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IRAN'S 'NUCLEAR OPTION' IN CONTEXT: IMPLICATIONS FOR US NONPROLIFERATION POLICY

By Cdr Dean Martins

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Abstract

Sometime between 2010-2015, Iran's nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz will likely achieve the technological capability to produce enough fissile material to make one nuclear weapon, thereby giving Iran a 'nuclear option'. US nonproliferation policy to date continues to demand that Iran "suspend" its nuclear enrichment activities, a policy which appears to be premised on the notion that Iran will likely eventually take a decision to acquire nuclear weapons once it has a capability to do so. This paper, however, argues that Iran's nuclear option needs to be placed in context of the "nuclear drivers" that have propelled Iran towards the nuclear threshold and the "sources of nuclear restraint" that act to discourage Iran from actually 'going nuclear'. It shows that Iran's 'nuclear drivers' have evolved considerably and may not be sufficient to impel Iran to make a political decision to acquire a nuclear arsenal in the near term given the international and domestic political disincentives of doing so. US nonproliferation policy needs to be tailored accordingly. Specifically, the US should drop its 'no enrichment' policy and instead seek an agreement with Iran which allows it to operate a small-scale nuclear enrichment facility in return for implementing a more intrusive International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguard regime that improves transparency over Iranian nuclear activities. Otherwise, sticking with the current demand that Iran suspend its enrichment activities risks leaving the US with a binary choice of trying to coerce Iran with military force or economic sanctions; not only are these policy choices not likely to work but they may prove to be counterproductive to US nonproliferation aims in the longer run.

Introduction

US nonproliferation policy towards Iran will soon come to a crossroad; sometime between 2010-2015, Iran's nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz will likely achieve the technological capability to produce enough fissile material to make one nuclear weapon, thereby giving Iran a 'nuclear option'.[1] The dilemma for the new Obama administration therefore will be how to square Iran's insistence that, as a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), it has an 'inalienable right' to enrich nuclear uranium to fuel future nuclear power reactors with US suspicions that Tehran ultimately desires to acquire nuclear weapons. In a departure with the previous administration's policy, US officials will join multilateral talks[2] with Iran designed to end the nuclear standoff.[3] But US policy to date continues to demand that Iran "suspend" its nuclear enrichment (and reprocessing[4]) activities as a basis of any future agreement with Iran.[5] This "all-or-

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[1] In February 2009, the US Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, reaffirmed a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that Iran "probably would be technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a weapon sometime during the 2010-2015 timeframe." Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence* (February 2009): 20; http://intelligence.senate.gov/090212/blair.pdf; Internet; accessed 13 March 2009. However, David Albright, a proliferation expert, contends that Iran will likely reach "the first level of breakout capability" in 2009, once it has amassed 1000 kgs of low enriched uranium, which, with further enrichment, could produce enough HEU for one nuclear device. David Albright, Jacqueline Shire with Paul Brannan and Andrea Scheel, *Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable - Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration* (Institute for Science and International Security, January 21 2009); http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/Iran_paper_final_2.pdf; Internet; accessed 15 March 2009. See also Council on Foreign Relations, "Interview David Albright - Iran may Achieve Capability to make a Nuclear Weapon in 2009," February 20, 2009; http://www.cfr.org/publications/18570; Internet; accessed 22 March 2009.

[2] These talks have included UK, France, Germany, Russia and China.

[3] Sue Pleming "US joins Iran nuclear talks in policy about-face" *Globe and Mail*, 9 April 2009, A18.

[4] Iran is not known to have a reprocessing facility that would enable it to extract plutonium - the other fissile material that could be used to produce nuclear weapons – which naturally accumulates as part of spent fuel from nuclear reactors. However, Iran is building a heavy-water reactor at Arak, which, when it

nothing" approach to negotiations, however, risks undermining any reasonable chance of reaching a diplomatic solution to the nuclear impasse,[6] since it appears to be premised on the notion that Iran 'can't be trusted' with a nuclear enrichment capability; that Iran's past safeguard violations undermine its 'right' to enrichment technology, or worse, suggest that it will likely take a decision to acquire nuclear weapons once it has acquired a capability do to so.[7]

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becomes operational in 2013, will be capable of producing enough plutonium for one or two nuclear weapons per year. Peter Crail, "Iran Still Rebuffs IAEA Requests," *Arms Control Today* (March 2009); http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_03/Iran_IAEA; Internet; accessed; 11 April 2009. The enrichment facility at Natanz, however, is the "main source of proliferation concern", since, when fully completed, it will have considerably more 'break-out potential' than the one or two nuclear weapons per year at Arak. Natanz therefore be the focus of this paper. Paul K. Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status," *Congressional Research Service: Report* (06/23, 2008): 2; http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tsh&AN=32817686&site=ehost-live; Internet; accessed 25 March 2009.

[5] US officials have demanded that Iran suspend enrichment activities even *before* negotiations can take place. Thomas Erdbrink and Mary Beth Sheridan, "Ahmadinejad Claims Progress in Iranian Nuclear Program," *The Washington Post*, Friday, April 10, 2009; http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/09/AR2009040904220.html ; Internet; accessed April 15 2009. The previous negotiations did 'technically' move away from demanding "permanent cessation" of Iran's enrichment activities, when in 2005 it was suggested that "suspension" be tied to a 10 year review cycle. This was followed in 2006 with an "indefinite moratorium" proposal that would be reviewed when international confidence was restored in Iran's nuclear intentions. The latest incentive package submitted to Iran in June 2008 also tied the duration of the "suspension" period to restoration of international confidence about Iran's nuclear intentions but without any specifics of how confidence would be restored. Mark Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, Adelphi Paper 398 (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2008): 25-26. In all previous overtures, however, Iran would have been prevented from carrying out nuclear research and development which would have delayed it from acquiring a nuclear option for some time. More recently, there have been reports that the US Obama administration, as part of its policy review on Iran, may be considering a change to the US 'no enrichment' position but no official change has taken place at the time of writing. Daniel Dombey, "US may Cede to Iran's Nuclear Ambitions," *FT.Com Financial Times* , 3 April 2009; http: //www.ft.com/cms/s/0/87571cc6-206b-11de-b930-00144feabdc0.html; Internet; accessed 10 April 2009.

[6] Paul Kerr, "Divided from within: Does Tehran Seek Nuclear Weapons or an International Agreement? It's Not Clear Whether Even the Iranians Know for Sure," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (November/ December 2006): 19; http://search.ebscohost.com; Internet; accessed 10 March 2009.

[7] *Ibid*. In 2009, the US intelligence community assessed that "Although we do not know whether Iran currently intends to develop nuclear weapons, we assess Tehran at minimum is keeping open the option to develop them." However, it goes on to state that "We assess convincing the Iranian leadership to forgo the eventual development of nuclear weapons will be difficult given the linkage many within the leadership see between nuclear weapons and Iran's key national security and foreign policy objectives…." Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, 20.

This paper argues that Iran's nuclear option needs to be placed in context[8] of the "nuclear drivers"[9] that have propelled Iran towards the nuclear threshold and the "sources of nuclear restraint"[10] that act to discourage Iran from actually 'going nuclear'. Indeed, it can be shown that Iran's 'nuclear drivers' have evolved considerably and are not likely sufficient to impel Iran to make a political decision to acquire a nuclear arsenal in the near term given the international and domestic political disincentives of doing so. US nonproliferation policy needs to be tailored accordingly. Specifically, the US should drop its 'no enrichment' policy and instead seek an agreement with Iran which allows it to operate a small-scale nuclear enrichment facility in return for implementing a more intrusive International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguard regime that improves transparency over Iranian nuclear activities.[11] Otherwise, sticking with an 'all-or-nothing' approach may risk not only undermining a reasonable chance of finding a diplomatic solution to the current nuclear standoff but also undermining Iran's 'sources of nuclear restraint' in the longer run as well.

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[8] The title and 'angle' for this paper have been inspired by Shahram Chubin, "Iran's Power in Context," *Survival* 51, no. 1 (February-March, 2009), 165. It should be noted, however, that Chubin's article does not address Iran's nuclear program or option in any detail.

[9] This term is used to refer to the motivational basis for countries embarking on a nuclear program. See for example Bradley L. Bowman, "The 'Demand-Side': Avoiding a Nuclear-Armed Iran," *Orbis* 52, no. 4 (Fall, 2008), 628**.**

[10] Mitchell Reiss, *Without the Bomb: The Politics of Nuclear Nonproliferation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 247.

