

A NUCLEAR-ARMED IRAN:
A DIFFICULT BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE POLICY PROBLEM

BARRY R. POSEN

A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Iran's nuclear energy research and development efforts seem on course to achieve an ability to produce highly enriched uranium, the key element of a nuclear weapon. While the capability itself would not be a violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if it were under the full scope safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran's deceptive behavior in the development of this technology, as well as the flimsy economic arguments Iran has used to justify this capability, have produced broad international opposition to the program. Many reasonably fear that Iran's actual purpose is to produce nuclear weapons, though there is no definite proof that it has decided to do so. It should be acknowledged that Iran could insist on its right to enrich uranium for power reactors, but refrain from producing nuclear weapons. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, acting under the auspices of the European Union, and with the support of the United States, have negotiated intensively with Iran since 2003 to discourage further Iranian nuclear enrichment progress; the United Nations Security Council demanded that Iran suspend enrichment and implement other important arms control measures with Resolution 1696 in July 2006. Nevertheless diplomacy has thus far been unsuccessful, and there is no guarantee of future success.

If negotiations fail, interested powers such as the United States, the European Union, and Iran's neighbors will face three alternatives: (1) they could move from diplomacy to economic and political coercion; (2) one or more states (most probably the United States or Israel) could launch a preventive attack to erode or destroy the Iranian nuclear program; or (3) these powers could develop strategies of containment and deterrence to coexist with a nuclear-armed Iran—if Iran achieves weapons capability.

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The primary purpose of this paper is to address the third option—to spell out a strategy of containment and deterrence and show how it could work. I systematically review the standard objections to this strategy, and explain why they are misplaced. Summarizing the other options, I then argue that a containment and deterrence strategy is more likely to achieve U.S. strategic goals, and do so at lower risks and costs. Finally, I briefly review the proliferation risks that would arise from an Iranian nuclear program, and argue that these risks can be reduced by a deterrence and containment strategy. That said, containment of a nuclear-armed Iran is not the preferred outcome. It would be better if diplomacy were to succeed. Thus, one implication of this analysis is that the United States and its allies should review their current diplomatic approach to Iran and try to devise a more promising political strategy.

For many reasons, it would be better if Iran had neither nuclear weapons, nor the enabling technologies that would permit it to build nuclear weapons:

- Neither nuclear energy nor nuclear weapons are risk-free technologies—new civil and military nuclear powers run the risks of any novice. These include environmental problems, equipment failures, and unsafe or insecure weapons storage.
- It is natural for the nonnuclear states in the region to fear a nuclear Iran. These fears may cause countermeasures that are fraught with danger—including national nuclear energy or weapons programs of their own—which also would run “novice” risks.
- As other states try to acquire nuclear weapons, they may inadvertently threaten each other, setting off new security competitions.
- Iran and any of its neighbors that chose to deploy nuclear weapons may have problems developing a secure basing method, which could tempt them to adopt “hair trigger,” day-to-day alert postures, which in turn could raise the risks of accidental war or preemptive war.
- Iran may be emboldened by its possession of nuclear weapons, and could threaten the security of regional or distant powers.

These are all valid concerns, which should make even Iran wary of nuclear weaponry. These risks have prompted the international diplomatic efforts to induce Iran to refrain from the enrichment of uranium (or the reprocessing of

plutonium). If these efforts fail, however, concerned states will need to choose from the three remaining alternative policies—nonmilitary coercion mainly through sanctions, preventive military strikes, or containment and deterrence.

ECONOMIC COERCION

Though economic coercion should be attempted if the current round of diplomacy fails, this seems unlikely to work unless it is combined with a new set of incentives. First, it is improbable that a particularly strong international sanctions regime can be organized against Iran. Russia, China, and even many European states fear that the initiation of a strong sanctions policy, blessed by the UN, is the first step on the road to war. Sanctions may not change Iranian behavior, but they will have further committed the international community to do something about Iran's program. Some states also will oppose a strong sanctions policy because they profit from their relationships with Iran, due to its energy resources, or expect to profit even more if they help shield Iran from stern measures. Finally, given tight oil markets and high prices, most states would not support a sanctions regime that embargoed the export of Iranian oil.¹

Second, though Iran is not a wealthy country, it has a relatively well-rounded economy. Aside from its obvious strengths in oil and gas production, Iran is endowed with abundant raw materials and agricultural land, and has a moderately well developed industrial sector. If a sanctions regime did not close off Iran's oil exports, it seems very likely that, with its own endowments and the cash it raises from energy exports, it could weather any plausible sanctions regime.²

If the threat of international economic sanctions were accompanied by more focused diplomacy, it might find more support and be more credible. In particular, the United States would need to assure Iran that it has abandoned any hopes to overthrow the current regime. Some have suggested a "grand bargain" in which the United States would offer Iran a security guarantee, an end to sanctions, and the normalization of diplomatic relations, in exchange for major concessions on Iran's nuclear program and an end to support for terrorism.³ Such a negotiating offer might reduce the concerns of fence sitters such as Russia and China, who fear that the ultimate U.S. objective is regime change, and

that the United States intends to leverage ineffective sanctions into an argument for war. The offer of a grand bargain also would put Iran in a difficult position, insofar as declining the offer would be tantamount to admitting its ambitions to produce a nuclear weapon. Moreover, if such a negotiating gambit fails, and the United States turns to a strategy of containment, states in the region will be even more likely to want U.S. assistance, and will more easily be able to portray a strengthened relationship with the United States as an essential counter to Iranian ambitions.

