



BACKGROUND

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Iran: Putting the Threat in Perspective

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Iran has been out of the headlines lately. That is good for Iran policy: the bombastic rhetoric and threats of neo-conservatives under the Bush Administration boosted Iranian standing in the world. Labeling Iran part of the “Axis of Evil” allowed hardliners in Iran to consolidate power, while making Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a hero in the region.

The Bush administration made a mistake in prioritizing rhetoric over reality, but they were not mistaken in the belief that Iran represented a serious menace. No progressive wants to see a country like Iran – where homosexuals are executed and stoning is the price a woman might pay for being raped – get its hands on a nuclear weapon. But unlike neoconservatives, progressives realize that harsh words and empty intimidation will not get the job done – they will only buy Iran time. We must stand up against the Iranian threat, but in order to do so we have to understand the nature of that threat.

The Obama administration recently appointed Dennis Ross as special advisor for the Gulf and Southwest Asia. One of his major duties will be to re-examine U.S. policy towards Iran. What should Congress understand as this new Administration approaches the problem?

The Good News – The Limits of Iran’s Power

The good news is that Iran’s military is a shadow of its former self. Iran devotes a

“The possession of a nuclear weapon would allow Iran to increase its power at the expense of the international community and its own people.”

smaller percentage of its GDP to military spending than any of its neighbors in the Persian Gulf, the United Arab Emirates excepted.¹ Iran’s annual defense budget of \$6-\$8 billion is approximately 1/100 of the \$711 billion the United States devoted to the Department of Defense, nuclear weapons, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in fiscal year 2009.²

Nor can Iran make up this conventional gap via mass fanaticism. The people of Iran are tired of their system of government and its poor handling of the Iranian economy. According to one poll, 61% of respondents expressed opposition to Iran’s form of government, while 68% favored normalized relations with the United States.³ The Iranian regime commands too few military resources and too little domestic support to engage in territorial aggression against its neighbors, our allies, or the United States itself. Iran is not a major threat to the United States, and we should not allow our own rhetoric to puff up a paper tiger.

The Bad News – The Extent of Iran’s Power

The bad news is that since Iran cannot compete with the United States in conventional



terms, it has adopted asymmetrical tactics that can inflict real harm on America and our allies. Instead of armoring squads of soldiers, it has armed squads of suicide bombers, mounted speedboats with missiles, and funded fifth-column networks in neighboring countries. These tactics are designed to make it a deadly proposition for the U.S. and its allies, such as Israel and some Gulf States, to cross Iran. The Iranian regime also funnels tens of millions of dollars per year to terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah.⁴ Whether it's supplying Hezbollah during the Israel-Lebanon War of 2006, arming Shiite militias in Iraq, or supporting Hamas's demands during Israel's recent excursion in the Gaza Strip, Iran has the ability to activate terror cells and cause chaos throughout the already turbulent Middle East. Moreover, Iran's Revolutionary Guard – funded outside the regular defense budget – is an elite fighting force that controls billions of dollars of its own and wields tremendous power.⁵

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Yet these capabilities pale when compared with Iran's ongoing nuclear program. According to worst case scenarios, Iran could have enough highly-enriched uranium to produce a nuclear weapon sometime this year, although conservative estimates set the date closer to 2015.⁶ Whether Iran truly intends to field a nuclear weapon is impossible to say, but it is rapidly acquiring the ability to do so. Making matters worse, Iran's ballistic missile program deepens the nuclear threat. Iran is already capable of deploying missiles that can hit most targets in the Middle East, including Iraq, where 50,000 American troops are likely to remain stationed, even after President Obama's drawdown.⁷ Iranian missiles may already be able to hit Israel, Turkey, and Southeast Europe.⁸ As Iran's missile range grows with time, its ability to project power – and perhaps a nuclear weapon – grows.

Intentions: What Does Iran Really Want?

The real question is what Iran would do with a nuclear weapon. Would the Iranian regime ever actu-

ally use a nuclear weapon, given the threat of massive retaliation? After all, the United States feared what Stalin and Mao would do with nuclear weapons, but they were effectively deterred. The same logic might apply to Iran: Iran must realize that it would face massive retaliation if it ever used nuclear weapons against the U.S. or its allies.

The problem is that suicide and martyrdom play an essential role in Iranian theology. In the words of Ayatollah Khomeini, father of the Iranian Revolution, “the natural world is the lowest element, the scum of creation.” He and many of his followers, including President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, subscribe to an apocalyptic vision of the end times whereby the sacrifice of life on earth is justified in the eyes of God.⁹ Fortunately, Iran's leadership structure allows for steadier hands to hold the reins of government than those of Ahmadinejad. While the regime may be willing to encourage individuals to sign up for suicide squads for the greater glory of Iran, it has showed no signs of a willingness to forfeit its own existence. However, if the regime was teetering or threatened, there is a real possibility that they may boost their domestic standing by using terrorist organizations to spark a conflict with Israel, then launching, or seriously threatening to launch, a nuclear missile to protect their co-religionists in the region.

Even if Iran's leaders do not wish to instigate nuclear war, their possession of nuclear weapons would give them a major bargaining chip. It would boost their standing in the region, possibly leading nearby Gulf States, long-time enemies of the Persian nation, to invest in nuclear weapons of their own. They would be able to issue more credible threats and interfere with American and European interests with greater impunity. It would also deepen the hold an oppressive regime has over its people – people who wish to be a normal country integrated into the rest of the world. This is the more likely, but seriously problematic, scenario. Iran is already spreading terror throughout the Middle East. The possession of a nuclear weapon would allow the Iranian regime to safeguard its existence from perceived threats, and to increase its power at the expense of the greater good of the international community and its own people.

