

Iran/Iraq

The Islamic Republic of Iran, which has pursued policies hostile to the United States since its founding in 1979, seeks to become the most powerful country in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Iran is on the brink of attaining nuclear weapons capabilities, which its leadership believes will help it to attain this end.

Iran cloaks its nuclear weapons efforts under the guise of a civilian nuclear power program. U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair testified before Congress on March 10 that, "We assess Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons." Although it is not clear exactly when Iran will realize this goal, Blair testified, "We judge Iran probably would be technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a weapon sometime during the 2010–2015 timeframe." Other sources estimate a much shorter time frame for an Iranian nuclear breakout. The Institute for Science and International Security estimated in March 2009 that Iran could produce enough HEU for a nuclear weapon in less than six months. The staff of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control estimated that by December 2008, Iran had accumulated enough U-235 (the uranium isotope necessary for a nuclear weapon) to fuel one bomb within two to three months if it is enriched to higher levels.

A nuclear-capable Iran would accelerate the pressures that are already leading many states, including Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Algeria, to consider acquiring their own nuclear option. Each new nuclear power would multiply the risks and uncertainties in an already volatile region. The end result would be a tense and unstable multipolar Middle East a hair-trigger away from nuclear war. Such a capability might also embolden Iran to step up its support for terrorism and subversion, believing that its nuclear capability would deter a military response from the United States or other powers. An Iranian miscalculation could easily lead to a military clash with the U.S. or Israel—a clash whose costs would be exponentially higher than the costs of a conflict with a non-nuclear Iran. Even if Tehran could not carry out a nuclear missile attack on U.S. territory for many years, Tehran could credibly threaten to target Saudi oil fields with a nuclear weapon, thereby gaining a potent blackmail threat to the world economy.

Notes

Tehran's efforts to modernize its conventional forces by purchasing arms from Russia and China are complemented by its nuclear and ballistic missile efforts. With the Shahab-class ballistic missile, Tehran can already reach all of the Middle East and parts of southeastern Europe. But Iran's ambitions seem to go beyond that. This spring, Iran launched its first indigenously produced satellite, putting Tehran on a trajectory to develop an ICBM capability that could be matched with its budding nuclear program.

Domestically, the massive protests that convulsed Iran in the days after the June 12, 2009, presidential elections have waned in the face of unrelenting government repression. The ruling regime has shown itself to be out of touch with and cruelly indifferent to the popular opinion of its own people. By resorting to brute force, the regime has lost whatever legitimacy it had in the eyes of many Iranians. There are cracks at the top of the regime and the government has been weakened, but as long as the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, retains the undivided loyalty of Iran's security forces, particularly its Revolutionary Guards, the regime will not be toppled merely by protest rallies.

President Barack Obama's evolving message on Iran belatedly included criticism of the regime's repression and human rights abuses. His Administration, however, continues to cling to wishful thinking about the possibility of negotiating a sustainable rapprochement with Iran's ruling regime. American diplomats met with their Iranian counterparts in Geneva on October 1 as part of the P5+1 talks on Iran's nuclear program. At that meeting, Iran agreed "in principle" to send about three-quarters of its known supplies of enriched uranium out of the country to Russia and France to be processed into fuel for a nuclear reactor dedicated to producing medical isotopes. It also agreed to permit International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to examine the uranium enrichment plant that it tried to conceal for several years before President Obama announced it had been discovered in late September.

Although the results of the October 1 meeting have been prematurely hailed as a success, Iran continues to refuse to halt its accelerating uranium enrichment activities, as called for by U.N. Security Council resolutions. Moreover, if Iran has retained secret stockpiles of enriched uranium or builds another clandestine enrichment facility, then the tentative agreement would do little to slow Iran's nuclear program. An "agreement in principle" with a regime that has no principles would merely allow Tehran to stave off sanctions while secretly continuing its nuclear weapons work.