PREVENTIVE MILITARY ACTION

A military attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure could set back the program, but probably not prevent its recovery, unless the attack were somehow to topple the Iranian government and bring a very different ruling group to power. A military strike carries significant political and military risks. If time bought by setting back the Iranian program through military strikes would be used to good effect—that is, if in the interim other disputes in which Iran is directly or indirectly involved were solved, or if Iran became a liberal-democratic mirror-image of a Western democracy—a preventive attack might look attractive. But there is no reason to believe that this will be the case, and the reverse is more probable. Small or large attacks on Iran will inject energy into Persian nationalism, strengthen the regime's argument that the West is a threat, and leave Iran with a grudge that it may express by deepening or initiating relationships with other states and groups hostile to U.S. purposes. Even regional states with something to fear from a nuclear armed Iran probably would not welcome a preventive attack, simply because the region is already so roiled with violence, much of it attributed to mistaken U.S. policies.

Published assessments of possible attacks on Iran's nuclear infrastructure necessarily involve some speculation. There are nuclear facilities that we have good public information about, but there is likely a great deal of information that is known by western intelligence agencies that has not leaked into the public domain, and more information in Iran that has not leaked to anyone. Poor intelligence alone is one factor that might hinder the success of these operations. That said, three types of attack, of increasing strength, have been suggested.

First, some have considered very limited attacks on what seem to be critical nodes in a nuclear weapons production chain—especially Iran’s plants at Isfahan to produce uranium hexafluoride gas and its facilities at Natanz to process this gas through centrifuges in order to enrich its fissionable material content. One careful analysis suggests that even Israeli fighter-bombers, armed with precision guided weapons Israel is known to possess, could destroy these facilities, presuming that they could refuel from aerial tankers en route, and fly over Jordan and Iraq, or Saudi Arabia, or Turkey.⁴ For the United States, destroying these facilities would be a trivial matter. That said, the rest of the Iranian nuclear research and development effort would survive, and it seems likely that failing a change of government, Iran would persevere, and do so in a way that leaves the program less vulnerable. One might believe that a limited attack, however, would produce a relatively modest Iranian military response.

Second, some have suggested that one should try for maximum damage to the entire Iranian nuclear program. A recent analysis suggests that an attack on the Iranian nuclear infrastructure would involve four hundred aim points. The Pentagon’s own intelligence would produce an even bigger target set. The United States easily could strike four hundred aim points with precision guided munitions in a single night.⁵ Though no one could guarantee that this would be the end of Iran’s program, it seems likely that the setback would be far greater than the limited attack on two critical nodes. An Iranian regime might determine that an attack of this size needed to be answered with a forceful response. The regime would look weak regionally, and domestically, if it simply accepted such an attack without a response. The regime reasonably could fear that failure to respond simply would invite further attacks, because the United States would doubt Iran’s capability and will. Insofar as the United States has made plain that it wants to overthrow the Iranian regime, it is unlikely that Iran would view such a large attack as the final move.

Finally, precisely because civilian and military strategists in the Bush administration seem to have accepted the preceding logic, rumors have surfaced of even larger attack plans. To the target list associated with Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, would be added an array of conventional targets—including naval bases, airfields, surface-to-air missile sites, surface-to-surface missiles sites, and so on. During the first three nights of the 1991 Gulf War, coalition aircraft struck nearly three thousand targets of this kind.⁶ Such attacks would have the

purpose of forestalling an Iranian military retaliation against countries as close as Kuwait and as distant as Israel, U.S. forces in the region including those in Iraq, and oil tanker routes. Attacks of this size may also have the purpose of weakening the Iranian regime, though the precise mechanism is unclear, insofar as attacks of this kind have typically strengthened rather than weakened national cohesion and public support of governments, at least in the first instance. Though such an attack may succeed in reducing Iran's retaliatory options, it is implausible that it can reduce them to zero. U.S. forces in Iraq, and their line of communication, which runs through Shia populated areas where Iran has considerable influence, are quite vulnerable to tactical rocket and commando attacks that U.S. air strikes probably cannot prevent.⁷ Beyond these significant immediate local costs, the United States attack will become a significant factor in future Iranian politics, discrediting any political faction that seems remotely associated with the United States or its purposes, and providing a potent political/ideological rationale for violence against the United States and its friends for many years to come.

Given that the odds of nonmilitary coercion achieving a success seem low, and the possible costs of a significant, if partly successful, large military operation seem high, it is reasonable to consider the remaining alternative systematically—containment and deterrence of a nuclear-armed Iran.

“GRAND STRATEGY”—IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES

Before considering the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran for both the stability of the Middle East and Persian Gulf region and the security interests of the United States, one ought to consider the objectives that an Iranian nuclear force might be meant to serve. This requires some speculation about Iran's own “grand strategy.”

Given that Iran is the most populous and economically developed state in the Persian Gulf area, a realist expects it to have ambitions to expand its power and influence in the region. Indeed, it is reasonable to expect that revolutionary Iran, like Iran under the Shah, has pretensions to regional hegemony. This is a general prediction, however, and much depends on what this means to Iran. For example, though many analysts do believe Iran has hegemonic ambitions, they

usually couch this in cultural and political terms, not military terms.⁸ Iran is active in expanding its influence, especially among Shia Arab populations in Iraq, in the Gulf region, and in Lebanon. Though Iran does have some disputes about islands, water rights, waterways, and coastal zones, according to the Central Intelligence Agency it has no major territorial claims beyond its borders.⁹ The United States is no doubt perceived as an obstacle to Iran's regional ambitions. Iran surely would like to reduce the United States presence in the Gulf region, especially since the Bush administration adopted regime change in Iran as an objective.

