

# HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE IRANIAN BOMB

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When he takes office on January 20th, 2009, the next President of the United States will have to contend with a range of pressing issues, from a global economic slowdown to soaring energy prices and a domestic housing market in crisis. On the foreign policy front, however, none will be as urgent as dealing with the persistent nuclear ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. How the United States responds to Iran's atomic drive will, to a large extent, dictate the shape of American strategy toward the greater Middle East for the foreseeable future.

## **The downward spiral**

The next President will inherit an American policy in profound disarray. Notwithstanding early signs of clearheadedness about the danger posed by Iran's theocratic regime, the Bush administration has steadily ceded the strategic initiative to the Islamic Republic.

During his first term, President Bush made clear in no uncertain terms that his administration "would not tolerate" a nuclear-armed Iran.<sup>1</sup> But years of European and United Nations diplomacy have left Washington at the mercy of a convoluted and self-defeating diplomatic track—one with no clear end in sight. And in the process, the goalposts have shifted dramatically in Tehran's favor. On his farewell tour of Europe in June 2008, Mr. Bush implicitly recognized this reality when he told reporters that he now hoped simply to "leave behind



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a multilateral framework” to resolve the international crisis over Iran’s nuclear ambitions.<sup>2</sup>

There can be no doubt that one of the principal culprits of this backpedaling has been the U.S. intelligence community’s latest National Intelligence Estimate on Iran. With its central claim that Iran had ceased work on nuclear weapons back in 2003, that document—released publicly in December 2007—profoundly undercut the Bush administration’s own characterization of Iran as an imminent threat.

In its aftermath, the White House has steadily drifted toward détente with the Islamic Republic. It has announced plans to establish a formal diplomatic presence in Iran for the first time since the Iranian hostage crisis nearly three decades ago, implicitly accepting the idea of normalization with the current regime in Tehran.<sup>3</sup> Just as seriously, it has thrown its weight behind a new negotiating proposal by the 5+1 group (made up of the United States, Russia, China, France, Great Britain and Germany). That offer, delivered to Tehran by EU foreign policy czar Javier Solana in mid-June, does not ask Iran to freeze its uranium enrichment entirely as a precondition to initiating preliminary dialogue.<sup>4</sup> With Iran now estimated to be as little as a year away from a nuclear weapons capability,<sup>5</sup> the proposal is a clear sign of the West’s growing acceptance of the idea of a nuclear Iran—a development that has not been lost on the regime in Tehran.

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## Uncharted territory

Where does the United States go from here? The approaches of the two candidates now vying for the position of Commander-in-Chief could not be more different.

Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama has made clear that, if elected, he would be willing to negotiate without preconditions with the Iranian government over its nuclear ambitions. In an interview with the *New York Times* last fall, he pledged to “engage in aggressive personal diplomacy” with the Islamic Republic as president.<sup>6</sup> Republican nominee John McCain, on the other hand, has opposed such an approach, calling it both “naïve” and “dangerous.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, he has argued in favor of “enormous pressure—diplomatic, trade, financial,”<sup>8</sup> and, if necessary, the use of force, in order to stop Iran’s march toward the bomb. As of yet, however, neither has articulated a comprehensive approach for dealing with Iran.

Each will need to do so in short order. And when they do, the strategy that emerges will have to be informed by a number of broad realizations:

*It takes two to tango.* Since the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly two decades ago, the United States has occupied the position of the world’s lone superpower. That status, however, has bred more than a little diplomatic hubris on the part of officials in Washington. U.S. policymakers now routinely expect everyone to want to talk to them, and for all items to be on the negotiating table when they do. In the case of Iran, this may have been true back in 2003, when the regime put out feelers about the possibility of some sort of “grand bargain” with the United States.<sup>9</sup> But it is decidedly not the case today. As

Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, told his followers back in January, "[t]he conditions of the U.S. government are such now that it is harmful for us to resume relations."<sup>10</sup> Six months later, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gave an inkling as to why when he told reporters that his government would not "retreat one iota" from its current nuclear effort.<sup>11</sup>

If the words of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are any indication, Iran does not view its nuclear program as a bargaining chip. Rather, it sees it as a staple of regime stability, and a vehicle for regional dominance. And it perceives more benefit—and greater security—in moving ahead unilaterally on that front than in trying to hammer out some sort of negotiated settlement with the United States. All of which pours more than a little cold water on the hopes of those in Washington who believe that a comprehensive deal with Iran is in the offing.

