

"The Nuclearization of Iran: America's Responses"

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Introduction

Middle East regional stability has long been a strategic goal to U.S. foreign policymakers. The sea-lanes from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea via the Suez Canal, and the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean via the Strait of Hormuz are some of the most widely used for both commercial vessels and military naval units. In addition, ever since the oil embargo of 1973, the United States has realized the strategic importance of the Middle East energy reserves. Therefore, establishing regional stability is of great importance to American foreign policymakers.

Iran is currently the strongest Middle Eastern military power (other than Israel), and Tehran has a great desire to lessen Western influence in this region. It has been assessed, as well, that Iran may be the first Islamic country in the Middle East to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. Proliferation of nuclear weapons to the Middle East, could pose a great threat to U.S. national security and international stability. A nuclearized Iran, in particular, would likely instigate competitive nuclear programs in several neighboring states, doing much to destabilize the already fragile security balance of the Middle East. With the willing support of several countries to supply Iran with the materials, technologies and scientific know-how to produce its first atomic weapon, America must now reevaluate the prospects of preventing the nuclearization of Iran.

This paper focuses on Iran's national defense priorities to discuss how American foreign policymakers should reevaluate and, possibly, reconsider new approaches when dealing with a nuclearized Iran. Is the "isolationism" policy still the most adequate way to work with Iran? With the current drastic changes taking place in the Middle East security environment, this paper seeks to determine whether an alternative means of conducting U.S. foreign policy toward Iran would be prudent, and, if so, what possible changes in U.S. policy should be made in order to minimize American security risks.

Background

Although, the Islamic Republic is currently a member of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), it has been aggressively pursuing a nuclear program for more than 30 years. The first nuclear reactor acquired by the Islamic Republic dates back to 1967; it was delivered by the United States to the Aimrabad Nuclear Research Center in Tehran (now called the Amirabad Technical College).¹ However, war with Iraq and the inability of the Islamic Republic's leadership to prevent the ruthless chemical attacks on its civilian population did a great deal to convince the Ayatollah Khomeini government to revitalize the Iranian nuclear weapons program, which had remained dormant for several years after the overthrow of the Shah. To carry out such a program,

Iran has continuously requested the assistance of numerous countries such as China, Pakistan, Russia, Argentina and North Korea.

Despite such attempts, it is currently assessed that the Islamic Republic has yet to acquire the necessary materials and/or technical know-how to produce its first atomic bomb. Nonetheless, the Iranian leadership has been and still is patient, mainly because its international security motives to acquire nuclear weapons are not urgent or critical.

To better grasp Iran's motivations for the acquisition of nuclear weapons, it is important to also understand what the security priorities of the Iranian government are. In terms of national security, Iran's leadership believes that their immediate concerns are not against international aggression, but rather against local and internal opposition elements. Iran's main priority is to ensure that the Islamic regime stays in power; and, thus, the more immediate security concerns of the Islamic Revolution is against opposition groups such as the mujahedin in Iraq who are attempting to topple the regime, than against possible future U.S. attacks. In addition, the Iranian government has continuously been concerned over the economically destabilizing factor of possible incursions from bordering states, specifically those who are in the process of decomposition like Iraq and Afghanistan.² According to Ahmed Hashim, "Iran's recent economic problems are the greatest threat to its national security, and the first priority for the Tehran leadership."³

Along with local security issues, the Iranian leadership has international security concerns with Iraq and the West, which are predicated mostly upon policies of the United States.⁴ Due to the decade long United Nations sanctions placed on Iraq, this military threat has been somewhat neutralized. In addition, the American presence in the Persian Gulf is still seen as a potential, future threat that Iran would like to see eliminated. Although this is not an urgent danger, the Iranian government realizes that the United States' presence in the region is a security concern that has strategic relevance to the realizations of their international goals and objectives.