Iran uses military force with some calculation, to increase the costs to others who might obstruct its goals, rather than to remove obstacles directly. Iran is not shy about using military assistance to nonstate actors as a way to discomfit those it defines as enemies, such as the United States and Israel. Iran sees some interest in maintaining a plausible capability to disrupt the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, by leveraging its own limited naval capacity and its geographic control of one side of the narrow Strait of Hormuz to create a threat to Western economies. This threat is probably dissuasive—a retaliatory capability, as Iran cannot disrupt the flow of oil out of the Gulf without losing its own ability to export, which is vital to its economy. On the whole, Iran seems deliberate, unafraid to use violence in limited ways, but cautious as it tries to increase its influence and reduce that of others. The main exception to this description is its inflammatory rhetoric about Israel. I hypothesize, however, that much of this rhetoric is instrumental. Iran faces a major obstacle in expanding its influence—it is a Persian state amidst Arabs, and a Shia state amidst Sunnis. These differences are important and cause most Arab regimes to mistrust Iran. Iran may be using the struggle with Israel to submerge these differences in the face of a common enemy, and so legitimate itself among those not affectively inclined to follow its leadership, and weak enough to fear its power.

The United States pursues an ambitious inter-related complex of economic, security, and political objectives in the Persian Gulf. At this moment, political and security goals loom largest. President Bush wishes to transform the politics of the region and bring liberal democracy to the regional states, including Iran. The president identifies the absence of democracy in the region as a cause of terrorism, and terrorism as a danger to the United States. Hence political transformation is a security goal. The president also believes that the

West cannot wait for transformation to end terror, so he pursues terrorists, and real and suspected state sponsors, with conventional military power—and is waging two wars to do so. Finally, the president believes that the United States must ensure that hostile powers, which Iran is deemed to be, do not get their hands on weapons of mass destruction, because the president and his allies do not agree with the analysis I advance below.

The United States also has more traditional economic interests in the Gulf, which also are connected to security interests. Much of the world's internationally traded oil comes from the Gulf, so the United States is interested in the free flow of oil from the region. It also wishes to ensure that the oil resources not come under the control of hostile powers that might use it as a coercive lever. And finally, the United States wants to assure that the earnings from oil exports not end up in mischievous hands. These concerns generate a broad security agenda—including the defense of oil routes, the prevention of the conquest of any oil state by another, and watchful oversight of the internal politics of certain countries to ensure that dangerous elements not come to power. U.S. strategists may also believe that U.S. hegemony in the Gulf region gives them some leverage over oil exports, and thus increases U.S. power in other parts of the world. For all these reasons, the United States must maintain a very large military presence, and remain the predominant military power in the Gulf region.

This brief assessment of Iranian and U.S. goals suggests that these two powers are destined to be in an intensely competitive relationship. Each has cards to play in this competition. Iran knows the region well, has an excellent geographic position, and may be able to find support in Shiite Arab populations in neighboring countries. Though economically and militarily weak compared to the United States, it is the strongest power in the Gulf, and has proven itself capable of mobilizing very large ground forces. The United States has a giant economy and the world's most advanced military. The United States also has two potential political advantages. Historically, most states consider large proximate land powers such as Iran to be more dangerous to them than distant sea powers such as the United States. And, Iran—an Islamic country, with potential Shia domestic allies in many gulf states—poses a more credible threat of domestic destabilization than does the U.S. rhetoric of democratization. However powerful and assertive the United States may be, neighboring Iran poses at

least as great a threat—and perhaps a greater threat. Hence, despite the present diplomatic ill effects of its mistakes in Iraq, over time the United States is likely to prove the more attractive ally to most states in the region.

Nuclear weapons would make Iran a somewhat more powerful state, which could allow it to pursue certain interests with greater vigor. Fear of Iranian nuclear weapons may cause other states in the region to want their own nuclear weapons, which may in turn cause still others to want nuclear weapons. This would not only be a problem in its own terms, it could further damage the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the institutions that sustain it. The ability of the United States and its allies and friends outside and inside the region to contain and deter Iran will affect whether or not significant nuclear proliferation occurs in the region, so I turn first to the likely U.S. and regional responses to a nuclear Iran.

NUCLEAR-ARMED IRAN'S FOUR THREATS

Reviewing the debate over Iranian nuclear weapons, one can find four different strategic fears of a nuclear-armed Iran: (1) Iran could be emboldened by the possession of a deterrent force and its foreign policy thus would become more adventurous and more violent; (2) Iran could directly threaten others with nuclear attack unless certain demands were met; (3) Iran could give nuclear weapons to nonstate actors; and (4) Iran simply could attack Israel with nuclear weapons—heedless of the inevitable Israeli nuclear retaliation.

A MORE ADVENTUROUS IRAN

During the recent fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, President Bush averred that the event would have been much more dangerous had Iran possessed nuclear weapons, but he did not explain why. His implication was that Iran would have been more inclined to involve itself directly in the crisis. The argument would be that Iran's leadership would shelter behind its nuclear deterrent. Great powers would be afraid to attack Iran directly, especially to invade Iran, if they faced the risk of nuclear escalation. So Iran would be free to do anything from meddling in the internal affairs of other countries to invading them with conventional forces, because it could control its costs.

This concern is quite reasonable; Iran's leaders might have this idea, but how much different would the situation be than it is today?

Iran already dabbles in subversion and terror. Its leaders do not seem too concerned about invasion, and overthrow, and with good reason. Iran's population is some 70 million, and its land area is roughly three times the size of France. The United States, with the most capable army in the world, is having a difficult time controlling five of Iraq's eighteen provinces, and perhaps 12 million of its 26.8 million people. Iran is surely concerned about other retaliatory responses, including air attacks and even embargos. This is why Iran is somewhat careful to limit its activities and cover its tracks. It might perceive itself to be more secure from retaliatory air attack with a nuclear deterrent, but Israel's nuclear deterrent did not save it from rocket attack in the recent fighting in Lebanon. And from what is known about U.S. Cold War military planning for war against the Soviet Union, and for that matter possible conflict with China today, large nuclear retaliatory forces do not deter the United States from planning large scale conventional air operations against nuclear-armed countries.