What Should We Do?

In spite of saber-rattling during the Bush Administration, taking military action against Iran's nuclear program is not a winning proposition. Airstrikes –



from the U.S. or Israel – are unlikely to work. Iran has learned from past Israeli airstrikes in Iraq: it is believed that it has buried its program underground and in places unlikely to be stopped by air attack. In fact, strikes could actually increase the likelihood Iran will obtain a nuclear weapon by convincing the regime and the Iranian people that they need the extra protection.¹⁰ Moreover, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen has pointed out, opening a third front in Iran would put tremendous strain on the U.S. military.¹¹ Iran is much larger than Iraq, so it is naïve to think we could successfully occupy it when we are already struggling to deploy sufficient troops to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Military action must always be a last resort. In this case, the last resort is not a viable option, so we must figure out a way to convince Iran's leaders to abandon their nuclear ambitions of their own accord. To succeed at doing so, we must marry two separate approaches.

1.) We must reduce Iran's ability to acquire nuclear weapons.

2.) We must show Iran that nuclear weapons will be of limited use, making them less worthy of pursuit in the first place.

America's task is to create a situation for Iran in which the cost of pursuing nuclear weapons is too high and the utility of having them is too low to make their weapons program worthwhile. Here are the steps we can take to make that happen.

Diplomacy: Carrots. The Iranian people are generally friendly to the United States and their economic problems are overwhelmingly important to domestic politics. Many Iranians would be willing to trade nuclear weapons for outside energy assistance and better trade relations. We must make it clear to the Iranian people that we are offering just that. If we make that offer credible in the eyes of the Iranian people and the clerical regime still refuses to budge on the nuclear program, public anger will flow not to the United States, but rather to the regime itself. Iran is not a totalitarian country. It has a lively press and strong public debate; there are limits to how much the regime can ignore the population. We need to push those limits as far as possible. *Diplomatic carrots increase the cost of acquiring a nuclear weapon.*

Diplomacy: Sticks. We must keep the pressure on Iran by continuing, and possibly deepening, the

sanctions regime. The recent drop in oil prices has further damaged Iran's fragile economy, which makes it less able to withstand sanctions. In addition to maintaining a united front with Europe, the U.S. needs to do a better job of securing Russian and Chinese support if sanctions are to be truly effective. However, a U.S. government that is willing to extend an open hand to the people of Iran – as opposed to placing a rhetorical emphasis on threats – makes it more likely that the Iranian regime can halt its nuclear program without having to “cave” to American demands. They must be given an honorable way to accept, as a partner, a multinational offer. *Diplomatic sticks increase the cost of acquiring a nuclear weapon.*

Oil: Use Less. Oil earnings account for about 40% of Iran's revenue.¹² Expensive oil expands Iran's options. When oil prices drop – as they have recently – Iran has fewer resources with which to challenge the United States or buy off its own people. Our long term policies vis-à-vis Iran and other oppressive oil rich regimes must include provisions to expand alternative sources of energy. *Consuming less oil denies Iran resources, increasing the opportunity cost of acquiring a nuclear weapon.*

Iraq: Reduce Troops. The United States has 142,000 troops in Iraq.¹³ These men and women could easily become the targets of Iranian missiles and Iranian-backed militias. We cannot allow Iran to hold American policy hostage by threatening our military. Responsible redeployment from an increasingly stable Iraq will diminish Iranian leverage and expand our freedom of action. *Withdrawing troops from Iraq decreases the number of targets Iran can hit, making a nuclear weapon less useful.*

Credible Deterrents: Create Some. Missile defense advocates are pointing to Iran as a principal reason for continuing our strategic missile defense program. They have a point. Unlike President Reagan's fantastical Star Wars that was supposed to be able to take on the mighty Soviet arsenal, today's missile defense priorities, which got started under the Clinton administration, emphasize small arsenals from threatening states.¹⁴ Iran clearly fits the bill. There remain serious questions about the technological feasibility of the system, and worries about whether it will ever be a credible deterrent. But the *premise* is not to be dismissed lightly: the best way to reduce the worth of states acquiring nuclear weapons is to render those weapons ineffective. *A credible deterrent undercuts Iran's ability to use missiles, making a nuclear weapon less useful.*



Retaliation: Be Crystal Clear. We must make it crystal clear that Iran's use of a nuclear weapon will elicit a punishing military response from the United States. We cannot prevent the existence of fanaticism, but we can make it more likely that pragmatists in the Iranian government will outmaneuver the fundamentalists if we make our intent to respond with overwhelming force absolutely clear. *A credible threat to retaliate will make Iran's leaders think twice about using a nuclear weapon, making a nuclear weapon less useful.*

The Least Bad Option

The combination of measures that increase the cost of acquiring nuclear weapons with measures that decrease the utility of owning them is our best bet for cajoling Iran into suspending its nuclear program. It is our job to convince the Iranian regime that working towards normalized relations will be worth more than nuclear weapons. However long the odds are, no other approach has a better shot at success. Given the seriousness of the Iranian threat, we must do our best to make that approach work.

End Notes

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