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## To Curtail the Iranian Nuclear Threat, Change Tehran's Threat Perceptions

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The Obama administration has made a promising start in diplomatically re-engaging Iran. The United States will participate fully in international talks with Iran over its nuclear activities, but if Washington is to cope successfully with Tehran's nuclear challenge, sensitive and skillful policy implementation must be based on sober analysis. This means considering which Iranian threats are imminent, which are mutable, and how our own actions affect threat perceptions on the other side of the fence. This Threat Assessment Brief seeks to evaluate the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program and by the policies we choose to adopt in response, thereby illuminating viable approaches to threat mitigation.

### Highlights

- Iran is *years* rather than *months* away from a credible nuclear weapons capability.
- While Iran wants a full nuclear fuel cycle and the option of quickly producing material needed for nuclear weapons, it does not appear to have resumed its earlier weaponization program.

A decision to do so would be based on a conclusion that nuclear weapons were necessary to deter attack and/or desirable to increase Iran's influence.

- Tehran's perceptions about the possibility of an attack are the biggest obstacle to preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state.
- The greatest near-term threat to U.S. national security would arise from an attack to forestall Iran's ability to acquire nuclear weapons.

- Iran must be persuaded that building nuclear weapons would pose a bigger threat to its security and prestige than not, and that satisfying the IAEA on safeguards is the best path to achieving its overall goals.

- To alter Iran's threat perceptions, the United States must:

Stop identifying "regime change" in Iran as a foreign policy objective and explicitly reject the unilateral use of military force.

Seek agreements with Iran in areas of mutual interest such as Afghanistan, even before the nuclear issue is resolved.

Support the continuation of UN Security Council sanctions until Iran satisfies the IAEA that it is in compliance with its NPT obligations.

## Background

Any commentary on the Iranian nuclear threat should begin with a review of what we think we know from the most informed and credible sources. The closest thing we have to facts on Iran's nuclear program comes from:

- 1) Information provided by the International Atomic Energy Agency in carrying out inspections conducted in accordance with the Safeguards Agreement negotiated pursuant to Iran's NPT membership.
- 2) Information provided by the U.S. intelligence community, both in the declassified summary of the November 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, and in subsequent open testimony from intelligence officials.

Tehran's nuclear program began under the Shah and was promoted by the United States. In the first decade of the Islamic Republic, the clerical government established the goal of achieving a full nuclear fuel cycle, hiding from the IAEA and the outside world its uranium conversion-related and uranium enrichment-related efforts and an associated program for nuclear weapons design and weaponization. The covert uranium enrichment efforts, compatible with either a civilian nuclear power program or a nuclear weapons program, were exposed by an Iranian opposition group in 2002. Iran's previous weaponization efforts, inherently contrary to the spirit and letter of Iran's NPT obligations, were confirmed by the U.S. intelligence community in 2007. At that time, the National Intelligence Council judged with high confidence that Iran's weaponization program was halted in the fall of 2003. Based on recent testimony by Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair and Defense Intelligence Agency Director Michael Maples, there does not seem to have been any fundamental change in that judgment or the moderate-to-high confidence assessment that accompanied it: "Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of UN Security Council resolutions demanding that Iran freeze its uranium enrichment efforts, Iran has continued to operate and expand a commercial scale uranium enrichment facility at Natanz, producing low-enriched uranium (LEU), and to construct a heavy-water research reactor at Arak, from which plutonium could eventually be extracted. According to the IAEA report released February 19, 2009, Iran had installed at Natanz 6,000 IR-1 centrifuges based on the Pakistani P-1 design, with 5,600 already operating. 1,010 kilograms of LEU had been produced at the facility. The IAEA reported further that Iran had begun producing fuel rods for Arak at the Esfahan Fuel Manufacturing Plant—evidence that Iran has taken the last remaining step in achieving a full nuclear fuel cycle.

Iran now has the technology and infrastructure necessary to produce fissile material—the most demanding



Iran's two-stage space-launch vehicle, named Safir-2, is displayed Feb. 10 at Azadi square in Tehran during a rally to mark the 30th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution.

prerequisite for developing nuclear weapons. Opinions differ on whether or not Iran's 6,000 IR-1 centrifuges at the Natanz facility could produce sufficient highly enriched uranium (HEU) from existing LEU feedstocks to supply one nuclear weapon. If the Natanz facility were used in this way, it would be quickly detected by the IAEA. U.S. officials continue to identify 2010-2015 as the period when Iran would be technically capable of producing enough HEU for a weapon, and to predict that any breakout in fissile material production would be most likely to occur through use of a covert enrichment facility, out of sight of IAEA inspectors. Although Iran is assessed to have the capability eventually to produce nuclear weapons, additional work (and time) would be required to develop and produce a reliable warhead for a delivery vehicle once Iran obtained sufficient fissile material.