Iran's leaders might also perceive that actual conventional attacks on its neighbors would carry less risk than in the past, due to possession of a nuclear deterrent. But counterattacks on its homeland is only one cost of such a gambit. Iran's conventional military offensive capability is not very great, and it would take enormous investments to improve them much. U.S. military spending is currently nearly three times Iran's total GDP, and ninety times Iran's defense effort.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia might be able to defend itself without U.S. help, but we know from the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait that the kingdom and the United States have cooperated to assure that U.S. reinforcements can reach Saudi Arabia very quickly. Though tiny countries such as Kuwait and the Gulf sheikdoms cannot hope to defend themselves against Iran on their own, reinforcement with high-technology U.S. military forces would assure that Iran's offensive forces could not conquer these countries, and there again preparations have already been made to enable rapid U.S. reinforcement. And, for the foreseeable future, it seems very likely that considerable U.S. forces will be based in the Gulf states and the adjacent waters. Even if Iran's leaders somehow feel safe at home, the forces they dispatch abroad would surely be destroyed, and they likely understand this very well as they have had a box seat at two U.S. conventional wars in the region, and seen much of their own surface fleet sunk by the United States.

DIRECT THREATS FROM IRAN

A second possible use of Iran's nuclear weapons is bald nuclear coercion—especially against nonnuclear neighbors. Nuclear coercion, even against the weak, has certain risks, so it is hard to guess what Iranian interest would be worth such a gambit. In a drive for Gulf hegemony, Iran might demand that those of its neighbors who are close to the United States should weaken these ties—throw out U.S. forces, deny them ports of call and landing rights, destroy prepositioned equipment sites, and cease importing U.S. weapons. Less plausibly, Iran might demand that other oil producing states agree with its own views at any given time about how much oil to pump, or what to charge for it, though this does not seem worth a nuclear crisis. It is worth noting that, since the end of World War II, no nuclear power has found a way to use nuclear threats to achieve offensive strategic objectives.

These gambits are unlikely to work, and the United States and its allies can act to forestall them. During the Cold War, the United States offered the protection of its nuclear deterrent forces to many allies who did not possess nuclear weapons—every NATO member state except Britain and France. The United States promised that if NATO were to be attacked by the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons, it would respond. Indeed, NATO strategy called for the employment of nuclear weapons in the event of a successful Soviet conventional invasion of NATO states. The United States made this commitment in spite of virtual nuclear parity with the Soviet Union. The United States risked annihilation to secure its interests in Europe.

The United States has, at least since the late 1970s, perceived itself through Democratic and Republican administrations to have a very strong interest in the security of Persian Gulf countries. It is likely that the United States would offer the Gulf Arab countries a nuclear “guarantee.” Given that U.S. strategic nuclear forces today are vastly more powerful than anything Iran is likely to be able to deploy, the United States runs less risk in offering such an assurance than it did during the Cold War, and Iran would face very grave risks if it challenged them. Indeed, given U.S. nuclear advantages, Iran would be running the risk of a preemptive U.S. nuclear strike against Iranian forces, in the event that it began to alert these forces to add credibility to its threat. Put bluntly, to be a nuclear-armed state is to be a nuclear target.

Would a state such as Saudi Arabia be willing to count on the U.S. nuclear guarantee? Would it be willing to stand up to an Iranian threat, and risk the possibility that Iran might not be deterred? This is impossible to know. But, Saudi Arabia would know one thing: if it succumbed to Iran's blandishments once, and severed its connections to the United States, it essentially would become a satellite of Iran, and there would be no end to Iran's demands.

IRAN AND NONSTATE ACTORS

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, many have been concerned that nuclear weapons could fall into the hands of terrorists. One way this could occur, it is feared, would be for a state with a weapons program to give or sell one to a terrorist group. Such action seems unlikely in the case of Iran, or any state, because it serves no strategic purpose, invites retaliation, and cannot be controlled. It is perhaps the most self-destructive thing that any nation state can do.

What strategic purpose, other than pure destruction, could such an action serve? A single nuclear weapon exploded in the United States, or any other state, would be a truly horrible event. But it would not destroy the existence of that state, or destroy its political power. And it would enrage that state, and no doubt cause extraordinary efforts to discover, and punish, the source of the attack.

If the weapon is tracked back to the source, the source country will be blamed. It will be blamed not only by the victim, but by other states, terrified by the implications of the action. The victim surely will try to punish the supplier, and it is likely that this punishment would involve nuclear strikes. Iran or any other nuclear weapons provider might hope to avoid detection, but they could only hope—they could not count on it. The characteristics of the explosion may provide some indications of the origin of the weapon.¹¹ Moreover, once the explosion occurs, intelligence collected and either ignored or misunderstood prior to the event will be reviewed in light of the event, and may have new meaning. Additionally, there are not all that many potential sources of a nuclear weapon—wherever an explosion occurs one can be sure that intelligence would quickly focus on nuclear problem states such as North Korea, Iran, and Pakistan. Indeed, these states are so likely to end up in the

spotlight for a terrorist use of a nuclear weapon, they probably have an interest in stopping *any* conspiracies of this kind that they discover.

Once a weapon is supplied to the nonstate actor, the supplying state has no guarantee that it will be used for the original agreed purpose. The nonstate actor may have promised to attack Israel, but instead may attack France, or the United States. Alternatively, that actor may simply be a middleman, and sell or trade the device to someone else. The risks cannot be controlled by the supplying state.