[11] A similar argument is made in Christoph Bertram, "Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation," *Chaillot Paper 110* (Institute for Security Studies, August 2008), 30-35. Fitzpatrick summarizes other similar proposals but argues against these so-called 'fall-back positions'. Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 58-60.

Towards the Nuclear Threshold – Nuclear Drivers

Revelations in 2002-03 that Iran had "systematically violated" its IAEA safeguard obligations over the course of nearly two decades by secretly building a nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz raised international concerns about Iran's nuclear intentions to an all time high.[12] Evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapon design program also surfaced in 2004 when an Iranian defector leaked a laptop containing sensitive nuclear research documents, including a design for a nuclear re-entry vehicle for an Iranian Shabab-3 ballistic missile.[13] US intelligence has assessed with "high confidence" that this nuclear weaponization program was terminated in late 2003; and, since that time, Iran has opened Natanz to IAEA inspectors as well.[14] But Iran has continued to develop its enrichment facility at Natanz, despite a series of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR), backed up by economic sanctions, demanding that it cease to do so.

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[12] Iran claimed that its 1974 safeguard agreement with IAEA does not require it to declare new facilities until 180 days before they became operational. Technically this was correct. However, when IAEA officials were finally able to visit these facilities, they discovered 14 different ways in which Iran "had systematically violated" its 1974 safeguard agreement for nearly two decades. To make matters worse, Iranian explanations for these illicit activities were subsequently found wanting by IAEA inspectors, who gathered evidence that contradicted Iran's explanations, forcing Iranian officials to change their story on several occasions. *Ibid.*, 15.

[13] The IAEA has also uncovered a number of documents that refer to research and experiments that were likely related to a nuclear weaponization program. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

[14] United States, National Intelligence Estimate *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, (November 2007); http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf; Internet; accessed 31 March 2009. A more recent US threat assessment re-affirms this finding. Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, 20.

Why did Iran embark on a clandestine nuclear program and why has Iran refused to suspend its nuclear activities to assuage international concerns about it's nuclear intentions? For some the answer is straight forward: Iran is bent on acquiring nuclear weapons.[15]

However, before analyzing the 'drivers' behind Iran's nuclear program, it is important to make a distinction between Iran's motivations to acquire the *technological capability* to produce nuclear weapons - which requires a *capability decision* - and motivations to actually build and test nuclear weapons - which requires a *proliferation decision*.[16] Indeed, as in the case with other nuclear threshold states, these motivations are very different and are "too frequently confused with one another."[17]

The end-state of a *capability decision* is to acquire a 'nuclear option' - that is, the capability to produce nuclear weapons relatively quickly if required. The actual time that would lapse between taking a *proliferation decision* and actually acquiring the first

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[15] See for example Alan M. Dershowitz, *Preemption: A Knife that Cuts both Ways* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 175. Roger Chapin, "Commentary: Destroy Nuclear Facilities", *The Washington Times* 18 March 2009; http://washingtontimes.com/news/2009/mar/18/destroy-nuclear-. facilities-now; Internet; accessed 15 April 2009. Ilan Berman, "Why Tehran Wants the Bomb," *The American Spectator* (June, 2007), 15-17. Thérèse Deplech, *Iran and the Bomb: The Abdication of International Responsibilit*y (New York: Columbia University Press), 15.

[16] A number of countries, for example Sweden, are believed to have taken decisions to acquire a nuclear option without ever having made a *proliferation decision* to actually acquire nuclear weapons. Pakistan, on the other hand, appears to have made both a capability decision and a proliferation decision simultaneously. Stephen M. Meyer, *The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5-6.

[17] Reiss, *Without the Bomb: The Politics of Nuclear Nonproliferation*, 258.

nuclear weapon is referred to as the *lag-time*.[18] For some countries, the incentive to take a *capability decision* early in a country's nuclear development in order to reduce the lag-time and acquire a readily available nuclear option as a '*hedge'* against an uncertain and potentially volatile future security environment can be quite high.[19] Even a nuclear weapon design program can be started to reduce lag-time, without an explicit *proliferation decision* ever having been made.[20]

It is in this context that Chubin and others[21] have argued that rather than a concerted drive towards acquiring a nuclear arsenal, the evolution of Tehran's nuclear program has been influenced by various security, foreign policy and domestic political imperatives that have evolved considerably over time; these imperatives have nonetheless acted to propel Iran towards the nuclear threshold in keeping with a *capability decision* to *at least* acquire a nuclear option. [22] Accordingly, Chubin argues that

> Iran's quest for a nuclear capability (for "nonweaponized deterrence") can be understood by reference to certain key

[18] Meyer, *The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation*, 149.

[19] *Ibid.*, 151. Chubin describes "Iran's attempt to position itself to acquire a nuclear option as a classic case of nuclear hedging." Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), 60.

[20] For example, in the 1980s, the Brazilian military built a 1,000 foot shaft in a remote area of Brazil which was likely to be used for underground nuclear tests should Brazil decide to acquire nuclear weapons in the future. At the time, however, Brazil "was still years away from possessing the necessary nuclear weapons material for a test device." Leonard S. Spector and Jacquelin R. Smith, *Nuclear Ambitions: The Spread of Nuclear Weapons 1989-1990* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1990), 245-246.

[21] Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 7-8 and 11-12. See also Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 14-15.

[22] *Ibid*, 12.

> goals: a deterrent (regime maintenance), an instrument for regional influence, [and] a nationalist card for regime legitimization….[23]

Security/Regime maintenance. Until Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003, the key driver behind Iran's clandestine nuclear program was to hedge against "being caught at a strategic disadvantage" should an Iraqi nuclear threat ever materialize.[24] It was during its bitter eight year war with Iraq and amid growing concerns that Baghdad had "revitalized its quest for nuclear arms"[25] in the mid-1980s that Tehran re-started its nuclear program and later secretly acquired centrifuge technology from the Pakistani AQ Khan black market network in 1987.[26] Iraq's ambitious nuclear program was largely dismantled in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. But Iran's need for a clandestine program to act as a hedge against a future nuclear armed Iraq was further highlighted in

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[23] *Ibid*. In this same quote Chubin also notes that the nuclear program has been seen as a "bargaining card." Certainly, the controversy over the nuclear program gives Iran some 'leverage' to secure concessions from the US and the West in general on key Iranian issues, such lifting of economic sanctions. However, as will be argued later in the paper, strong domestic political support that has been engendered for the program since Chubin's book was published in 2006 is such that no Iranian government is likely to be in a position to 'bargain' the away nuclear enrichment program.

[24] Spector and Smith, *Nuclear Ambitions: The Spread of Nuclear Weapons 1989-1990*, 203. Chubin also describes the evolution of Iran's nuclear program as a "classic case of nuclear hedging." Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 60.

[25] Spector and Smith, *Nuclear Ambitions: The Spread of Nuclear Weapons 1989-1990*, 203. It should be noted that, even following the Israeli attack on the Iraqi Osiraq nuclear rector in 1981, Saddam still had access to enough highly enriched uranium from the French supplied reactor to manufacture one nuclear device. Ibid., 186. Although Iraq did not divert this fissile material for weapon related purposes, Iraq did launch an ambitious clandestine nuclear weapons program in the wake of the 1981 Israeli attack, the scale of which was only revealed after the conclusion of Gulf War I, when UN inspectors were mandated to dismantle the program. Dan Reiter, "Preventive Attacks Against Nuclear Programs and the 'Success' at Osiraq," *Nonproliferation Review* 12, no. 2 (07, 2005): 362; http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eoah&AN=10526459&site=ehost-live; Internet; accessed 15 December 2008.

[26] Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U. S. and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 29.

1998, when Saddam Hussein barred UN and IAEA inspectors from the country, provoking international concerns that Iraq would eventually reconstitute its nuclear weapons program.[27] It was in this context that Iran's clandestine nuclear program was again "accelerated"[28] in 1999.