*Doing nothing is not an option.* Admiral Vern Clark, the legendary former U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, once famously remarked that the current conflict in which America finds itself "ain't like the last one, and it ain't like the next one. It is like this one."<sup>12</sup> And yet, when it comes to predicting how Iran will behave when it crosses the nuclear threshold, U.S. policymakers seem determined to disregard this dictum. In their thinking about Iran, more than a few have come to the conclusion that, when it comes to nuclear weapons, Iran is just like the Soviet Union.

The attractiveness of the comparison is obvious. As commonly understood, deterrence involves a level of parity between two nuclear-armed states, creating a condition in which war becomes unthink-

able because each has the power to obliterate the other. And, the thinking goes, since the United States is already a nuclear possessor, it does not actually have to do anything at all; this "balance of terror" will be established automatically just as soon as Iran gets the bomb.

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But deterrence is about much more than simply nuclear possession. It involves clear lines of communication, an understanding of your adversary's "red lines," and most of all a shared desire to avoid conflict.<sup>13</sup> Notably, *all* of those things are missing in America's current relationship with Iran. Save for recent tactical (and ultimately unconstructive) contacts over Iraq, the United States so far has had no formal dialogue with the Iranian government since the hostage crisis of 1979. As a result, American policymakers know far less than they should about Iran's decisionmaking process, the personalities of its key leaders, and the regime's fundamental principles and demands. Finally, Iran's leadership cannot be expected to behave in the same way the Soviet elites would have in the event of a crisis. As former CIA Director R. James Woolsey has succinctly put it, the Soviets may have been radical, but they were rational, and they had no interest in dying

for their dachas.<sup>14</sup> Ahmadinejad and his ilk, however, are different. They believe that Iran is engaged in a civilizational war against the West that will bring about the second coming of the Islamic messiah—and they say so openly.<sup>15</sup> None of this should be taken to mean that Iran's leadership as a whole is irrational and millenarian. Far from it; more than a few Iranian politicians (most notably former president and current Assembly of Experts and Expediency Council Chairman Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani) are known to be notoriously pragmatic. What it does suggest, however, is that at least one segment of the Iranian leadership is not seeking to avoid conflict with the West, but rather to precipitate one. And that demolishes the assumption that the U.S. can expect to successfully deter the Iranian regime under any conceivable conflict scenario.

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The future of Iran, then, lies not with the current, sclerotic theocracy but with the country's young, vibrant and Westward-looking population. Washington has every interest in working with that constituency to make sure that, when a domestic political transition does take place, it brings to power a more pluralistic, humane and representative regime.

*The Iranian people are America's secret weapon.* All too often, policy-makers in the West have tended to view the Islamic Republic as a unitary actor, and ascribe the regime's strategic objectives to the country as a whole. Nothing could be further from the truth. Iran today is a country in the midst of a pro-

found socio-economic transition. Its population of 70 million is overwhelmingly young, while the clerical regime that came to power with the Islamic Revolution nearly three decades ago is graying and riven by internal contradictions. Domestic conditions such as rampant unemployment, skyrocketing inflation and a climbing poverty rate, meanwhile, have contributed to a slackening of ideological bonds and made the current regime in Tehran increasingly unpopular.

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So far, however, the United States has not done much on either front. Despite its lip service in support of Iranian democracy, the Bush administration has offered only nominal aid to those seeking freedom and pluralism within the Islamic Republic.<sup>16</sup> Nor has it worked to increase international attention to—and punishment of—Iran's repressive domestic practices, even though restricting Iran's ability to oppress its own population is a necessary prerequisite for the creation of the "empty political space" in which real regime alternatives can flourish. The United States will need to do so if it hopes to harness the forces of change now stir-

ring within the Islamic Republic. At the same time, it will need to avoid expedient short-term diplomatic deals that could extend the life span of the current regime at the expense of more democratic alternatives.