IRAN AND ISRAEL

It is occasionally suggested that Iran in particular, because of its leaders' undisguised hatred for the state of Israel, and quite open assertions that the Middle East would be better off if Israel disappeared, might act to make their fantasies a reality. Iran could use its future nuclear weapons to annihilate the state of Israel, unconcerned about Israeli nuclear retaliation because Iran is a large country that would somehow survive a nuclear exchange with Israel, while Israel is a small country that would be entirely destroyed.

A few fission weapons would horribly damage the state of Israel, and a few fusion weapons would surely destroy it. But neither kind of attack could reliably shield Iran from a devastating response. Israel has had years to work on developing and shielding its nuclear deterrent. It is generally attributed with as many as 200 fission warheads, deliverable by several different methods, including Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile.¹² Were Iran to proceed with a weapons program, Israel would surely improve its own capabilities. Though Iran's population is large, and much of it is dispersed, about a quarter of Iranians (over fifteen million people) live in eight cities conservatively within range of Israel's Jericho II missile.¹³ Much of Iran's economic capacity is also concentrated in these cities.¹⁴ Nuclear attacks on these cities, plus some oil industry targets, would destroy Iran as a functioning society and prevent its recovery. There is little in the behavior of the leaders of revolutionary Iran that suggests they would see this as a good trade.

A premise of the foregoing fears is that Iran is led by religious fanatics, who might be more interested in the next world than this one. The current president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has made statements that have caused observ-

ers to doubt his risk aversion and his grasp on reality. It is important to note, however, that in Iran's governing structure, the president does not have much influence over security policy. This belongs to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Though its implications are much disputed, he has issued a *fatwa* against the development, production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons.¹⁵ This suggests awareness that nuclear weapons are particularly destructive and terrible. Iran's religious leaders have in the past shown themselves sensitive to costs. The founder of Iran's revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, ceased the war with Iraq in the 1980s when he determined that the costs were too great.¹⁶ By modern standards these costs were high, perhaps half a million dead. But those casualties pale against the casualties of a nuclear exchange with Israel. And Iran's suffering in a nuclear exchange with Israel would pale against its likely suffering in an exchange with the United States.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is nevertheless a worrying figure. He has denied that the Jewish Holocaust is a proven fact. He has said, or implied, that Israel should disappear from the map of the Middle East. In the first instance he denies a horror for world Jewry. In the second, he promises a new horror for the Jews, and given Israel's nuclear capabilities, a horror for Iranians as well if his own country were involved. What we cannot know is whether these observations are offered to produce a certain emotional effect, or whether he understands the implications of his utterances and believes and accepts them. Fortunately, few predict that Iran can acquire nuclear weapons soon, which gives time to assess and monitor Ahmadinejad's actual strategic influence in Iran, and to discredit him in Iran and in the wider world by regularly pointing out the very grave risks that his ideas hold for his country. Iranians will have a chance to reconsider this man's leadership abilities. He came in with a vote; he can go out the same way. The time in office of Iranian presidents is fixed in any case—limited to two four-year terms.

OTHER ISSUES RESULTING FROM A NUCLEAR-ARMED IRAN

A final set of concerns about a nuclear-armed Iran arise not from what Iran would or would not do from the point of view of considered strategy, but from a mixed bag of concerns about inadequate Iranian resources, organizational incompetence, and political decentralization. These concerns are not trivial, but

even those who raise them do not advocate preventive war to avoid them, which helps put the risks in context.¹⁷

The first problem is the risk that, due to their relative poverty and inexperience, new nuclear states, such as Iran, will be unable or unwilling to develop the secure retaliatory forces necessary for a stable deterrent relationship. Iran's nuclear force could be small, vulnerable to attack, and lacking secure command and control. Such a force could attract preemption by a neighbor. Or, fearing preemption by a neighbor, Iran could adopt "hair-trigger" alert postures, or due to poor command and control, a fearful Iran might in a crisis inadvertently launch a nuclear weapon. These are all valid concerns, but many of these problems would be in Iran's hands to solve.

Precisely because even a single nuclear explosion is so destructive, Iran does not need a particularly large nuclear force to deter nuclear attacks by other nuclear states. If Iran's secondary purpose is to discourage further any effort to conquer Iran and change the government, then the state attempting to do that will inevitably present lucrative proximate targets for Iranian nuclear weapons. To deter its neighbors, or invaders, Iran does not need particularly long-ranged survivable systems—short-range mobile missiles should be sufficient and these are the easiest to hide.

Iran's most reasonable strategy is to disperse and hide its small force as best it can, and keep it quiet so that foreign intelligence means cannot attack it. This means eschewing dangerous alert postures, first strike doctrines, and the like. Dispersal, secrecy, stealth, and communications security are the means to survival, though they may present some command and control issues, and some nuclear security issues. There is no reason in principle, however, why a state such as Iran cannot use multiple-key arrangements to ensure against the unauthorized launch of its weapons.

Analysts of nuclear weapons organizations, however, fairly point to the fact that states do not always base their nuclear weapons in reasonable ways. And they do not necessarily confine their objectives to basic deterrence. Iran may decide that it wants a first-strike capability versus its neighbors, such as Israel. Such a dream is probably unachievable, but Iran might attempt to develop such a capability. This would set up an unstable strategic relationship between the two countries, and any crises would include an element of great risk, as one or the other became tempted to preempt. In the U.S.-Soviet case,

these problems ultimately lead the two sides to ensure that some piece of their nuclear forces would likely survive an exchange to visit a horrible retaliation, and thus deter the other's first-strike temptations. These risks also led them to become quite cautious in their political competition, but there were hair-raising episodes along the way, and there is no reason to rule out similar events in the case of Iran.