Despite Saddam's demise in 2003, the Bush administration policy of 'regime change' provided further impetus for Iran to continue enhancing its nuclear capabilities. Indeed, Bush administration officials strongly hinted that Iran was 'next' on its "axis of evil" hit list shortly after US forces invaded Iraq, increasing the regime's sense of vulnerability to new heights.[29] At the time, however, Tehran was still years away from

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[27] Chubin minimizes Iran's perceptions of the Iraqi nuclear threat after the 1991 Gulf War and never mentions that IAEA and UN inspectors were barred from Iraq in 1998. However, the events in 1998 likely heightened Iranian concerns that Saddam would attempt to reconstitute his nuclear program, since, as Eisenstadt argues, Iran retained "its nuclear know-how" and might have been able "to produce nuclear weapons in a matter of months were it to succeed in acquiring fissile material on the black market from the former Soviet Union or elsewhere." Michael Eisenstadt, "Living with a Nuclear Iran?" *Survival* 41, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999), 124, 127. Farhi also argues that "Saddam Hussien's Iraq" was the key regional threat motivating Iran "to create a viable deterrent capability." Farideh Farhi, "To Sign or Not to Sign? Iran's Evolving Debate on Nuclear Options," *Iran's Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives* (Washington DC; The Nixon Centre, March 2004), 35; http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/IransBomb.pdf; Internet; accessed 15 March 2009. Another possible factor was Pakistan's detonation of nuclear devices in 1998. Although Iran initially congratulated Pakistan on its achievements, that same year bilateral relations took a turn for the worse, when Iran blamed Pakistan for the death of several of its diplomats in Afghanistan at the hands of the Taliban government, which was supported by Pakistan at the time. The incident almost provoked an Iranian military response against the Taliban regime. Eisenstadt, *Living with a Nuclear Iran?*, 128 and Jennifer Knepper, "Nuclear Weapons and Iranian Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 27, no. 5 (2008), 465; http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=35348089&site=ehost-live; Internet; accessed 18 March 2009. However, Pakistan never presented the Iranian regime with an existential threat on par with Iraq under Saddam or the US under the Bush administration, and was therefore likely a distant third order of importance in its nuclear decision-making calculus. For Iranian diplomatic reaction to Pakistan's nuclear tests and bilateral relations since, see Shah Alam, "Iran-Pakistan Relations: Political and Strategic Dimensions" *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 4 (October-December 2004): 534.

[28] Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 9.

[29] The US has long been considered a threat by the Islamic regime in Tehran, in part because of the US' long-standing support for the Shah and history of domestic interference in Iranian politics. The US and Iranian naval forces even clashed in the late 1980s, and officials in Tehran have been all too aware of Iran's military inferiority to the US. But "Iranians must have shuddered" at the initial ease in which US

acquiring a nuclear option that could help deter US conventional military superiority.[30] To avoid giving the US a pretext for military action, Tehran initially agreed in late 2003 to temporarily 'suspend' its enrichment activities during talks with European countries seeking a diplomatic solution to the nuclear standoff. But as US forces became "bogged down" in a counter-insurgency war in Iraq and the immediate US threat passed,[31] Tehran resumed its enrichment activities in earnest in 2005, which enabled it to shorten its lag-time as a hedge against the threat of 'regime change' materializing in the future. [32] Indeed, so long as 'regime change' and pre-emptive military action remained official US policy,[33] it "undercut any incentive for Iran to comply with US demands to abandon its nuclear program."[34]

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forces smashed the Iraqi military in 2003 - especially when contrasted to the eight years of indecisive fighting with Iraq in the 1980s. Richard L. Russell, *Weapons Proliferation and War in the Greater Middle East: Strategic Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 73. See also Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 21and Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 14.

[30] It was also during this period that the US 2007 National Intelligence Estimate assessed that Iran's "nuclear weapons program", by which it meant "Iran's nuclear weapon design and weaponization work and covert uranium conversion and uranium-related work", as opposed to its declared uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz, was halted. National Intelligence Estimate, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*.

[31] Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 22.

[32] In addition to "external pressure exerted by the US" Ganji cites "internal pressure exerted by the Revolutionary Guards" as the key factors that led Iran to resume its enrichment activities. Dr Babak Ganji, *Conservative Factionalism & Iranian Nuclear Strategy* (Conflict Studies Research Centre, April 2005), 14.

[33] The White House 2006 National Security Strategy "put Iran on the top of the list of US adversaries." Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U. S. and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*, 219. According to the document, "We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran." Its demand for "objective guarantees" that Iran harbored no nuclear weapons intention – which in effect meant not possessing enrichment or reprocessing capabilities – also came with what Slavin notes as an 'ominous warning'; diplomacy "must succeed if confrontation is to be avoided." Ibid., 219. United States, The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, March 2006), 20; http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/nss2006.pdf; Internet; accessed 31 March 2009.

[34] Charles C. Mayer, "National Security to Nationalist Myth: Why Iran Wants Nuclear Weapons," (Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, September 2004), 30.

Regional Influence/Prestige. In addition to acting as a hedge against future security concerns, Iran's nuclear enrichment program has become an important status issue, "reflecting Iran's coming of age as an important power."[35] Iran has long considered itself to be "the natural hegemon of its neighborhood"[36] and the nuclear program itself became a hallmark of Iran's technological prowess relative to its neighbors. In the wake of the premature disclosure of its program in 2002, Tehran was therefore driven in part by a desire to become a member of the 'select club' of countries in the world that had mastered the enrichment process, [37] irrespective of the economic illogic of pursuing such technology given Iran's inchoate civil nuclear energy program.[38]

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[35] Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 12.

[36] Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2006), 61.

[37] This 'prestige factor' is similar to that which has spurred Iranians to complete the Bushehr nuclear reactor, which has been under construction for over two decades, despite the facilities high opportunity costs; as a former manager of Bushehr has observed "This project has become something on which our prestige depends and the officials intend to finish it no matter what the conditions are in which that might happen." Abbas William Samii, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks," *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 84..

[38] Some forecasts project that Iran, "in less than decade", may not have sufficient oil to export, given spiraling domestic consumption rates. Abbas Milani and Michael McFaul, "Democracy and the Politics of Parliamentary Elections in Iran" *Brown Journal of World Affairs,* XV, Issue 1 (Fall/ Winter 2008): 29. Tehran is therefore keen to develop an alternate energy source but it is loath to be dependent on an outside source for nuclear fuel to power future nuclear reactors. Nevertheless, the economic illogic for Iran to develop an indigenous enrichment capability at this stage in its nuclear development is based on the fact that a) Iran has just one nuclear reactor coming into operation, which will be fueled by Russian sourced low enriched uranium, and that b) Iran does not have sufficient stocks of natural uranium in country to make it 'self-sufficient' to power future planned reactors anyway. See Albright et al, *Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable-Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration*, 7 and Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 18.

Underscoring the symbolism that the program has assumed,[39] Khamenei in 2006 asserted that

> many of the nations neither understand nuclear energy nor understand that it is their inalienable right…[O]ur people understand that nuclear energy is a great and palpable indicator of progress,…If a nation does not possess this it would be in trouble.[40]

Domestic Politics/Regime Legitimization. Extolling its nuclear achievements abroad has engendered enormous national pride at home, which has led to a broad domestic political consensus across Iran's main political factions that eschews any international agreement that would curtail Iran's nuclear enrichment activities.[41] Since his surprise election in 2005, President Ahmadinejad and his hardline conservative supporters, in particular, have used the international controversy over Iran's nuclear program to whip up Iranian patriotic fervor in an attempt to bolster the Islamic regimes legitimacy in the eyes of an increasingly disenfranchised public.[42] Indicative of his defiant rhetoric, President Ahmadinejad has claimed that

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[39] Sagan provides three models that attempt to explain why some nations want nuclear weapons and others exercise nuclear restraint. In one of the models, he argues that "nuclear decisions serve important symbolic functions, both shaping and reflecting a state's identity." Although Iran is not discussed in Sagan's article, "nuclear symbolism" appears to be an important 'driver' of the program. Scott D. Sagan, "Rethinking the Causes of Nuclear Proliferation: Three Models in Search of a Bomb" *The Coming Crises: Nuclear Proliferation, US Interests, and World Order*, ed Victor A. Utgoff (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2000), 37.

[40] Quoted in Mani Parsi and Steve A. Yetiv, "Unequal Contest: Iranian Nuclear Proliferation between Economic and Value Symmetry," *Contemporary Security Policy* 29, no. 2 (08, 2008): 31; http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tsh&AN=34223034&site=ehost-live; Internet; accessed 15 March 2009.

[41] Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation*, 33.

[42] Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 8. and Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U. S. and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*, 32.