The Obama Administration's risky strategy of engaging Iran's duplicitous dictatorship also is unlikely to succeed because hostility to the United States, which the regime considers to be the "Great Satan," is an ideological cornerstone of the Islamic Republic. The fact that Tehran was caught red-handed in trying to conceal another uranium enrichment facility underscores the poor prospects for negotiating an acceptable resolution

of the standoff over Iran's nuclear program. The bottom line is that Obama Administration officials must abandon their wishful thinking and deal with Iran as it is, not as how they would like it to be.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States should lead an international coalition to pressure Iran to halt its dangerous nuclear weapons program and support for terrorism. In the increasingly likely event that Iran attains a nuclear weapon capability, then Washington must deter Tehran from using such a weapon while containing Iranian influence and mitigating Iran's ability to threaten the United States or its allies. The United States should:

1. Adopt a "protect and defend" strategy aimed at neutralizing Iran's nuclear threat. The United States should strengthen deterrence against an Iranian attack on its allies in the region by deploying enhanced missile defenses to counter the threat of Iranian ballistic missiles. Washington should increase cooperation in the missile defense field with states that are threatened by Iran in Europe and in the Middle East, and particularly with Israel, a prime target of potential Iranian aggression.

The United States and Israel already have jointly funded and developed the Arrow missile defense system, which is now operational in Israel, and are developing the next-generation Arrow interceptor. Washington should continue these cooperative programs for the foreseeable future. The Navy should be prepared to deploy Aegis ships to appropriate locations to defend Israel against missile attacks as circumstances demand. This will require coordinating missile defense activities among the various U.S. and Israeli missile defense systems through the Link 16 communications system. The U.S. should also field missile defense interceptors in space for intercepting Iranian missiles in the boost phase, which would add a valuable additional layer to missile defenses. Given the growing Iranian ballistic missile threat, it would be a huge mistake to cut back missile defense programs that could address that threat. Yet the Obama Administration appears prepared to do just that. It already has abandoned the Bush Administration's plan for a "third site" missile defense program in Poland and the Czech Republic.

2. Mobilize an international coalition to contain and deter Iran. Iran's emergence as a nuclear power threatens many countries, particularly those in the growing shadow of Iranian power. The United States should maintain a strong naval and air presence in the Persian Gulf to deter Iran and strengthen military cooperation with other Gulf states, which are growing increasingly anxious about Iran's hard-line government. The U.S. and its European allies should strengthen military, intelligence, and security cooperation with such threatened states as Iraq, Israel, Turkey, and the members

of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). The GCC was founded in 1981 to provide collective security for Arab states threatened by Iran. Such a coalition could help to contain the expansion of Iranian power and to facilitate military action against Iran should it become necessary.

3. Lead an international coalition to impose the strongest possible sanctions on the Iranian regime. Although it benefited greatly from the 2007 and 2008 spike in world oil and natural gas prices, Iran's economy has been hurt by the subsequent fall in energy prices. This has increased Tehran's vulnerability to economic sanctions. Iran's economic future is not promising, and the situation is likely to get worse as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad follows through on his populist promises to increase state subsidies for food, fuel, and loans and give Iran's poor a greater share of the country's oil wealth. The U.S. should continue to push for the strongest possible sanctions at the U.N. Security Council, but experience has shown that it cannot rely on the U.N. to halt Iran's nuclear program. Russia and China, which have extensive economic, military, and energy ties to Iran, consistently block or dilute any effective resolution. The U.S. therefore should work with Britain, France, Germany, the European Union, Japan, and other like-minded countries to impose the strongest possible sanctions outside of the U.N. framework.

4. Maintain the U.S. commitment to help Iraqis build a stable democracy to deter Iran. A cornerstone of any policy to contain Iran must be strong support for an independent, democratic Iraq that is an ally in the war against terrorism. Iraq has made dramatic security gains in the past two years, thanks to the Bush Administration's surge strategy, which enabled and expanded an Iraqi surge against Iran-backed militias, Sunni insurgents, and al-Qaeda in Iraq. But Iraq's political and security progress is tentative and fragile. Iraq's shifting political equilibrium is potentially destabilizing and requires a strong U.S. military presence to assure adequate security. Iraqi security forces have made great strides and have become increasingly effective, but they remain dependent on U.S. training, logistical support, air support, intelligence, and counter-terrorism cooperation. Moreover, U.S. troops also play an important role in deterring Iran from undermining Iraqi progress. Iraqi security forces are going to require strong U.S. assistance. In this regard, the Obama Administration should press the Iraqi government for greater flexibility in interpreting the vaguely worded Status of Forces Agreement. Lastly, the U.S. and Iraq should clarify the terms of the security agreement to avoid future misunderstandings that could lead to avoidable losses of American and Iraqi lives.