On the other hand, it is virtually impossible for Iran to achieve a first-strike capability versus the United States. Any risks that Iran took in its basing mode and alert posture to get ready for a first strike against Israel could easily make it more vulnerable to a first strike from the United States. Spending its nuclear forces on Israel would leave Iran politically and militarily vulnerable to a huge U.S. retaliation. By striking first, it would have legitimated a U.S. nuclear attack, while simultaneously weakening its own deterrent with the weapons it had expended. The United States is the greater threat to Iran because it is much more powerful than Israel, and has actual strategic objectives in the Gulf. It is strategically reasonable for Iran to focus its deterrent energies on the United States, which it can only influence with a secure retaliatory force, capable of threatening U.S. forces and interests in the region.

A final potential problem in Iran is the apparent decentralization of power in the country. Iran essentially has two military organizations: the "professional" military, and the Revolutionary Guard Corps. The latter is ideologically motivated, secretive, and involved in assisting armed groups abroad in Iraq and Lebanon. Many fear that the latter would end up in control of the weapons, or at least with considerable access to them. Given the nature of this organization, some of its members might be willing to do things that the higher political authorities in the state would not choose to do. They might give the weapons away, or use them without authorization. It is impossible to know whether this would occur in Iran. The Revolutionary Guards are generally considered to be very loyal to the Supreme Leader, the ultimate political authority.¹⁸ This should work against renegade behavior. Iran is dedicating considerable national resources to nuclear energy, and if it pursued its current path through to a complete weapons program, it will have devoted many more resources. It is likely, though not guaranteed, that Iran's leaders will take care to put the weapons under the control of people they trust to obey their orders. All states having relations with Iran have an interest in this matter. Nuclear powers must make

clear to Iran that its nuclear weapons would be a state responsibility. It will not matter to others whether an Iranian nuclear weapon was employed or exported by “rogue” elements within the state. Even nonnuclear powers can convey this message to Iran, letting Iran know that such an excuse would not win Iran any diplomatic cover. Iran must also be carefully watched for signs of sloppy control practices, and if they appear, other states must make these practices a primary issue in their relations with Iran.

REGIONAL NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION AND RISKS TO THE NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY

States in range of Iran’s nuclear weapons will reasonably wish to take measures to protect themselves against nuclear coercion and nuclear attack. Iran’s neighbors have three policy options to ensure themselves against a nuclear-armed Iran. They can choose to appease Iran comprehensively; they can find a nuclear guarantor; they can build their own nuclear weapons. Though elements of these three policies could be combined, one will tend to dominate.

Most countries will decline to appease Iran, if they have another plausible option, because most nation-states enjoy their autonomy and do not wish to give it up. Comprehensive appeasement is the road to ruin; one set of concessions to a demanding Iran could easily lead to another, until the state in question loses the ability to recover any shred of sovereignty. Comprehensive appeasement will likely only prove preferable to states facing a disastrous war, or disastrous defeat, with no hope of survival. Historically, this sort of behavior is generally only found among the very weak, and typically when they lack any other option.

The most important choice is whether states will seek their own nuclear weapons, or seek the protection of another nuclear power, if that protection is offered. That said, only a few states in the Middle East and Persian Gulf have the resources to attempt their own autonomous nuclear weapons programs. I have argued above that the United States likely would offer protection to regional states in order to protect its interests in the Persian Gulf from Iran. It also may offer such protection in order to forestall a spasm of nuclear proliferation in the region. The policies of the United States, and to a lesser extent the principal

European states and the European Union, will be the most decisive determinant of whether or not Iran's nuclear programs are emulated.

At this time, and for the foreseeable future, four regional powers can be considered candidate nuclear competitors with Iran: Israel (already a nuclear-armed state), Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Israel depends on the United States for its advanced conventional weaponry, but it is unwilling to count on any state for its immediate defense. Israel has had a nuclear weapons program for a very long time, though it declines to discuss the matter publicly. Open sources estimate a stockpile of two hundred weapons. Israel is believed to be able to deliver weapons by ballistic missile and by aircraft, and perhaps by submarine launched cruise missile. It seems to have taken care to produce a secure second-strike capability. In the face of an open Iranian program, Israel may be tempted to go public with its own program.

Though Iran is quite vulnerable to nuclear attack today, Israel might intensify its preparations to ensure that Iran understands just how dangerous nuclear threats toward Israel would be. Not many Israeli nuclear weapons would need to survive an attempted Iranian first strike to ruin Iran forever. Open improvements in Israeli nuclear capabilities, especially if accompanied by extensive public rhetoric, would likely raise security and prestige concerns among its neighbors. The United States would be wise to urge Israel to refrain from strong nuclear declarations, unless Iran's own public declarations about its nuclear capability demand a response.

Egypt would be concerned for reasons of both prestige and security if Iran was to become a nuclear weapons state, and Israel was to become an open nuclear power. Egypt at one time had an active nuclear energy research program, and there was concern that it could become a nuclear weapons program. It has the technological and scientific expertise and has recently announced a new civilian nuclear energy program.¹⁹ Absent active U.S. diplomacy, and strategic guarantees, Egypt probably would follow suit in developing nuclear weapons. Egypt faces a number of barriers, however. First, it is highly dependent on the United States for conventional weaponry. The United States surely would suspend this relationship if Egypt decided to pursue nuclear weapons. This would be quite unsettling to Egypt's internal politics. Second, Egypt is a poor country; foreign economic assistance would also dry up if Egypt decided to go nuclear. Third, given that Israel is already a nuclear weapons state, and Iran is well

ahead of Egypt, Egypt would go through a period of both conventional and nuclear vulnerability as it attempted to produce nuclear weapons. Egypt could choose to accept all these risks and costs, but it seems more plausible that the United States and the European Union could find a package of assurances and incentives that would be acceptable to Egypt.