> retreating by even an iota on this [nuclear] path is out of the question. We had the Revolution in order not to listen [to the West]…Nuclear technology is not something someone gave us so they can take it back: no one can take it back.[43]

Not surprisingly, public opinion polls have consistently showed an "extraordinarily high level of support" [44] for Iran's enrichment program, which has made international demands for the program's suspension politically untenable for any Iranian government. As one proliferation expert puts it:

> As anyone who visits Iran knows….. there is no visible prospect that Iran will give up this technology. The issue has taken on too much political weight. Every man on the street in Tehran now knows – or thinks he knows – what enrichment is, and believe it to be indispensible to Iran's energy future and technological standing in the world.[45]

The Incentives and Disincentives of 'Going Nuclear'

[43] Knepper, *Nuclear Weapons and Iranian Strategic Culture*, 461.

[44] In a poll conducted between February – March 2008, 81 percent of Iranians surveyed considered it "'very important' to have a full nuclear fuel cycle." ('Full nuclear Fuel cycle' is the term used to refer to both enrichment and reprocessing capabilities.) Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 64. Similarly, in a more detailed and comprehensive survey in 2007, "[n]inety-one percent of Iranians consider it 'important' for Iran to have a full-fuel-cycle nuclear program…" The key justifications for the program included securing Iran's "energy needs" (86 percent), enhancing "Iran's great power status" (81 percent) and helping to "deter other countries from trying to economically and politically dominate Iran" (68 percent). World Public Opinion.Org., "Iranians Want Capacity to Enrich Uranium but Accept NPT Rules Against Developing Nuclear Weapons." (January 30, 2007); http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/311.php?nid=&id=&pnt=311&lb= ; Internet; accessed 10 February 2009.

[45] Mark Fitzpatrick, "Can Iran's Nuclear Capability be Kept Latent?" *Survival* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 42.

In analyzing the 'drivers' behind Iran's nuclear program, it seems clear that Tehran has *at least* made a *capability decision* to acquire a nuclear option.[46] Whether it has or will eventually make a *proliferation decision* is still subject to much debate: the problem is that the "path" of nuclear option building can be equally supported by "those who genuinely want to explore an energy alternative and by government officials who either want nuclear weapons or just to keep the option open."[47] Now that Iran is on the verge of acquiring a nuclear option, it is important therefore to examine Iran's internal nuclear debate about the *incentives* and *disincentives* of actually taking a *proliferation decision*. In Iran's case, however, having a nuclear option appears to far outweigh the rationale for having a weaponsized nuclear capability in light of the international and domestic political disincentives of 'going nuclear.'[48]

International Context. After the international controversy erupted over Iran's unveiled clandestine nuclear program, and particularly during the high point of the US threat of 'regime change', a "small"[49] group of mainly hardline conservative clerics, academics, and some military officers advocated that Iran should pull out of the NPT and

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[46] US Director DNI, Dennis Blair also assesses that, as of February 2009 "Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop" nuclear weapons. Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, 20.

[47] This observation on proliferation trends was made by Brazil's former secretary of state for science and technology, Jose Goldemberg; quoted in Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status", 2.

[48] Chubin makes a similar argument: "The arguments for a nuclear option (or nonweaponized deterrence) are at least as strong as those for nuclear weapons….In the absence of strategic urgency, the costs of getting nuclear weapons outside the treaty do not appear commensurate with the benefits for Iran." Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 59.

[49] Nasser Hadian, "To Sign or Not to Sign? Iran's Evolving Debate on Nuclear Options," *Iran's Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives* (Washington DC; The Nixon Centre, March 2004), 62; http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/IransBomb.pdf; Internet; accessed 15 March 2009

acquire a nuclear deterrent as soon as possible, regardless of the international repercussions.[50] As one Iranian parliament member noted:

> Our enemies today have armed themselves with all kind of weapons. What is wrong for a country to have deterrent weapons and – even if it does not need them – to use them as a deterrent to scare the enemy and prevent it from attacking.[51]

Not only would nuclear weapons act as an "ideal deterrent" but they would also "enhance Iran's status in the region and the world at large."[52] Some scholars have argued that Ahmadinejad and his hardline conservative supporters share this view and perceive

> the acquisition of nuclear weapons as critical to consolidating Iran's position and helping the country eclipse the US influence in the region - a price worth suffering pain to achieve.[53]

In this same vein, some Iranian conservatives have used Israel as a "strategic alibi"[54] to support acquiring nuclear weapons, which would end Israel's pretentious nuclear monopoly over the region.[55] Although Israeli nuclear weapons are not perceived as a

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[50] See Samii, *The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks*, 83-84 for 'pro-bomb' arguments from various Iranian political figures. See also Takeyh, *Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 150-151.

[51] *Ibid*., 84.

[52] Hadian, "To Sign or Not to Sign? Iran's Evolving Debate on Nuclear Options," 62.

[53] Ray Takeyh, "Time for Detente with Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 2 (March / April 2007, 2007), 24.

[54] Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 58.

[55] For example, an Expediency Council member, Mohamad Javad Ardeshir-Larijani, stated in 2004: "We have a certain and indisputable right to possess nuclear weapons… Israel possesses nuclear weapons, and because of this, no one has the right to deprive us of the possession of these weapons." Samii, *The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks*, 84.

threat to the regime per se,[56] Tehran has long used its opposition to Israel as a means "to assert its influence, garner popular approbation [on the Arab street], and affirm its claims as a regional power."[57]

Others, however, have counter-argued that Iran does not need to take a *proliferation decision*; rather, a nuclear option may provide Iran with sufficient 'deterrent effect' and commensurate status to meet its security and geopolitical needs.[58] If the US, for instance, ever embarked on a military invasion of Iran, it would have to factor in that, in the months that it would take to prepare such an invasion force, Iran would likely be capable of weaponising and deploying a nuclear arsenal. In addition, the mere perception that Iran could 'go nuclear' in short order if provoked may be sufficient to deter even a more limited military attack against it. Hence,

> the simple fact that Iran could develop nuclear weapons with the materials at hand within the country relatively quickly enhances Iran's power while not becoming too threatening to others.[59]

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[56] Bowman, "The 'Demand-Side': Avoiding a Nuclear-Armed Iran," 640. See also Takeyh, *Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 141-142.

[57] Quoted in Knepper, *Nuclear Weapons and Iranian Strategic Culture*, 455.

[58] Hadian, ""Iran's Nuclear Program: Contexts and Debates," 61-62. For comments on the 'deterrent effect' see Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 62; World Politics Review Blog, "Iran's Pre-Nuclear Deterrent"; http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/blog/blog.aspx?ID=3465; Internet; accessed 13 April 2009; Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 66.

[59] Ibid., 62 For similar argument see Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (United States of America: Basic Books, 2008), 292; Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 56, 59; Takeyh, *Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 152-153.

This view is shared by "Iranians of all political stripes"[60] including "quite a few influential institutions and people."[61] The benefits of Iran's near-nuclear status has also been noted by Iranian officials; as one Iranian nuclear negotiator noted:

> Believe me, psychologically it is as if we have a nuclear bomb now and they [ie the West] treat us in accordance with that belief…they treat us like this because they think we have such a thing. They are always worried that something may happen and they may have to deal with a nuclear Iran with nuclear weapons. We want to produce fuel. We truly want to produce fuel. It has nothing do to with us if technically the system for the production of fuel through enrichment is such that we are able to produce something else.[62]

In Iran's nuclear decision making process, any proliferation decision will ultimately rest with Supreme Leader Khamenei, who receives advice on foreign and security related matters based on the consensus view of members of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC).[63] In his public pronouncements on nuclear policy, Khamenei has been consistent in his message; Iran has a legitimate right to enrichment technology but does not aspire to acquire nuclear weapons. His reasons for eschewing nuclear weapons – and giving de facto support to the 'nuclear option' lobby - are premised on both religious and strategic grounds.

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[60] Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 66.

[61] Hadian, *"*Iran's Nuclear Program: Contexts and Debates*"*, 62.

[62] Quoted in Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 45-46.

[63] *Ibid*., 175.