*The road to an Iranian bomb and the road to democracy in Iran lead in opposite directions.* Armed with a nuclear capability, the Iranian regime will have far greater leeway to suppress opposition at home without having to fear retribution from abroad. The Iranian leadership understands this reality all too well, and is acting upon it. Since taking office in August 2005, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has launched a domestic “cultural revolution” that has included, among other things, a massive clampdown on Iran’s already-endangered free media, expanded governmental interference in social and cultural matters, and extensive restrictions on the ability of Iranians to access the Internet. Tellingly, the scope and intensity of this offensive tracks closely with Iran’s progress on the nuclear front, indicating that the Iranian regime views its nuclear program in part as a vehicle to squelch dissent by its domestic opponents—and that progress on the former is directly correlated with greater pressure on the latter.

In this sense, the Iranian regime has taken a page from the playbook of the Chinese Communist Party, whose brutal crackdown on student protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 earned it international condemnation but no lasting consequences. The end result of Iranian nuclearization, therefore, is likely to be the demise of Iran’s nascent political opposition, and a dramatically longer shelf life for the current regime in Tehran.

*The Iranian nuclear crisis is not just about Iran.* Today, Iran’s neighbors are scrambling for strategic parity with Tehran. As one of London’s premier think tanks, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, outlines in its recent study of the subject,<sup>17</sup> Iran’s march toward the bomb has touched off a dangerous and destabilizing proliferation cascade in the region. According to the IISS, no fewer than 13 other countries in the Middle East and North Africa are now seeking nuclear technology, and most of them are doing so with one eye on Tehran.<sup>18</sup> Left unchecked, this trend will virtually guarantee the emergence of a new arms race in the Middle East, much to the detriment of regional stability and U.S. interests there. If it hopes to prevent such an eventuality, Washington will need to adopt a posture toward Iran’s nuclear program that is robust enough not only to dissuade the Iranian regime from nuclear acquisition, but also to discourage Iran’s neighbors from following suit.

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*Subcontracting is not a strategy.* Ever since news of Iran’s nuclear program broke into the open in the fall of 2002, the international community has been attempting to coax Iran into adopting a more constructive stance over its atomic effort. As a practical matter, the United States has con-

sistently taken a back seat in this process. Rather than articulate an independent strategy for dealing with Iran's nuclear program, it has ceded the initiative first to the EU-3 (Great Britain, France and Germany) and then to the United Nations Security Council, with predictable results.

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Today, the United States is doing much the same with Israel. Faced with Tehran's relentless march toward the bomb, more than a few policymakers have pinned their hopes on a potential Israeli military strike as the panacea to their nagging Iran problem. Such action may indeed be in the offing; Israeli officials have said that a nuclear Iran would represent the single greatest threat to the Jewish state since its founding in 1948.<sup>19</sup> But the goals of such an offensive are likely to be limited—a simple delay of Iran's nuclear capability, rather than its outright destruction, and certainly not the more expansive action necessary to alter the character of the Iranian regime. Officials in Washington need to think carefully about whether such a limited agenda truly satisfies long-term American strategic objectives. And, if they decide that it does not, they must identify what else can and should be done.

## Moment of truth

For all of its talk to the contrary, the Bush administration now gives every indication of leaving office without having taken resolute action to prevent the emergence of an atomic Iran. The next American President, however, will not have that luxury. Irrespective of his political affiliation or views about the Islamic Republic, the future occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue will be forced to forge a serious policy to prevent Iran from getting the bomb—or craft a new regional posture in the aftermath of action by a country that has.

The stakes could not be any higher. Today, the Iranian regime is hardly the consolidated strategic threat that many have depicted and which Iranian leaders have tried so hard to portray. But there can be little doubt that if it manages to get the bomb, the Islamic Republic will receive a new lease on life, and dramatically greater regional reach.

Iran's leaders understand this very well. Back in April, surveying his regime's atomic accomplishments on the occasion of Iran's second national "nuclear day," Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told supporters that the Islamic Republic's nuclear effort "is the most important political development in contemporary history," and that "Iran's victory in this biggest political battle will lead to new international developments."<sup>20</sup>

Simply acquiescing to such a turn of events should not be acceptable to either candidate.