Iran's specific security motivations to become nuclearized are not particularly urgent, nor are they overwhelming. As one can see, nuclear weapons would not be very helpful with the more time critical, local security threat posed by the mujahedin in Iraq. It would only be of some importance to its bigger security concerns, like Iraq and the United States. Thus, the quest for nuclear weapons is mostly motivated by "political" rather than "security" reasons; its drive for world status being greater than any particular national security threat.⁵ It becomes evident, then, that the need to acquire a nuclear arsenal stems less from a sense of urgency or necessity, than from ambition, choice and historical lessons learned from the Gulf War and the eight-year war against Iraq.

The United States' Response to a Nuclearized Iran

Present U.S. Policy towards Iran

Currently, the United States has adopted a strategic policy aimed at economically isolating Iran as well as its neighbor and historical enemy Iraq. This has been done to militarily stabilize the region as well as to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East. The Clinton

Administration established this directive and labeled it the dual containment policy. Its main objectives when first introduced in May 1993, were five-fold:

- 1) Attempt to end Iran's support of international terrorism.
- 2) Stop Iran from supporting Hamas and its efforts toward sabotaging the Arab-Israeli peace process.
- 3) Eliminate Iran's international subversion through support of Islamic movements in Sudan and elsewhere.
- 4) Have the Iranian leadership recognize civil human rights.
- 5) And, prevent the Islamic Republic from acquiring weapons of mass-destruction.⁶

More than eight years later, these principal objectives have not changed.

America's dual containment policy was, and still is, aimed at preserving the balance of power in this region by containing the destabilizing effect of local aggressors. At the same time, Washington is protecting its own interests with assistance from other Gulf States and Israel. In actual practice, however, what dual containment really has meant, is the isolation of states such as Iran and Iraq with the apparent ultimate goal of causing economic destabilization, eventual internal collapse, or democratic changes in the current regimes.⁷

To accomplish the five strategic objectives of the dual containment policy, the United States has tried several approaches. On the economic front, Washington continues to aggressively oppose Iran's requests for loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.⁸ On the political front, the United States has maintained automatic opposition to Iranian candidates for posts in international organizations.⁹ In addition, America incessantly has solicited help from the European Union, Japan, Russia, and China for political, economic and technological support at more effectively tightening the noose around the Islamic Regime of Iran. However, the results of these actions have, at times, been less than promising.

There are several reasons for this comparatively ineffective U.S. policy. For one, Iran is much too large (60 million inhabitants), and geopolitically important to be isolated by unilateral measures alone. Iran's oil deposits, which make up greater than 9 percent of the world's oil reserves, are too significant in the world's international energy supplies.¹⁰ In addition, Iran is physically sandwiched between the oil rich areas of the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf, and is located at the international crossroads of Central Asia and the Middle East. It soon becomes apparent to any nation's foreign policymaker that Iran's geographic location is too strategic to be ignored.

While the European Union has long recognized the importance of Iran on the world stage and has made attempts to restore its ties with the Islamic regime; the United States' current policy is inherently distrustful and hostile toward the Islamic Republic. Although the Clinton

Administration showed some signs of becoming more flexible by allowing the import of luxury goods such as carpets, pistachios and caviar, there still is a ban against investing in Iran's energy development. Iran, unfortunately, has not given many good reasons for Washington to treat them otherwise; ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, events supported by Iran have shaped this response. The destruction of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, the subsequent taking of hostages, attacks on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, the bombing of the American Embassy in Kuwait, and several major airline hijackings form a basis for U.S. mistrust of Iran.

America's current policies, which encourage the collapse of the Islamic regime may be unrealistic, and may prove dangerous to moderate forces within Iran. While the former Assistant Secretary of Near East Affairs Djerijan denies that the United States "seeks to overthrow the Iranian Government...our policy does not exclude dialogue with Iran", current American policy still does not attempt to foster dialogue.¹¹ Rather, Washington's diplomacy toward Tehran creates mistrust and increases the level of divisiveness.