In March 2003, Khamenei reaffirmed a previous religious edict by his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, that pro-claimed nuclear weapons, and other weapons of mass destruction, as "inconsistent with the Islamic canons of war."[64] In August 2005 Khamenei reportedly issued a fatwa, prohibiting the "development, production and stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons."[65] Fatwas can be reversed, and the Iranian regime has long proven that when ideological principles clash with national interests, the latter take precedence.[66] Nevertheless, the Supreme Leaders religious rulings on nuclear weapons "should be given some credence"[67]; as Fitzpatrick points out

> given the pervasive religiosity of the regime, it is unlikely that Iran's supreme leader would secretly endorse military activity in explicit contradiction of his own religious edict.[68]

More convincing, however, are Khamenei's strategic arguments about the limited utility of nuclear weapons as a means of promoting the "country's strength and

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[64] Takeyh, *Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 137. In March 2003, Khamenei proclaimed that "We are not interested in an atomic bomb. We are opposed to chemical weapons… These things are against our principles." Samii, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks", 75.

[65] Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 13. Another 'Grand Ayatollah' has made similar public statements. See Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*, 273.

[66] This has even been 'rationalised' in religious terms; according to Willis Stanley, the Director of Regional Studies at the National Institute for Public Policy, "Iran and Shia Islam are one in the same, indivisible. Iran operates under Khomeini's unique politico-religious doctrine that stresses the survival of the regime as the ultimate service to Islam. In Khomeini's formulation, the regime is the embodiment of Shia Islam's authority on Earth and to abandon it would be to abandon the will of God." Quoted in Knepper, *Nuclear Weapons and Iranian Strategic Culture*, 452.

[67] Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*, 292.

[68] Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 13. Kerr also notes that "A change in this stance could arguably damage religious leaders' credibility." Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status", 15.

authority."[69] As recently as June 3 2008, Khamenei re-iterated that Iran's long standing opposition to nuclear weapons is not only grounded on religious reasoning but also

> based on logic and wisdom….Nuclear weapons have no benefit but high costs to manufacture and keep them. Nuclear weapons do not bring power to the nation because they are not applicable. Nuclear weapons cannot be used.[70]

Iranian officials have also stressed that nuclear weapon acquisition would likely undermine, rather than enhance, Iran's security and geopolitical interests, since they would likely provoke neighbors to acquire nuclear weapons as well, and "serve as a pretext for greater US military involvement in the region."[71] Hassan Rowhani, who was Khamenei's national security advisor and SNCS secretary (1989-2005), perhaps stated the 'case against' a weaponized nuclear capability most succinctly in 2004:

> Our decision not to possess weapons of mass destruction is strategic because we believe that these weapons will not provide security for Iran. On the contrary, they will create big problems. Iran exerted huge efforts during the past few years to build bridges of confidence with the states of the region. We absolutely do not want to blow up those bridges by mobilizing our resources to produce weapons of mass destruction. We are confident that our possession of these weapons will force those countries to seek support of big powers. Consequently, regional security will worsen. This will not serve national security.[72]

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[69] The full quote, made by Khamenei in October 2004 is as follows; "We have repeatedly declared that we do not need nuclear weapons, because we never believed that possession of such weapons would provide the ground for the country's strength and authority." Samii, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks", 76.

[70] Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status", 2.

[71] Samii, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks," 75.

[72] Quoted in Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 57.

This view has been shared by important elements in the military as reflected by a former Defence Minister, Admiral Shamkhani, who stated in 2005 that "the existence of nuclear weapons will turn us into a threat that could be exploited in dangerous ways to harm our relations with countries of the region."[73]

Even Ahmadinejad's hardline conservative supporters, who may have initially believed that Iran's regional neighbors, and indeed the world, would eventually learn to live with nuclear armed Iran and accept Iran's regional hegemony as a fait accompli, are not likely to feel as self-assured about the merits of 'going nuclear' given Arab reaction to Iran's evolving nuclear capabilities in recent years. Indeed, Iran's nuclear ambitions have created a great deal of angst in the Arab world; as one Saudi paper put it in 2003 "[t]he real target [of Iran's nuclear program] is the neighboring countries."[74] Not surprisingly, Arab countries appear to have already begun to hedge against the prospects of a future nuclear armed Iran by embarking on ambitious nuclear energy programs of their own.[75] While all these programs will be under IAEA safeguards, they could

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[73] Quoted in *Ibid*., 170-171.

[74] Quoted in *Ibid*., 128

[75] The UAE has signed a deal with France for a nuclear reactor. Other Gulf States and Saudi Arabia have expressed an interest in "pursuing a joint civilian nuclear program." BBC News "Nuclear power in the Middle East", 24 April 2008; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7367475.stm; Internet; accessed 5 April 2009. See also David Albright and Jonathan Schell, *Unprecedented Projected Nuclear Growth in the Middle East: Now is the Time to Create Effective Barriers to Proliferation*, Institute for Science and International Security Report (November 12, 2008), 1-5; http://www.isis-online.org/publications/iran/Unprecedented_Projected_Nuclear_Growth_Middle_East_12Nov2008.pdf; Internet; accessed 3 March 2009.

provide Arab countries with a latent nuclear capability that could enable them to respond to an Iranian bomb in the future, if required.[76]

Tehran could certainly count on the US trying to forestall Arab nuclear proliferation but this would likely come at the cost of seeing a continued large American regional presence (even post-Iraq withdrawal) and perhaps a formal US commitment of extending its nuclear umbrella over the region to deter a nuclear Iran. During the 2009 US presidential race, Hillary Clinton remarked that a nuclear armed Iran would likely lead the US to offer a nuclear guarantee to Arab allies in the region to dissuade them from acquiring nuclear weapons of their own.[77] Obama officials have "implicitly" made similar remarks.[78]

But Arab countries armed with nuclear weapons or a US nuclear security guarantee to the region would be contrary to Iran's interests and aspirations, since it would nullify its geopolitical and conventional military advantage that it currently enjoys even without nuclear weapons.[79] Indeed, if Iran sees itself as the 'natural' hegemon by

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[76] Saudi Arabia, in particular, would not likely "passively accept a nuclear–armed Tehran." Bowman, *The 'Demand-Side': Avoiding a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, 638. Russell also argues Iranian nuclear weapons would prompt the Saudis and possibly the UAE and even Turkey to revisit their nonproliferation commitments. Russell, *Weapon Proliferation and War in the Greater Middle East: Strategic Context*, 96-98, 108-119.

[77] Andrea Scheel and Jacqueline Shire, "The Candidates' Positions - Iran and the Nuclear Fuel Cycle," *Institute for Science and International Security Report* (April 39, 2008): 2; Internet; http://web.ebscohost.com; Internet; accessed 15 April 2009.

[78] Thomas P.M. Barnett, "Obama's New Map," *Esquire* 151, Issue 3 (March 2009): 53-54; http://web.ebscohost.com; Internet; accessed 4 March 2009.

[79] Bowman, *The 'Demand-Side': Avoiding a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, 638.

"dint of demography, geography and natural resources"[80] then nuclear weapon acquisition would be self-defeating, since it would provoke Arab countries to seek an 'equalizer' of their own, either in the form of nuclear weapons or even closer US security cooperation.[81]

The perceived existential threat from the US has also likely waned considerably, even among the most paranoid hardline conservatives in Tehran, since the advent of the Obama administration coming to power. Even if a US republican administration retook the White House in four years time, the Iraq post-invasion fiasco and more recent financial upheaval in the US will likely put in disrepute the doctrine of 'regime change' and so-called preventative wars for a long time to come. Tehran can also take solace from the fact that the US experience in Iraq, coupled with the formidable 'asymmetric' warfare fighting capabilities of Iran's armed forces, [82] offers significant deterrent effect, even in the continued absence of nuclear weapons. Baer, who has hyped Iran's rising power in recent years, argues that:

> [r]ight now, at least, the Iranians don't need a nuclear bomb. If a war is fought in the Gulf, Iraq, or Lebanon, Iran will almost certainly fall back on its asymmetrical tactics and weapons. There are also innumerable drawbacks to rushing the development of nuclear weapons in today's global atmosphere – and few benefits.… the Iranians see

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[80] Eisenstadt, *Living with a Nuclear Iran?*, 126.

[81] Knepper, *Nuclear Weapons and Iranian Strategic Culture*, 232.

[82] Robert Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (United States of America: Crown Publishers, 2008), 98-105.