Iran's nuclear program (always officially defined as leading to the operation of civilian nuclear power reactors) appears to have strong support from the public, but the government has never made the case publicly for developing nuclear weapons. In fact, the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, did just the opposite, describing nuclear weapons as anathema, a theological position later reinforced by a 2004\* fatwah, which explicitly ruled that developing, deploying, and

using such systems would be un-Islamic.

Iran has a sizeable ballistic missile development effort and has deployed dozens of the 1,300-2,000 kilometer-range, single-stage, liquid-fueled Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), capable of reaching U.S. military bases in the region as well as noncontiguous states such as Israel. The Iranians are also developing the 2,000 km-range, two-stage, solid-fueled Ashura MRBM. Reports have circulated for a number of years concerning programs to develop longer-range ballistic missiles of foreign design, but none have yet been flight-tested. Iran launched a small low-altitude satellite on a two-stage Safir space-launch vehicle (adapted from the Shahab-3) on February 2, 2009.

## U.S. Concerns

Iran's open ambition to develop a full nuclear fuel cycle and Tehran's aggressive pursuit of ballistic missiles, which could serve as the delivery vehicles for nuclear weapons, have been the cause of deep concern in the United States and among some U.S. friends and allies, particularly Israel. Activities and facilities permitted under the NPT would allow Iran to master the technology necessary for producing weapons-grade material. With centrifuge production capabilities and human capital in place, and with an ability to restrict IAEA inspections, Iran would be able to more easily construct covert facilities to produce HEU and accomplish weaponization. Neither the IAEA nor the U.S. intelligence community is confident it could detect such efforts without greater access and transparency.

Iran's rhetoric and behavior are important components in the threatening image Iran conveys to Israel and the United States. The seizure and holding of U.S. embassy hostages for 444 days in 1979-81 set the stage psychologically. The "Death to America" mantra adopted by Iranian authorities over the years and the "Great Satan" label frequently attached to the United States have reinforced negative and ominous stereotypes of Iran in America—even as the Iranian people themselves appear to take such slogans ever less seriously. Holocaust denial and belligerent rhetoric toward Israel by President Ahmadinejad casts an especially repugnant aura around the Islamic Republic's leadership.

Iran's strength is undergirded by its oil wealth—currently fourth in the world in terms of production and third in terms of reserves—and its location astride the jugular of world oil trade. The oil threat posed by Iran is two-fold. First, the oil gives Tehran confidence that it will have sufficient resources for pursuing its nuclear ambitions. Second, the enormous volume of oil moving through the Persian Gulf, the inelasticity of world demand, and Iran's growing military capabilities combine to enhance Tehran's putative threat of disrupting world oil supplies.

Finally, the arms and financial aid given by Tehran to Hezbollah and Hamas, both officially categorized by the United States as terrorist entities, heightens concern that Iranian nuclear weaponry or knowledge might fall into the hands of terrorists. That Iran was deemed re-

sponsible for the terrorist attack that killed 19 American soldiers at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and for shipping arms to insurgents in both Iraq and Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks, only deepens American threat perceptions concerning Iran.

Although the Obama administration has been more judicious than its predecessor in not demonizing Iran and not implying that President Ahmadinejad is in charge of nuclear policy, there are few who would disagree that Iran is a serious potential threat to U.S. interests. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said following her Middle East trip in March, "There is a great deal of concern about Iran from the entire region."<sup>2</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) was reflecting a common assessment of his colleagues when he described Iran in a recent speech as "a state supporter of terrorism and a threat to much of the Middle East, including the Arab world."<sup>3</sup>

## Iranian Concerns

Far less common among Americans is an appreciation of how U.S. rhetoric and actions impact the Iranian government and reinforce negative stereotypes of the United States. Iranian suspicions and anxieties about the United States harken back to the British-U.S.-sponsored coup in 1953 against Iran's democratically elected president, Mohammad Mosaddeq, and to U.S. support for Saddam Hussein during the long and bloody war Iraq launched against Iran in 1980.