After more than eight years of pursuing dual containment, it appears that only one of the original five objectives has been met: Iran still has yet to declare acquisition of nuclear weapons. However, CIA Director George Tenet had told the Clinton Administration in January 2000, that he could no longer verify that Iran did not have nuclear weapons.¹² It becomes apparent, then, that the current policy towards Iran may only "contain" a problem state for the very short-term. Dual containment is not likely to reduce future conventional or nuclear threats that an alienated and aggravated Iran poses to regional security.

Washington may need to begin to find different strategies to engage Iran. American policy objectives should look to integrate Iran into regional security and the global economic environment before it becomes a nuclear power. Then, once Iran becomes nuclearized, the United States will have made inroads to communicate with the Islamic regime that better articulate America's military and political "red lines".

Possible Future Policy before Nuclearization

The aim of future U.S. political engagement should be to achieve realignment or integration of Iran into the international community. In engaging Iran, the United States should use "carrot-and-stick" approaches to support both sensible and realistic demands for change. Unlike current policy, which only looks to punish Iran, American foreign policymakers will need to formulate a different approach that relies on positive inducements for change as well as sanctions for non-compliance. In this process, these policymakers must explicitly inform the Iranians about which actions will result in rewards or punishments. The United States was able to use this form of engagement with the Egyptians during the Camp David Peace Accords. Previous to Camp David, the Egyptians under former President Nasser and then Sadat were anti-Western and distrustful of America. However, at this meeting, then U.S. President Carter was able to broker a peace treaty with Egypt and Israel. In unspecific terms, the United States was able to use "carrot-and-stick" approaches by offering billions of dollars for defense equipment and the promise to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in order to ensure peace between those two nations. A similar situation using the same approach may also work with the Islamic Republic.

The U.S. aim should be to draw Iran away from continued confrontation with the West and towards the benefits of economic and regional security. In doing this, the Islamic Republic still can maintain its revolutionary goals while playing a more important role within the Middle East. Although the current diplomatic differences between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran do appear to be rather immense, there are several areas where these two worlds can meet.

First, the United States will need to recognize the cultural significance of the Islamic clergy within Iran as well as their moderate allies in the government, and attempt to work with both entities. The clerical isolationists must be given good reason to not discredit negotiations, and the best way to do this is by including them in the negotiations. Back in 1979, 1986, and 1989, Iranian-U.S. negotiations had to be abandoned when Iranian isolationists, who were not included in these talks, engineered scandals.¹³ Current leaders of the U.S. and Iran must learn from these previous episodes to prevent them from reoccurring.

American policymakers then will need to walk a thin-line between appeasement and antagonism in trying to frame negotiations in terms of mutual benefits rather than as a means to alter foreign policies of the Islamic regime, or even overthrow it. Washington will need to reassure the Iranian leadership that it seeks political dialogue rather than political change. As Shahram Chubin and Jerrold Green put it: "engagement depends on small steps, some reciprocal, which could be phased and sequenced to enhance the atmosphere of progress to the more substantive bilateral issues".¹⁴ Some of the incentives that these two scholars identify can help the normalization process. These moves would include:

- 1) Dropping automatic opposition to Iranian candidates for posts in international organizations.
- 2) Creating a forum (like the Gulf Cooperation Council) for regional dialogues on arms control.
- 3) Increasing cultural representations and visits.

Currently, Iranian domestic priorities revolve around the more fundamental issue of the economy. For this reason, then, economic aid could be the most obvious and beneficial way of making some reengagement. Iran's population has been reported as growing at 2 percent per annum. In order to maintain its current standard of living, the country requires an economic growth rate of 6 percent. In other words, the Iranian government needs to generate at least 700,000 jobs per annum if their rapidly growing population of youths is to be kept employed and off the streets.¹⁵ Without a doubt, this situation has been weighing heavily on the minds of the Islamic leadership over the past few years.