> nuclear bombs as a nice to have but not crucial to their survival.[83]

Domestic Context. There are likely elements amongst the hardline conservatives that perceive the ground swell of support for Iranian enrichment capability as a firm basis to take the next step and galvanize public opinion to support a firm decision to acquire a nuclear arsenal. For them the international isolation that would no doubt result in the wake of such a decision would be welcomed. As Pollack and Takeyh put it:

> In the cosmology of such hard-liners, nuclear arms have not only strategic value, but also currency in domestic politics. Iranian conservatives see their defiance of the Great Satan as a means of mobilizing nationalistic opinion behind a revolution that has gradually lost popular legitimacy.[84]

However, while the Iranian public is solidly behind the notion that the country should continue with enrichment development, it does not appear to have delusions of grandeur about the need for nuclear weapons. On the contrary, in a poll taken in 2007,

> [a] large majority of Iranians support their country's participation in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which prohibits Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons….Large majorities also support a Middle East

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[83] *Ibid*., 110-111.

[84] Quoted in Knepper, *Nuclear Weapons and Iranian Strategic Culture*, 460. Others have viewed the rise of former revolutionary guard war veterans, like President Ahmadinejad, in Iranian domestic politics as reflective of a growing "authoritarianism" within the regime. In this context, "[t]he successful acquisition of nuclear weapons would accelerate a militarization of Iran's regime.….In fact, if domestic forces do arise to challenge the regime, nuclearization, portrayed as an issue of national pride, would become one of the few powerful tools that could provide regime legitimacy and enable popular mobilization." Elliot Hen-Tov, "Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism," *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2006-2007): 169.

> nuclear free zone and ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons.[85]

Of significance is that the poll was taken at a time in which rising oil prices had given the Iranian treasury significant windfalls, bolstering Iran's sense of power and influence in the region. Today, however, Iran's economy is in trouble, with oil prices significantly down, and unemployment and inflation way up.[86] Consequently, public concern about the economy "has even trumped worries about the international fallout from Iran's nuclear program."[87] And as the Economist Intelligence Unit notes, "[d]espite the hardening of Iran's nuclear stance, its leadership remains sensitive to popular opinion, which appears to want a peaceful resolution of the nuclear dispute."[88]

There are already signs that proponents of a more pragmatic Iranian foreign policy in general and nuclear policy in particular may eventually re-emerge and sideline Ahmadinejad's conservative ideologues. Ahmadinejad's unorthodox economic policies and confrontational foreign policy rhetoric has left his prospects for getting re-elected in

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[85] World Public Opinion.Org, "Iranians Want Capacity to Enrich Uranium but Accept NPT Rules Against Developing Nuclear Weapons" (January 30, 2007); http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/311.php?nid=&id=&pnt=311&lb= ; Internet; accessed 10 February 2009.

[86] According to Iran's own government statistics, unemployment is estimated to be 11.9 percent; for people between 15-24 years, it's 25.6 percent. Patrick Clawson, "The Islamic Republic's Economic Failure," *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Fall, 2008), 15-26. Inflation was officially running at "25.4 % in 2008, up from an annual average of 17.1 % in 2007. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the prices of essential goods and services have risen sharply, and that import costs have been growing." Mohammed Shakeel, ed. "Country Report - Iran." (London, The Economist Intelligence Unit, February 2009), 8.

[87] Erica Alini, "Iran's Inflation Woes Leave Ahmadinejad Vulnerable in 2009 Elections." *World Politics Review* (7/30/2008); 2; http://web.ebscohost.com; Internet; accessed 14 March 2009.

[88] Shakeel, "Country Report – Iran", 5. Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, 1-44.

the upcoming 2009 election far from assured.[89] While conservative forces have "unprecedented dominance in Iranian politics", there is nevertheless "considerable splintering" among conservatives,[90] with more pragmatic forces making a political comeback after their defeat in 2005.[91] While these so-called pragmatic conservatives are

> fully part of the leadership consensus on acquiring a [*nonweaponized*] nuclear capability….they are willing to negotiate over the timing and they realize the benefits of normal international intercourse, both for Iran's commercial interests and for its relations with its Sunni neighbors."[92]

Reformers, who desire greater political openness within Iran, and see nuclear weapons acquisition as undermining any prospect of improving relations with the West,[93] are also attempting to make a political comeback in the next election, after loosing the presidency in 2005.[94]

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[89] *Ibid.*

[90] Suzan Maloney, senior fellow on foreign policy at the Brookings Institution's Saban Centre for Middle East Policy, quoted in Nina Hamedani, "Two Views: Iranian Domestic Trends," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 27, no. 7 (Sep/Oct 2008, 2008), 61-62.

[91] Although losing to Ahmadinejad in 2005 presidential election, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, considered a so called 'pragmatic conservative' with an interest in improving relations with the US, became head of the Council of Expediency, which is mandated to resolve disputes within the government. Ali Larijani, after resigning as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator and head of the SNSC, has become the speaker of the Majles assembly, which is "a significant setback for Mr Ahmadinejad." Another conservative, Mohammad Baquer Qlibaf, the Mayor of Tehran, is planning to challenge Ahmadinejad on a conservative ticket. Although Larjini and Qlibaf both lost to Ahmadinejad in 2005, both "now represent a more agreeable face of conservatism, which many in the ruling establishment would, undoubtedly, be favourable towards." Ibid and Shakeel, "Country Report – Iran", 5.

[92] Fitzpatrick, *Can Iran's Nuclear Capability be Kept Latent?*, 40. The word 'nonweaponized' has been added to the quote to ensure that context of 'nuclear capability' was properly conveyed.

[93] Takeyh, *Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 32, 152.

[94] Former President Khatami's decision to back out of the 2009 race to avoid risking a split in the reformist vote may increase the electoral prospects of the reformist movement. A split may still occur,

Of course, the President is but one voice on the SNSC that oversees Iranian nuclear policy, and even if a reformist or more likely a pragmatic conservative were to win, ultimate decisions rest with the Supreme Leader. That said, President Ahmadinejad's confrontational presidency has set the tone for Iran's recalcitrant nuclear policy and his political demise would lesson the chances of Iran's nuclear decisions being driven by parochial domestic political imperatives. As a recent US public intelligence assessment notes:

> Although we expect that whoever is elected [in 2009] will be a strong supporter of the Islamic Republic, we note that the election of a more pragmatic figure may, over time, produce some moderation in Iranian behaviour by introducing into the decision-making process a wider range of options than those presented under [Ahmadinejad].[95]

Even if President Ahmadinejad were to win again, his room for maneuver to attempt to undermine the apparent domestic political consensus against acquiring nuclear weapons has narrowed, given Iran's dire economic situation. A pitch for nuclear weapon acquisition would not be well received by pragmatic conservatives on the SNSC nor by a large percentage of domestic public opinion, since it only would further isolate Iran and lead to more economic sanctions. Only if Iran's security situation took a serious turn for the worse (as in the wake of a US or Israeli air strike, which will be discussed in the next section) would public support for the NPT change. Without such a strategic

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however, if one of the two remaining credible reformist candidates, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Medhi Kaarroubi, does not bow out. Shakeel, "Country Report – Iran", 5.

[95] Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, 10.

development, a decision by the regime to 'go nuclear' in an effort to divert public opinion from the country's domestic problems could backfire and possibly serve to further 'delegitimize' the regime in the eyes of many Iranians. As Hadian argues:

> the real check on Iran's elite, coming from both reformers and conservatives, is the fear of losing domestic legitimacy…. Public frustration over the unfulfilled promises of the reform movement, not fear of an American attack, is the chief worry among the ruling elite. Though this concern is not felt universally, and equally among all, it has certainly become the most important preoccupation of the regime. Even with nuclear weapons, an Iranian regime cannot rule for long without sufficient public popularity and legitimacy.[96]

Implications for US Nonproliferation Policy

That Iran seeks to acquire at least a nuclear option is clear; that it has or will eventually make a proliferation decision, however remains far from inevitable, given the strong disincentives of doing so. For some, however, the consequences of Iran 'going nuclear' are too great to allow Iran to have a nuclear option.[97] But premising US

[96] Hadian, *"Iran's Nuclear Program: Contexts and Debates"*, 67.