Saudi Arabia would face similar, though stronger temptations, than Egypt. Saudi Arabia is arguably the other “great power” of the Persian Gulf region, and thus a natural competitor with Iran. With the demise of Iraq, it is the undisputed leader of the Arab states in the Gulf, and thus a rival to an Iran trying to expand its sphere of influence. Due to their proximity, Iran and Saudi Arabia are vulnerable to one another’s conventional military power. Saudi Arabia likely views itself as the protector of Sunni Arabs from Shia Arabs, and from Shia Iran.

Saudi Arabia does not, however, have a developed nuclear science and technology effort. And it does not have the other industrial capabilities needed to support a nuclear weapons program and associated delivery systems. Saudi Arabia would thus take quite a long time to develop its own nuclear forces, and like Egypt, would be vulnerable in the interval. They would have to rely on an external guarantee, and the guarantor probably would not want to be a party to any nuclear program. With its wealth, however, it cannot be ruled out that the Saudis would simply try to buy nuclear weapons. They would need more than a few to compete with an Iranian program, and they would need delivery systems. Pakistan seems the only possible source, but it is under a great deal of scrutiny. Pakistan would face enormous pressure not to transfer complete weapons to another party. Finally, Saudi Arabia does have good reason to believe that outsiders are committed to its security. The United States and other great powers have extensive economic and military interests in maintaining Saudi security. The United States has demonstrated its commitment in many ways, including war. The Saudis are accustomed to security cooperation with the United States. A U.S. guarantee likely would prove the most attractive option for Saudi Arabia.

Turkey also will be concerned, for security and prestige reasons, about a nuclear weapons capability in neighboring Iran. Turkey’s economic, scientific, and engineering capabilities probably make it more capable of going nuclear than either Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Turkey’s calculation will be affected by other political interests, however. Turkey is a member of NATO, a nuclear alliance,

and thus already enjoys a nuclear guarantee by the United States. Dozens of tactical nuclear weapons are based in Turkey, and some of Turkey's aircraft are wired to deliver these weapons, which could be turned over to them under circumstances determined by the United States, and based on long-standing procedures agreed within NATO. This relationship would be jeopardized were Turkey to embark on its own independent nuclear weapons program. Turkey also aspires to membership in the European Union. Though the Europeans have been only moderately encouraging, it seems likely that the EU would discourage an independent Turkish nuclear effort. Conversely, it seems possible that the EU might become more accommodating of Turkey's effort to join the EU if that helped discourage a Turkish nuclear program.

In sum, a nuclear Iran creates risks of additional nuclear proliferation in the Persian Gulf and Middle East regions. At the same time, these risks will be affected by the U.S. response. If the United States behaves consistent with its past interpretation of its regional interests and global interests, then it can mute the incentives of three of the four states in question to acquire nuclear weapons. This is not a sure thing, of course, and the United States will need to show leadership and sagacity. That said, it looks as if the kinds of policies recommended in this paper in the event of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability are similar to what the United States, its allies, and other Asian powers are doing in response to the North Korean nuclear weapons test. The United States and its allies have demonstrated their solidarity; North Korea has been warned not to export its nuclear weapons; and the United Nations has instituted a sanctions regime, which effectively legalizes searches of North Korean ships, planes, trucks, and railroad cars for nuclear contraband.

If Iran ultimately does get nuclear weapons, this will surely further damage the NPT. Insofar as Iran will have launched and developed its program under the cover of the NPT, member states will lose confidence that the system actually protects them in any way. Many member states with the capacity to build their own nuclear weapons will want to move themselves closer to an ability to do so in the event that any of their neighbors defect from the treaty. They will want to be months rather than years away from their own nuclear weapons. If some do this, then all may wish to do so. Thus the warning time that the treaty mechanisms provide to other members that regions are turning dangerous—warning that could be used for preventive diplomacy—will be shortened.

If actual widespread and rapid proliferation then occurs in the Persian Gulf and Middle East, then the treaty obviously will have suffered a major failure.

Alternatively, Iran's weapons success will cause some member states of the NPT to demand even more aggressively than they already do that the entire treaty be renegotiated, with much stricter constraints on the technologies that nonnuclear weapon member states can pursue. This is a double-edged sword, because the nonnuclear weapon states will want a reopened negotiation to place further limits on the existing nuclear weapons states. This will make for a tense, and perhaps fruitless, negotiation. Foresight about all these difficulties will, however, provide an extra incentive for the advanced countries to discourage regional nuclear emulation of Iran.

CONCLUSION

A nuclear-armed Iran is not a trivial problem—for its neighbors or the United States. Indeed, Iran itself would be entering a difficult new period in its history. It would be better by far for Iran to forgo those technology development initiatives that would allow it to make a decision to become a nuclear weapons state. But current diplomatic efforts may fail, and the question arises as to whether preventive war dominates a strategy of containment and deterrence. This choice can only be considered if a strategy of containment is elucidated, and its odds of success assessed. Should Iran become a nuclear power, both the immediate strategic risks and the proliferation risks can be addressed with a reinvigorated commitment of U.S. power to stability and security in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Such a commitment is reasonable given U.S. strategic interests in the region. The United States should seek the help of outside partners in Europe and elsewhere in making this commitment. The United States can and should make it clear to Iran that the overt or covert use of its nuclear weapons, for blackmail or for war, would put Iran in the gravest danger of nuclear retaliation. The United States should similarly explain to regional actors why it is willing to make this commitment. Both the United States and regional actors may wish to reinforce this commitment with security agreements and some visible military preparations. At the same time, it will be necessary for the United States to forgo any future efforts to replace

the Iranian regime. This would run nuclear risks that neither the United States, nor other great powers, nor regional powers will wish to run.

The strategy of deterrence and containment has worked for the United States before; there is no reason why it cannot work again. Relative to Iran, the United States and its likely allies have vastly superior material capabilities, a far more favorable situation than the in Cold War. In a confrontation with the United States, Iran would run risks of complete destruction, and it cannot threaten the United States with comparable damage.