The present American sanctions have been doing a great deal to inhibit the economic growth of Iran. One of the most frustrating situations is the stagnating Iranian oil and natural gas industry. In 1995, for example, the U.S. oil company Conoco announced that it had signed a \$1 billion contract with the government of Iran to develop the Sirri Gas Field in the Persian Gulf. However, U.S. political pressures and subsequent legislation made it illegal for any American oil/gas company to do business with the Islamic Republic, and this law eventually caused the

nullification of that contract.¹⁶ Tehran would very much like to see more American capital and investment within the nation's borders to help maintain and then improve Iran's current economic situation. This would allow for greater integration between the American and Iranian economies, and it undoubtedly would more widely open up this oil rich country's economy to the rest of the world.

In addition, The Islamic Republic wants to be the primary route for the oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. This route would be the shortest, most economic path for energy resources to be transmitted. However, the Clinton Administration advocated creating a pipeline from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey, which would completely bypass Iran.¹⁷ The United States, then, could assist the Iranian government by supporting their pipeline plans.

These are two significant areas that America could use to bridge the widening gap between this country and Iran. However, all of these economic incentives would come at a price. U.S. policymakers need to explain explicitly to the Islamic regime which actions it expects them not to take. Providing clear, consistent policy expectations towards terrorism, the Middle East peace process, nuclear weapons development, and human rights in Iran.

Here, the engagement process would become more difficult. Washington would expect the Islamic Republic to stop any efforts to produce nuclear weapons, and to continue allowing international observers to examine, periodically, its civil nuclear power program to ensure the international community that it is meeting this demand. America, in the process, must be sensitive to Iran's desire to produce a light water, civil nuclear infrastructure, which does not use the fissionable form of the uranium isotope, so it cannot be transformed into weapons grade material. In addition, the United States can do a great deal toward helping ease the security tensions in the region by helping establish a Middle East nuclear weapons "free zone". This would be similar to the United Nations resolution passed in the 1995 NPT calling for the development of an internationally recognized nuclear weapons "free zone" in the Middle East. To do this, the United States may have to remove all of its nuclear warships from the region as well as persuade Israel to become a member of the NPT.¹⁸

Iran must also assure the United States that it has stopped supporting groups opposed to the Middle East peace process, whether it is with arms, training, shelter, passports, finance, etc. This is not to say Iran needs to support the peace process per se; however, it should not attempt to take part in any activity that would undermine or jeopardize these talks. In fact, there has been some evidence that the Iranian government would allow this to take place. President Khatami has reportedly already assured the Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat that Iran would support any agreement accepted by the Palestinians.¹⁹

The United States will need to reassure the Iranian leadership that it seeks a meaningful political dialogue with Iran rather than an abrupt political change in that country. At the same time, it must explain that any Iranian attempts to engage in political or military actions which run counter to American "red lines" would then require the reinstatement of economic pressures and sanctions. If Washington is able to negotiate effectively over these issues as well as create a more prosperous economic future for the Islamic Republic, then the Iranian government may be

more likely to consider Western concerns. In addition, this new economic marriage between the U.S. and Iran would allow for greater flexibility with an "arm twisting" ability for U.S. policymakers, if (or when) they deal with a nuclear-armed Iran.

Possible Future Policy after Nuclearization

Although America has done a great deal with sanctions to prevent the nuclearization of Iran, there is always the possibility that the Islamic regime will find the motivations to acquire nuclear weapons too powerful to ignore. If that is the case, and Iran overtly becomes a nuclear power, than the United States should have a secondary plan to implement for this new challenge.

Needless to say, an openly nuclear Iran would destabilize the security environment of the Middle East. Many American allies who neighbor Iran, including the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Israel, will find themselves in a precarious situation. There will be the possible threat of a Low Intensity Conflict (as has been the case with India & Pakistan), some of those countries may need to establish their own nuclear weapons program or verbally confirm the current existence of such a program just to counter this new threat. The end result would be an even more hostile and destabilized political/military environment within the Middle East. Therefore, it will be up to the United States to find as well as implement new ways to minimize the significance of an Iran with nuclear weapons.