5. Show strong support for the Iranian people by denouncing Iran's human rights abuses. In the long run, a free Iran is the best hope for peace and security in the volatile Middle East. President Obama must make

it clear that the United States stands with the Iranian people, not with the repressive regime of the ayatollahs. He should strongly denounce the violent suppression of the democratic opposition and the systematic human rights abuses perpetrated by regime. Moreover, he should call on other world leaders to cooperate in pressuring Tehran to end its persecution of political reformers, human rights activists, and religious minorities.

6. Strengthen Proliferation Security Initiative efforts against Iran.

The United States should encourage PSI participants to focus more tightly on Iranian proliferation. The Obama Administration should continue to pursue its predecessor's efforts in signing agreements to allow the boarding of ships that fly a "flag of convenience," a flag of one country flown by a ship owned by a citizen or company of another country. Proliferators often use cargo ships that fly flags of convenience to conceal the origin or nature of prohibited cargo. PSI participants cannot board suspicious vessels unless they acquire the permission of the nation under whose flag the ship operates. Advance agreements would allow more flexibility and freedom of action in time-sensitive operations.

7. Launch a public diplomacy campaign to explain to the Iranian people how the regime's nuclear weapons program and hard-line policies hurt their economic and national interests. Over the past several years, the Ahmadinejad regime has managed to monopolize the domestic dialogue on its nuclear program. As a result, a majority of Iranians view their country's nuclear effort as a national cause and support it. America's outreach to Iran so far has failed to provide a robust opposing message that clearly articulates to ordinary Iranians the steep political and economic costs associated with the regime's plans. America should not try to play favorites among the various Iranian opposition groups, but should instead encourage them to cooperate under the umbrella of the broadest possible coalition

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Iran has the largest ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East and has the capability to strike U.S. bases in the region, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, and a growing number of other U.S. allies using a medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM).
- On May 20, 2009, Iran tested a solid-fuel ballistic missile with an estimated range of at least 2,000 kilometers, underscoring the continued progress Iran has made in developing advanced missile technology.
- According to experts, Iran is likely to develop an ICBM that can reach the United States by 2015.

- According to Uzi Rubin, the former head of Israel's missile defense program, Iran could have the ability to target all of Europe with ballistic missiles in three or four years, if it made an all-out push.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency reported in August 2009 that Iran had installed over 8,000 gas centrifuges in its uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and that about 4,600 of them were in operation. These machines had produced about 1,594 kilograms of low-enriched uranium, which is more than enough to fuel a nuclear weapon if further enriched to weapon grade.
- Iranian leaders continue to deny the Holocaust and threaten to destroy Israel, while proceeding to develop nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them.
- Iran's abysmal human rights record has worsened under the repressive rule of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was reinstated as president after falsifying the results of the June 2009 election. The regime continues to violate the human rights of Iranians with impunity; systematically arrest, torture, and execute political dissidents; jail reporters and close down newspapers; and persecute religious minorities, particularly the Bahais.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Heritage Foundation's Iran Briefing Room Web Site

Includes all recent Heritage Foundation publications on Iran

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Middleeast/iranbriefingroom.cfm>

James Phillips, "Time for Tougher Sanctions on Iran's Terrorist Regime," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2647, October 9, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Iran/wm2647.cfm>

Peter Brookes, "Rogue States and Rising Powers Continue to Pose a Strategic Risk to American Security," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 56, June 15, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/sr0056.cfm>

James Phillips, "What Is Next in Iran?" Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2509, June 26, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Iran/wm2509.cfm>

The Heritage Foundation Iran Working Group, "Iran's Nuclear Threat: The Day After," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 53, June 4, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/sr0053.cfm>

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