[97] Some authors have argued that Iran's nuclear program is part of a messianic drive to acquire nuclear weapons so that they can be *used* against Israel. See for instance Ze'ev Maghen, "Eradicating the "Little Satan": Why Iran should be Taken at its Word," *Commentary*, (January 2009), 11; http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/eradicating-the--little-satan--13900; Internet; accessed 15 March 2009. Ahmadinejad's controversial remarks shortly after taking office that Israel should be ''wiped off the map" have also heightened concern about Iran's ultimate nuclear ambitions, even though Ahmadinejad at no point mentioned using nuclear weapons during his remarks. However, even within Iran, Ahmadinejad was widely criticized for making the incendiary remarks and casting Iran in a negative light. Supreme Leader Khamenei himself "rebutted" Amhadinejad shortly after he made his comments about Israel to allay concern about Iranian intent; in a nationwide television address in 2005 he asserted that "We will not commit aggression toward any nations; we will not breach any nation's rights anywhere in the world." Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U. S. and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*, 51-52. Even Ahmadinejad went out of his way to allay concern that Iran's nuclear program was directed at Israel; during the inauguration of a new heavy-water plant in 2006, he stated that Iran was

nonproliferation policy on the notion that Iran will likely eventually take a proliferation decision leaves the US with the binary choice of trying to coerce Iran to give up its nuclear option using military force[98] or economic sanctions.[99] Not only are these policy choices not likely to work but they may prove to be counterproductive in the longer run.

A number of proliferation experts have argued that even a highly successful military strike against Iran's nuclear program could, "at best", delay Iran's acquisition of a nuclear option by "a few years"[100]; at worst it will most likely provoke a proliferation decision to acquire nuclear weapons. Simply put, although air strikes can destroy facilities, they are unable to destroy the "*knowledge* in nuclear and related sciences and engineering skills that Iran has amassed to date."[101] Thus, even in the wake of a

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not interested in acquiring nuclear weapons and is not "a threat to anybody, even the Zionist (Israeli) regime, which is a definite enemy for the people of the region." David J. Lynch, "Nuclear Program a Source of Pride for Iranians,"*The USA Today*, 28 August 2006; http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2006-08-28-iran-cover_x.htm; Internet; accessed 15 February 2009. For a well rounded argument that Iran would indeed likely act 'rationally' even if it did acquire nuclear weapons, particularly in its behavior towards Israel, see Ehsaneh I. Sadr "The Impact of Iran's Nuclearization on Israel," *Middle East Policy*, XII, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 58-72 and Reuven Pedatzur "The Iranian Nuclear Threat and the Israeli Option" Contemporary Security Policy 28, no. 3 (December 2007): 513-540.

[98] See Clawson and Eisenstadt for the 'case for' military strikes should diplomacy fail. Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt, "Halting Iran's Nuclear Programme: The Military Option," *Survival*, 50, no. 5 (October-November, 2008): 13-19.

[99] In addition to sanctions and the implicit threat of force, multilateral talks to date have offered Iran a series of economic inducements – what has been termed 'carrots' – to try and convince Iran to give up its nuclear enrichment capability. To date, this strategy has not worked, and given the strong domestic political support for the program discussed earlier in this paper, nor are they likely to do so in the future. According to a survey conducted in 2007, "[o]ffers such as having the United States lift economic sanctions, unfreeze the Iranians assets it holds, and repeal legislation calling for regime change, were dismissed as not very or not at all significant by majorities of Iranian respondents." World Public Opinion, *Iranians Want Capacity to Enrich Uranium but Accept NPT Rules Against Developing Nuclear Weapons*, 4.

[100] Fitzpatrick, *Can Iran's Nuclear Capability be Kept Latent?*, 47.

[101] *Ibid*., 47. Emphasis added. See also Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U. S. and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*, 37.

relatively successful series of strikes, Iran would eventually be able to reconstitute its nuclear program.[102] And in the wake of such attacks, hard-line ideologues would be in a strong position to sway other elites and the general public on the merits of acquiring nuclear weapons as opposed to contending themselves with merely a nuclear option.[103]

Economic sanctions also have important limitations. Iran's economic difficulties may appear to provide the West with greater leverage over Iran and some analysts have argued that Iran needs to feel the impact of "truly painful sanctions" for it to give up its nuclear program.[104] However, such measures could prove counterproductive if hardships on Iranians are exploited by hardliners and used to detract from their own economic mismanagement.[105] Such measures may even be more counterproductive if a pragmatic conservative or reformist oriented leader is elected President in June 2009, since it would only leave him exposed to hardline conservatives that would view any negotiations under

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[102] David Albright, Paul Brannan and Jacqueline Shire, *Can Military Strikes Destroy Iran's Gas Centrifuge Program? Probably Not.* (Washington, DC: Institute for Science and International Security, 2008); http://www.isis-online.org/publications/iran/Centrifuge_Manufacturing_7August2008.pdf; Internet; accessed 15 March 2009.

[103] This view is widely held by a number of analysts. See Bowman, *The 'Demand-Side': Avoiding a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, 638, Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 8 Takeyh, *Time for Detente with Iran*, 18, Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation*, 25-26, Dr Jim Walsh, "Addressing Iran's Nuclear Ambitions," *Testimony to U. S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs* (April 24, 2008), 10; http://web.mit.edu/cis/pdf/Walsh042408.pdf ; Internet; accessed 3 April 2009.

[104] For instance, banning the sale of refined gasoline products to Iran would bring the economy to "to its knees", since imports account for 40% of gasoline consumption. Chuck Freilich, "The United States, Israel, and Iran: Defusing an 'Existential' Threat," *Arms Control Today* 38, no. 9 (November, 2008), 8; http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tsh&AN=35760744&site=ehost-live; Internet; accessed 10 March 2009. See also Ilan Berman, "Toward an Economic Strategy Against Iran," *Comparative Strategy* 27 (2008), 20-26.

[105] "When Iranians feel they are under siege from without, Ahmadinejad and his fellow ultra-conservatives are better able to blame the US for the consequences of their leadership failures." Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 82.

these circumstances as a humiliating 'sell out' to the US. Under such circumstances, more pragmatic voices on the nuclear issue would likely be drowned out by patriotic fervor in the longer term.[106] As Walsh notes, "Iran is a proud nation, one whose leadership has repeatedly demonstrated that it is willing to bear economic costs in defence of issues of nationalism."[107]

There is a third option, however, that involves 'calibrating'[108] US nonproliferation strategy to Iran's 'nuclear drivers' and 'sources of restraint'; that is, instead of seeking to suspend Iran's enrichment capability, US policy should attempt to manage the risk that Iran would take a proliferation decision in the future by seeking an agreement that would curtail the 'break-out' potential of Iran's 'nuclear option' and impose a more intrusive IAEA safeguard regime over Iran's nuclear activities. This proposal has been called 'tailored acquiescence.'[109]

First, Iran would need to be restricted to a smaller enrichment capability than the industrial scale, 54,000 centrifuge[110] facility currently envisaged for Natanz.[111] For

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[106] Lynch, *Nuclear Program a Source of Pride for Iranians*. See also Bowman, *The 'Demand-Side': Avoiding a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, 635.

[107] Walsh, *Addressing Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 7.

[108] Reiss, *Without the Bomb: The Politics of Nuclear Nonproliferation*, 268.

[109] Fitzpatrick, *Can Iran's Nuclear Capability be Kept Latent?*, 49. Fitzpatrick summarizes 'tailored acquiescence' proposals in Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 59. For a recent, similar argument see Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation*, 34.

[110] "Gas centrifuges enrich uranium by spinning uranium hexafluoride gas at high speeds to increase the concentration of the uranium-235 isotope. Such centrifuges can produce both LEU [low

instance, a 6000 centrifuge facility would limit Iran's nuclear break-out potential to "one or two weapons per year"; by contrast, with 54,000 centrifuges in operation, Iran could produce "a few bombs" every "few weeks."[112] Second, Iran would need to implement a more intrusive safeguard regime, known as an Additional Protocol (AP)[113], as well as accept what the IAEA calls additional 'transparency measures'[114] designed to reduce the risk that Iran could operate a clandestine enrichment facility. Indeed, it is the risk that Iran could surreptitiously amass a nuclear arsenal over time at an *undisclosed* facility that is the key proliferation concern, since any attempt to divert fissile material at Natanz would be detected "almost immediately" by the current IAEA safeguard regime in place since 2003.[115]

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enriched uranium], *which* can be used in nuclear power reactors, and highly enriched uranium (HEU), which is one of the two types of fissile material used in nuclear weapons." Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status," 2.