Bismarck said of preventive war that it was like committing suicide out of fear of death. A preventive war versus Iran might not be suicidal, but it will definitely hurt. The United States and its allies have many military and diplomatic cards to play to manage the dangers posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. That said, a replay of the Cold War competition in the Persian Gulf is not a happy outcome. Though I think it is preferable to preventive war, far better would be a diplomatic solution. Since it is unlikely that economic pressure alone will bring diplomatic success, it would be wise to offer Iran a package of incentives more consistent with its apparent concerns than has been offered thus far. If Iran were to decline such an offer, this clarification of its purposes would assist the ultimate diplomacy of containment and deterrence.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey J. Schott, Institute for International Economics, "Economic Sanctions, Oil, and Iran," Testimony before the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress, Hearing on "Energy and the Iranian Economy," July 25, 2006, available online at <http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/paper.cfm?ResearchID=649>.
2. Lionel Beehner, "What Sanctions Mean for Iran's Economy," Council on Foreign Relations Background Paper, May 2006, available online at http://www.cfr.org/publication/10590/what_sanctions_mean_for_irans_economy.html?
3. Flynt Leverett, "The Race for Iran," *New York Times*, June 20, 2006.
4. Austin Long and Whitney Raas, "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities," April 2006, SSP Working Paper, available online at http://web.mit.edu/ssp/Publications/working_papers/wp_06-1.pdf.
5. For example, two hundred fighter bombers could easily deliver four hundred precision-guided weapons against four hundred aim points. Given the U.S. naval and air presence in the Persian Gulf, this rather limited attack could probably be launched with little reinforcement.
6. Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Gulf War Air Power Survey Summary Report* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993), Figure 5, "Coalition Air Strikes by Day Against Iraqi Target Sets," p. 13 (numbers estimated from graph).
7. The recent Israeli experience in Lebanon is relevant. Neither the Israeli Air Force nor the powerful counterbattery attacks of the Israeli Army's artillery could prevent Hezbollah from launching a hundred or more artillery rockets into northern Israel almost every night. Given the length of the Iran/Iraq border, it seems likely that Iran could infiltrate small units into Iraq to raid bases and truck convoys. At this moment, Iran likely has agents in Southern Iraq, and has sufficiently strong relationships with Shiite militias that some of these militias might assist Iran. Finally, Iran's intelligence on the location and strength of coalition forces is likely very good. It would not be surprising if Iran had precise coordinates for many of these potential targets, and spotters close to these targets, both of which would improve the performance of its otherwise inaccurate long range artillery rockets.
8. Robert Lowe and Claire Spencer, eds., *Iran, its Neighbors and the Regional Crises, A Middle East Programme Report* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2006), pp. 6, 8–12; See also Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs* 85 (July/August 2006): 58–74, esp. 66–68. Ray Takeyh, "A Profile in Defiance, Being Mahmoud Admadinejad," *National Interest*, no. 83 (Spring 2006): pp. 16–21 makes the point that the new Iranian president and his coterie of Iraq war veterans seem more religious, more nationalistic, and more confrontational than others in the Iranian political elite, but that they are only one faction.
9. *The World Factbook*, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, available online at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html>, accessed Sept. 25, 2006.
10. *The Military Balance 2006* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, and Routledge, 2006), pp. 18, 187.
11. William Dunlop and Harold Smith, "Who Did It? Using International Forensics to Detect and Deter Nuclear Terrorism," *Arms Control Today*, October 2006, available online at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2006_10/CVRForensics.asp, accessed October 29, 2006.
12. *The Military Balance 2006*, p. 191.

13. For population concentrations see, "World Urbanization Prospects: The 2005 Revision Population Database," "Iran," U.N. Population Division, available online at <http://esa.un.org/unup>, accessed 23 September 2006. Jericho II range estimates by Austin Long.
14. Perhaps a third of Iranian manufacturing industry is concentrated in or near Tehran, Karaj, and Isfahan alone. See "Table 7.9, Manufacturing Establishments by Legal Status and Ostan: 1381," Statistical Centre of Iran, available online at http://www.sci.org.ir/portal/faces/public/sci_en/sci_en.selecteddata/sci_en.yearbookdata, accessed September 29, 2006.
15. Mark Fitzpatrick, "Assessing Iran's Nuclear Program," *Survival* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 13.
16. Graham E. Fuller, "War and Revolution in Iran," *Current History* (February 1989): 81–100. "In basic terms, Khomeini faced a stark choice between pursuing an increasingly unattainable revolutionary victory over Iraq and the survival of the Islamic Revolution itself" (p. 81).
17. Scott D. Sagan, "How to Keep the Bomb From Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 85 (September/October 2006): 45–59. Sagan raises many of the concerns outlined here. These concerns lead him to advise a focused diplomatic effort to discourage Iran from proceeding with its enrichment program. He explicitly concludes, however, that preventive war is not an appropriate answer to the Iranian program. Implicitly, therefore, he accepts that however problematical a nuclear Iran might be, these risks do not exceed those associated with a preventive war.
18. Jim Walsh, "Iran and the Nuclear Issue: Negotiated Settlement or Escalation?" Testimony before the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information and International Security, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, July 20, 2006, Washington, D.C.
19. For an excellent review of the nuclear potential of Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, see Wyn Q. Bowen and Joanna Kidd, "The Nuclear Capabilities and Ambitions of Iran's Neighbors," in *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson, eds. (Carlyle Barracks, Penn.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), pp. 51–88, available online at www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/. See also William Wallis and Roula Khalaf, "Speculation after Egypt Revives Nuclear Plans," *Financial Times*, September 25, 2006, available online at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/6e01b312-4cba-11db-b03c-0000779e2340.html>, accessed October 29, 2006.

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