It is difficult for Americans to appreciate fully how warnings against Iranian "meddling" or "interference" in the affairs of its neighbors sounds to an Iranian ear from the officials of a country which has forceably entered two states contiguous to Iran, leaving nearly 200,000 soldiers deployed in the region. In the six years since President Bush designated Iran as a member of the "axis of evil," U.S. leaders articulated a new military doctrine of preventive war, used military force to change the neighboring regimes in Baghdad and Kabul, identified the goal of "regime change" in Iran, and appeared to collude in Israel's attack on Syria's nuclear reactor at al-Kibar. Moreover, the U.S. press carried stories of covert action programs against Iran, alleging regime change as their goal. As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama labeled Iranian nuclear weapons as "unacceptable" and said he would "never take military action off the table"<sup>4</sup>—a rhetorical combination which Tehran can easily interpret as the threatened use of military force, regardless of whether Iranian nuclear weapons intent has been established. In reference to "U.S. enmity," Ayatollah Khamenei told university students in January 2008, "The Iranian nation has always had the threat of military attack dangled over it; it is nothing new."<sup>5</sup>

Much U.S. commentary on the Iranian nuclear threat takes place in reaction to Iranian rhetoric or to evidence of Iranian support for terrorist activity in the Middle East. A more sober appraisal comes from those who have spent considerable time in Iran talking with Iranian officials. Foreign policy journalist and author



Barbara Slavin has described Iran's goals as "largely defensive: to achieve strategic depth and safeguard its system against foreign intervention, to have a major say in regional decisions, and to prevent or minimize actions that might run counter to Iranian interests."<sup>6</sup> Further, Hillary Mann Leveret, former National Security Council Director for Iran and Persian Gulf Affairs, recently described Iran's feeling of vulnerability as a state with no strategic buffer, weak conventional military forces, and 15 neighbors—none of which are allies, but several of which raise potential security concerns.<sup>7</sup>

material for nuclear warheads is far from an ideal solution. The greater the number of centrifuges running at Natanz, the less time Iran would need to develop weapons in a breakout scenario. The existence of even a limited indigenous enrichment capability would not set a helpful precedent with regard to constraining the spread of sensitive fuel cycle capabilities to non-nuclear-weapon states. Establishing multilateral control of enrichment activities in Iran or halting expansion of Iran's current capability would be preferable. Nonetheless, given that Iran already has a small enrichment

U.S. officials continue to identify 2010-2015 as the period when Iran would be technically capable of producing enough HEU for a weapon

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## Conclusions

A realistic assessment of the threat to the United States from Iran's nuclear program and from Iran's response to U.S. threat mitigation efforts leads to several conclusions.

The Iranians are likely to interpret UN Security Council sanctions as a U.S.-inspired effort to prevent Iran from realizing its rightful status as a powerful and important country. Even if Iran's nuclear program is actually directed at creating a nuclear weapons option, the Iranians feel they are being deprived of their inherent rights as an NPT signatory to produce nuclear fuel for civilian power production. Based on existing U.S. policy pronouncements, Iran sees little to gain from changing course. Coming clean with the IAEA about its past weaponization work, halting its sensitive fuel cycle activities, and agreeing to allow IAEA additional protocol access to Iranian facilities and personnel would not change U.S. opposition to Iranian possession of a full nuclear fuel cycle or remove the threat of attack.

This Iranian threat perception can probably only be altered by explicit assurances that full disclosure and adoption of enhanced IAEA inspections would be accompanied by international acceptance of Iran's right to possess a full fuel cycle. The removal of sanctions could then be offered (and perceived by Iran) as the quid pro quo for accepting IAEA transparency measures rather than as a capitulation to the demand that Iran's enrichment program be frozen. If there were such a shift in the stated objective of sanctions and it were accompanied by openness to negotiated agreements in other realms, there would be a much greater chance of dissuading Iran from the path of nuclear weaponization.

Forestalling an Iranian nuclear weapons capability after Iran has established a technical basis for producing fissile

capability which is growing and could be supplemented with a clandestine capability, it would be better to prevent development of a nuclear weapons capability by heading off a covert route and avoiding the disastrous option of invasion and occupation. Moreover, demonstrating strong support for IAEA safeguards by the international community would be a very positive contribution to dealing with the threat of nuclear nonproliferation elsewhere.

## ENDNOTES

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