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2. Steven Lee Myers and Alan Cowell, "European Leaders Support Bush on Iran Sanctions," *International Herald Tribune*, June 10, 2008, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/06/10/america/11prexy.php>.
3. Ewan MacAskill, "US Plans to Station Diplomats in Iran for First Time Since 1979," *Guardian* (London), July 17, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/17/usa.iran>.
4. Officially, the proposal declares that formal negotiations between Iran and the 5+1 group "can start as soon as Iran's enrichment-related and reprocessing activities are suspended." Joint Letter of the E3+3 Ministers to Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki, June 14, 2008, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/newsroom/latest-news/?view=News&id=3772654>. Unofficially, however, Europe and the United States have indicated that they are willing to engage in a period of "pre-negotiations" in which the parties can begin dialogue without Iran's having to give up its nuclear work.
5. "IAEA Chief ElBaradei: Iran Can Produce Enough Enriched Uranium for a Bomb in Six Months to a Year," Middle East Media Research Institute, *Special Dispatch* no. 1967, June 23, 2008, <http://www.memri.org/bin/latestnews.cgi?ID=SD196708>.
6. Michael R. Gordon and Jeff Zelezný, "Obama Pledges 'Aggressive' Iran Diplomacy," *New York Times*, November 2, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/02/us/politics/01cnd-obama.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/02/us/politics/01cnd-obama.html?_r=1&oref=slogin).
7. "Obama, McCain Split on Iran's Missile Tests," AgenceFrance-Presse, July 9, 2008, [http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=080709151110.c80jkga5&show\\_article=1](http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=080709151110.c80jkga5&show_article=1).
8. Andy Sullivan, "McCain Says Would Apply Diplomacy Squeeze on Iran," Reuters, April 15, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/politicsNews/idUSN1521996320080415>.
9. See, for example, Glenn Kessler, "In 2003, U.S. Spurned Iran's Offer of Dialogue," *Washington Post*, June 18, 2006, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/17/AR2006061700727\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/17/AR2006061700727_pf.html). Some scholars, however, have noted that the Iranian "road map" for normalization was informal at best, and largely discredited from the outset in both Tehran and Washington. Michael Rubin, "The Guldimmann Memorandum," *Weekly Standard* 013, iss. 06 (October 22, 2007), <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/014/225enxax.asp>.
10. *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, January 3, 2008, as translated in Mideastwire, January 4, 2008.
11. "Ahmadinejad: Iran Will Not 'Retreat One Iota' in Nuclear Drive," foxnews.com, July 23, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,389245,00.html>.
12. As cited in John T. Correll, "Verbatim," *Air Force Magazine* 85, no. 04 (April 2002), <http://www.afa.org/magazine/april2002/0402verb.asp>.
13. For an in-depth discussion of the problems inherent in attempting deterrence vis-à-vis Iran, see James S. Robbins, "The Dangers of Deterrence," in Ilan Berman, ed., *Taking on Tehran: Strategies for Confronting the Islamic Republic* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 17-30.
14. R. James Woolsey, Remarks at the American Foreign Policy Council conference on "Understanding the Iranian Threat," Washington, DC, November 15, 2006.
15. Ahmadinejad himself has told supporters that Iran is engaged in "a historic war between the oppressor [Christians] and the world of Islam." "Ahmadinejad: Wipe Israel Off Map," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), October 26, 2005, <http://english.aljazeera.net/archive/2005/10/200849132648612154.html>. He has also announced that the goal of the Islamic Republic "should [be to] define [its] economic, cultural and political policies based on the policy of Imam Mahdi's return." Paul Hughes, "Iran President Paves the Way for Arabs' Imam Return," Reuters, November 17, 2005.
16. As of this writing, of the \$60 million in Iran democracy programming allocated to the State Department for FY08, \$28.7 million was given to the Voice of America's Persian News Network for broadcasting toward Iran. The rest remains unspent.
17. *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East: In the Shadow of Iran* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2008).
18. The countries in question are Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Turkey, Yemen, Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco.
19. See, for example, "Mossad Chief: Nuclear Iran Is Worst-Ever Threat to Israel," *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), November 18, 2003, <http://www.allbusiness.com/middle-east/israel/684476-1.html>.
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