqi leaders. Unchecked, the Special Groups pose the greatest long-term threat to the viability of a democratic Iraq." David Petraeus, Hearing in the U.S. Senate, April 8, 2008, http://armed-services.senate.gov/testimony.cfm?wit_id=7071&id=3237.
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