[111] Albright and others, *Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration*, 7. Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 51-52. It should be noted that in both cases the lag-time could be significantly reduced if Iran started from low enriched uranium (LEU) instead of natural unenriched uranium. For instance, starting with LEU, a 54,000 centrifuge facility could produce "a few bombs worth of HEU in "two or three days." Ibid, 51-52.

[112] Albright and others, *Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable - Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration*, 7. Iran would likely want to have enough centrifuges and LEU on hand so that its lag-time would be reduced to at least a few months; determining exactly how many centrifuges and LEU Iran would 'settle for' is beyond the scope of this paper. The '6000 centrifuges' figure simply illustrates how an agreement to scale back the number of centrifuges available to Iran's could reduce its potential 'break-out' potential.

[113] The AP had been ratified by 85 of 144 parties belonging to the NPT. Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation*, 29.

[114] These would involve Iran providing "access to individuals, documentation related to procurement, dual use equipment, certain military owned workshops, and research and development locations." Quoted in Fitzpatrick, *Can Iran's Nuclear Capability be Kept Latent?*, 52.

[115] Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 58. See also Albright et al, *Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable - Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration*, 7.

Despite its defiant tone in recent negotiations, Iran would likely be amenable to concluding an agreement based on this 'tailored acquiescence' formula. Iran had signed and implemented an AP from 2003-2006 and, during this period, had put forth a "number of proposals" that sought acceptance of a scaled back or delayed enrichment capability in return for full ratification of the AP and allowing IAEA continuous on-sight access to Natanz.[116] Although opposition to the AP had grown in the aftermath of conservatives winning control of the Iranian parliament in 2004, it was not until the IAEA referred Iran to the UNSC in 2006 for continuing its enrichment activities that Tehran suspended its compliance with the 2003 AP agreement. Since then, Tehran has implemented some elements of the AP but in an ad hoc fashion.[117] More recently, however, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, currently the head of Iran's Expediency Council, has hinted that Tehran may be prepared to accept a more intrusive IAEA safeguard regime like the AP:

> We are willing to substantiate the non-military nature of Tehran's uranium enrichment over the course of future negotiations….We solemnly declare that nuclear weapons have absolutely no place in Iran's nuclear program.[118]

There are risks associated with the 'tailored acquiescence' proposal. Some proliferation experts have highlighted the fact that no IAEA safeguards regime, "no matter how intrusive", could provide a '100% guarantee' that a country as large as Iran

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[116] Kerr, "Divided from within", 19. Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 25.

[117] Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation*, 29.

[118] Press TV, "Rafsanjani: Iran Will Prove N-Program Peaceful." On-line newspaper; http:www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=86971&sectionid=351020104; Internet; accessed April 3, 2009.

would *not* be operating a covert enrichment facility somewhere.[119] And even if some evidence was to emerge, it would unlikely constitute a "smoking gun" that would prove conclusively that Iran was breaking its safeguard agreement.[120] Moreover, allowing Iran to operate even a small enrichment facility may actually help "mask" the operation of a covert facility, since it would be more difficult "for inspectors to prove that any evidence they found of centrifuge-component production was not part of the replacement cycle" for the overt program."[121]

While these are indeed legitimate concerns, they need to be placed in context of Iran's 'nuclear drivers' and 'sources of restraint'. It is not a question of 'trusting' the Iranians; Iran's history of deception and stonewalling on the nuclear issue cannot be denied. But this history needs to be placed in context of the 'nuclear drivers' that have propelled Iran to seek a nuclear option. And now that Iran is on the verge of acquiring such a capability, the 'case against' Iran acquiring nuclear weapons sometime in the future appears more persuasive than the 'case for'.[122] This does mitigate the risk of an Iranian proliferation decision, at least in the near future. But even if Iran's strategic calculations about the merits of going nuclear were to change in the longer term, an

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[119] Fitzpatrick, *Can Iran's Nuclear Capability be Kept Latent?*, 51. Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 67-69 and Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 42, 96.

[120] *Ibid*., 96 and Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 71.

[121] *Ibid*., 68. Fitzpatrick also notes that there is a legal hurdle that would need to be overcome, since UNSC 1696 has in effect made the enrichment of uranium in Iran a "breach of international law. Ibid., 15.

[122] Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 59.

intrusive IAEA safeguard system would raise the risk of early detection, which may be sufficient to deter Iran from attempting to cheat the system.

Indeed, while IAEA safeguards do have limitations, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the status quo, in which the IAEA has little transparency over Iran's nuclear activities beyond its declared facilities, remains pregnant with risks in the longer term as well.[123] Hence, as one proliferation expert puts it:

> Do we want to get Iran to suspend its known nuclear activities, or do we want to achieve the transparency needed to detect any unknown activities? Both are important goals in their own right, but it may be increasingly important to shift our focus to the latter.[124]

There is also a tendency to minimize the deterrent effect of IAEA safeguards. Indeed, the combination of the AP and additional IAEA 'transparency measures', while not guaranteed to be '100%' effective, would certainly create "many more hurdles" [125] and make it "more risky"[126] for Iran to operate a covert enrichment facility. And from

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[123] Gary Sick, Trita Parsi, Ray Takeyh and Barbara Slavin, "Symposium: Iran's Strategic Concerns and U.S. Interests," *Middle East Policy Council* XV, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 4; http://www.mepc.org/forums_chcs/51.asp; Internet; accessed 3 March 2009.

[124] Peter Crail, "Iran's Nuclear Program: The Risk of the 'Known Unknown'" *World Politics Review* (3/4/2009): 2.

[125] Albright, *Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable-Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration*, 12. Of particular importance will be getting access to the facilities involved in the manufacture of centrifuges, "both to ensure that Iran does not have a parallel enrichment effort and to prevent Tehran from considering such a risky move." Peter Crail, "Iran's Nuclear Program: The Risk of the 'Known Unknown'." *World Politics Review* (3/4/2009, 2009), 2.

Tehran's point of view, the risk of early detection is not something that is likely to be easily discounted, given the premature disclosure of Natanz in 2002. In addition, Tehran can also take little comfort in the fact that US intelligence agencies already knew about the facilities in question, despite Iran's extraordinary efforts to hide them,[127] and may be in a position to 'tipoff' IAEA inspectors about future undisclosed facilities. More devastating was the 2004 defection of an Iranian official who literally 'walked in' a Western embassy with a laptop full of documents about Iran's nuclear weaponisation program. These incidents arguably give Tehran "little basis for confidence that significant nuclear facilities could be kept hidden," [128] especially if a more intrusive IAEA regime were in effect.

Conclusion

That Iran will soon have the option to 'go nuclear' presents a challenge for US nonproliferation policy. That it will cross the nuclear threshold, however, is far from inevitable given the stark disincentives that Iranian decision makers would need to weigh before doing so. Indeed, the paradox is that Iran's nuclear option may actually act as a "buffer"[129] against the need to take a proliferation decision, since Iran's near-nuclear status may satisfy important security and geopolitical imperatives short of actual nuclear

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[126] Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 102.

[127] Fitzpatrick, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes*, 15 and Kerr, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Status*,3.

[128] Ibid., 16.

[129] Meyer, *The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation*, 151.

weapon acquisition. Moreover, while the risk of a proliferation decision cannot be discounted entirely, even hard-line conservatives, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, are not insensitive to the international and domestic disincentives of actually acquiring nuclear weapons, particularly in light of the growing economic difficulties facing the regime. That said, even though President Ahmadinejad's confrontational approach with the international community over nuclear policy has become increasingly criticized, there is strong domestic consensus across the Iranian political spectrum that it will not accept 'zero enrichment' as a basis of any agreement to end the nuclear standoff.

Iran's nuclear option needs to put in context of these 'nuclear drivers' and 'sources of restraint' and US nonproliferation policy needs to be tailored accordingly. By contrast, sticking with the 'all-or-nothing' demand that Iran suspend its nuclear enrichment capability leaves the US with the binary choice of trying to coerce Iran to give up its nuclear option using either military strikes or economic sanctions. But given Iran's near-nuclear status, there are no military options that could in perpetuity prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons should it choose to do so. Similarly, imposing more painful economic sanctions may also provoke a nationalist backlash that could prove counterproductive to US nonproliferation aims in the long-run. It is in this context that seeking to negotiate an agreement which curtails Iran's nuclear break-out potential and imposes more intrusive IAEA safeguards offers the 'least-bad solution' to managing the risks inherent with Iran acquiring a nuclear option in the near future.

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