By reducing the strategic importance of possessing nuclear WMD, the U.S. may be able to create the necessary environment for the Iranian government to reconsider having a nuclear weapons program, as was the case for South Africa. In that situation, South Africa initially never confirmed it was developing, or possessed nuclear weapons. It did, however, have the necessary natural and technological infrastructure to become a nuclearized nation.²⁰ In September 1990, Pretoria agreed to sign the NPT, but only "in the context of an equal commitment by other states in the Southern African region".²¹ After intensive diplomatic efforts, especially by the United States and the Soviet Union, Tanzania and Zambia agreed to sign the treaty. After having some of their external security concerns alleviated and recognizing the significant strategic limitations of becoming nuclearized, South Africa eventually signed the NPT on July 10, 1991.

American leaders need to look at South Africa as an example and should consider implementing four possible strategic policy changes to help reduce the significance of a nuclearized Iran. These would include:

- 1) Economic Sanctions
- 2) Regional Missile Defense System
- 3) Technical and Material Sanction
- 4) Coastal Defense

Economic Sanctions. As was the case with India and Pakistan when they became nuclearized, the initial political action that takes place will be international economic sanctions headed by the

United States. As a signatory member of the NPT, Iran (unlike Israel, Pakistan or India) is obliged not to produce any nuclear weapons, so long as it is not under any immediate, extreme threat. For this reason the United States, as well as the rest of the international community, would be within the U.N. legal bounds to implement sanctions on Iran if they were not in, or on the verge of, war.²² It is critical here, however, not to only focus on the punitive aspects of these economic sanctions. Washington will also need to continue to remind the Iranian leadership that a return to normal relations could be possible, and additional economic aid would be provided, so long as they dismantled their nuclear arsenal and weapons program.

Regional Missile Defense Systems. Since the most credible and realistic threat of a nuclearized Iran would be to its close neighbors in the Middle East, the United States will need to find ways to provide security to those interests. In helping to minimize any nuclear threat to the Middle East, America will need to improve the strategic defenses of its allies and American military bases within striking distance of Iran by using aerospace power. Due to their rather extensive long-range missile systems, the Islamic Republic currently has the ability to hit every capital city in the Middle East along with all fixed U.S. military installations.

American military planners will need to start developing an advanced, defensive surface-to-air missile system, similar to the Patriot Missile used extensively in the Gulf War or the Israeli built (but American funded) Arrow-2 anti-tactical ballistic missile. The purpose of this system would be to destroy any possible incoming nuclear missile, preferably during the delivery vehicle's boost stage over the Persian Gulf. Other anti-missile ideas could range from sea-based interceptors to airborne lasers.

Technical and Material Sanctions. Although the United States possesses a very powerful and credible, second-strike nuclear capability, there has been some fear among American policymakers that this deterrent factor, which was successfully upheld throughout the Cold War, may not be enough to prevent an irrational "rogue" nation from sending a nuclear missile across the ocean into the U.S. heartland. For this reason, as well as to limit Iran's strategic targeting options in general, the United States should continue its aggressive campaign (from the dual containment policy) to control and prevent intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) technologies and materials from entering Iran. If this can be maintained, the Islamic Republic will be limited to striking against only U.S. interests outside of America's borders. This would allow U.S. strategic war planners greater flexibility in defending against, as well as reacting towards, a hostile, nuclear-armed Iran without having fear of an attack on American territory.

Coastal Defenses. If the Islamic Republic of Iran is unable to advance past its current sophistication with ballistic missile technology, the Iranian leadership may seek alternative, less technologically advanced, means to strike against the U.S. with a nuclear weapon. The second and one of the most unexpected ways to attack the United States, as was proven with the USS Cole bombing, is the suicidal detonation of a merchant or passenger ship with a nuclear bomb. While the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole did not include the use of a nuclear weapon, it did show how susceptible large ports could be. Although the likelihood of an overt attack such as this by the Islamic government may be minimal, political leaders within the Iranian regime very well could utilize international terrorists as their surrogates, eliminating any Iranian fingerprint that possibly could be used to identify the Islamic Republic as the culprit. To help prevent this sort of

attack from occurring, the United States will need to find ways to beef-up coastal security and surveillance to help prevent the infiltration of any unregistered or unidentified ships from coming into one of its ports.

While these are not all of the possible ways in which the United States could react to a nuclearized Iran, they constitute a good start towards helping to minimize the significance of Iran having nuclear weapons. By implementing these four strategic measures, American policymakers would be able to provide greater security for its national interests in the Middle East as well as allow the Iranian regime to reconsider the necessity of continuing with their nuclear weapons program.

Conclusion

Whatever motives Iran has for the acquisition of nuclear weapons and the possible usage of such an arsenal, a nuclearized Iran is not what the United States wants in an already restless Middle East. The acquisition of nuclear weapons within this region could only make the security environment more hostile and volatile. However, the willingness and support of multiple countries to sell advanced weapon technologies to the Islamic Republic, forces America to reevaluate the plausibility of preventing the nuclearization of Iran. The current U.S. strategy of dual containment has proven ineffective at altering Iran's push to become a nuclear power, and inadequate at preventing them from interfering in the Middle East peace process. American policymakers should, therefore, investigate alternative means to work with this country in order to help maintain regional stability.

The current political and cultural gaps between Iran and the U.S. are rather considerable. Nonetheless, this research recommends pursuing pragmatic political engagement, focused mainly on mutual benefits in order to achieve the realignment and integration of Iran into the international community. To this end, America will need to recognize the importance of the Islamic clergy within the Iranian government and attempt to work them. Unlike the current U.S. policy, which only seeks to isolate and punish Iran, American policymakers should use "carrot-and-stick" approaches to rely on inducement for change as well as sanctions for non-compliance. For example, the Iranian leadership would greatly like to see an ease in economic sanctions and allow for American oil companies to invest in their country. The U.S. may find it in their interest to consider these options as long as Iran agrees not to interfere in the Middle East peace process. If at anytime the Islamic Republic is suspected of renegeing on their deal, then the United States could rekindle their previously imposed sanctions.

Recent developments in the U.S.-Iran relations give some indications that both nations may move to some form of open dialogue. In June 1998, Iran's President Khatami called for a "dialogue of civilizations", then former President Clinton stated "What we want is a genuine reconciliation with Iran".²³ American policymakers need to take advantage of this mindset and use it to start bridging gaps before Iran becomes nuclearized.

However, in case no such rapprochement takes place between the two nations prior to Iran's overt acquisition of a nuclear weapon, it then becomes imperative for the United States to have a back-up plan ready to implement. This research recommends that America focus on finding ways

to minimize the strategic significance of having a nuclear arsenal. Such as implementing severe economic, technical and material sanctions on Iran. Militarily, it recommends establishing a regional missile defense system and beefing-up U.S. coastal defenses. At the same time, Washington will also need to remind Tehran that a return to normal relations could be possible if they dismantle their nuclear arsenal and weapons program.

A move towards normalized relations will obviously not be easy for the leaders of either the United States or Iran. Current political and cultural differences challenge these two governments from working with one another. However, after the tragic terrorist events of September 11, 2001, there appears to be a growing need to more closely monitor those states that are pursuing weapons of mass destruction. The mounting tension in the Middle East and the increasingly restlessness and hostility of religious fundamentalists are all adding a further sense of urgency to the issue of security and nuclear weapons proliferation in this region. It appears now, more than ever, that the problem of international security is becoming more and more relevant in this area of the world where terrorism has become an aspect of every day life.

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