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The Persian Dilemma: Will Iran Go Nuclear?

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The durability of the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to confound Iran watchers and analysts. Indeed, the opaqueness of the theocratic government has been among the regime's most pragmatic achievements in perpetuating Islamic rule since the 1979 revolution. The clerics at the helm of the Iranian state have dealt and played a game of confusion and deception with considerable success as the international community continues to be perplexed by its inability to deconstruct Iran's decision-making structure or identify and categorize the elite cadre of clerical loyalists who are the key players in policy making.

This information deficiency is of particular significance because it has the United States and the European Union (EU) spinning in confusion over Iran's apparent pursuit of nuclear weapons. For the international community, preventing a nuclear Iran is paramount. The United States, the EU, and the United Nations recognize that the consequences of a nuclear Iran would not only affect the region, its security, and its alignments—it might also inspire other countries to follow in the same vein. With the increased US presence and interests in Iraq and Afghanistan, containing their Iranian neighbor is even more critical. And the fear that nuclear technology would reach the hands of terrorist groups is profound.

Unfortunately, the shrouded nature of the Iranian regime has been an obstacle to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the EU-3 (an ad hoc coalition of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) in their attempts to improve oversight of Iran's nuclear energy activities. Also obscuring the situation is the fickle nature of Iranian domestic

opinion, evident in conflicting messages and rhetorical posturing on the country's nuclear program. For Iranians, an inherent need for deterrence guides the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability. Tehran maintains that the country's nuclear program is entirely peaceful, designed to create alternative energy sources. The West considers this argument laughable, since Iran possesses the fourth-largest oil reserves and second-largest natural gas reserves in the world. However, the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), of which Iran is a signatory, permits Tehran to pursue nuclear research and development activities on the condition that it maintain transparency in declaring its progress and detailing the location of research and nuclear facilities.

The genuine motivation for Iran, which survived a devastating eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s and remains internationally isolated, comes from its dangerous neighborhood. The countries around Iran include several with unstable regimes and nuclear capabilities. This regional environment has heightened Iran's anxiety and prompted various efforts to increase security, including the interest in WMD. With Israel an undeclared nuclear power and India and Pakistan having tested their nuclear devices in 1998, Iran's strategy is understandable. Moreover, Iran today is surrounded by American troops and their allies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and Turkey.

Unlike its neighbors, Israel, India, and Pakistan, which have neither signed the NPT nor committed to the control of nuclear weapons, Iran is a member of the NPT. (Iran also has signed the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention.) The language of Article IV of the NPT recognizes Iran's “inalienable right to develop . . . nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination, and acquire equipment, materials and scientific and

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technological information.” The problem is that these same activities also bring Iran closer to possessing an atomic bomb.

TEMPTATION IN TEHRAN

Iran’s nuclear program was actually begun by Mohammad Reza Shah under the watchful eye of the United States. The 1979 Islamic revolution halted all construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactors on the eve of the uprising. But in the hostile environment encircling Iran during its war with Iraq, the Iranians restarted the program in 1984, albeit under the guise of peaceful energy diversification. Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons and regular missile bombardments against Iran undoubtedly motivated Tehran to reinstate the program. The Bushehr reactors were bombed six times during the war. Since the 1980s, Iran has sought the help of Russia, Pakistan, China, and North Korea in recommencing its nuclear program. The United States and its European allies had many opportunities during this period to participate in the development and construction of Iran’s nuclear reactors, which could have given them some capability to monitor and control the facilities.

Clinging to the argument that its oil and gas resources are ephemeral, Iran has consistently insisted that it is only pursuing alternative energy sources. The country’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, has even issued a *fatwa* (a religious edict) claiming that production of nuclear weapons violates Islamic law and is *haram* (forbidden). The government maintains that it is only committed to nuclear technology, not weaponization. However, more inflammatory ideologues have taken up the argument that in light of Israeli, Pakistani, and Indian proliferation, Iran should not be denied the same right. Even President Mohammad Khatami has noted that, “If we feel others are not meeting their promises, under no circumstances would we be committed to continue fulfilling ours.”

In October 2003, Iran agreed to cooperate with the EU-3 and to commit to the Additional Protocols to the NPT, which allow more intrusive inspections of nuclear facilities. Since then Tehran has been noncommittal and surreptitious in its negotiating. In early 2004, it was evident the Iranians planned to continue both the assembly of centrifuges (which can separate enriched uranium to fuel a nuclear

reactor but also to build a nuclear bomb) and the production of converted uranium, thereby shredding the confidence-building measures pursued by the EU-3. By the summer of 2004, Iran’s agreement to cooperate in exchange for economic and security incentives was essentially negated, as the IAEA and EU increased their criticism of Tehran while Iranians reciprocated with equally bold accusations. Iran’s announcement that it intended to resume manufacturing parts for centrifuges and begin testing for uranium conversion set the final nail in the concession coffin.

Further provoking international protest, the Iranians revealed plans to build a heavy water reactor in Arak. (A heavy water research reactor produces high-quality plutonium, the most important component for a compact nuclear device.) And Russia, over American protests, declared its intention to continue nuclear cooperation with and arms sales to Iran. Yet the IAEA, while actively critical of Iranian

antagonism, still resisted US pressure to refer the Iranian case to the United Nations Security Council, which would have

had the option of imposing sanctions. Instead, it provided Iran with a deadline of the end of November 2004 to comply with the Additional Protocols and suspend all of its uranium enrichment activities. By extending Iran’s compliance time, IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei came into conflict with the United States, which wanted a more aggressive stance taken toward Tehran.

A RELUCTANT SECURITY COUNCIL

Having targeted Iran as part of an “axis of evil” (which also included Iraq and North Korea), the administration of George W. Bush has sought redemption for its intelligence failure in Iraq, where WMD have yet to be found two years after the invasion. In its drum roll up to the war, the Bush administration essentially exported its Iranian dossier to the EU. However, in observing Iran’s contemptuous behavior not only regarding its nuclear activities but also in potentially threatening American interests in Iraq and Afghanistan, the administration has sought an opportunity to legally sanction Iran through the Security Council.

Any such resolution would be a challenge to pass, since the permanent members are not united behind US attempts to corner Iran. China has lob-

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bied against such resolutions and has acted as a conduit on behalf of the Iranians to the EU and the United States. With intricate commercial and strategic ties, it is unlikely that the Chinese would support any resolution against the clerical regime. (On the other hand, the Chinese have a history of only vetoing resolutions related to their own security arrangements in the Taiwan Strait.)

The Russians pose another obstacle for American lobbying against the Iranians. Russia signed a deal to assist the Iranians in building their nuclear power plant at the Bushehr complex, scheduled for completion by the summer of 2006, as well as two additional reactors that would operate within IAEA limits. The Clinton administration tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the Russians to cancel their \$800 million contract to complete the initial 1,000-megawatt reactor. Indeed, Russian support for Iran's nuclear ambitions presented an obstacle to US-Russian cooperation. President Boris Yeltsin did finally agree to eliminate centrifuges from the deal. However, his successor, President Vladimir Putin, has been unyielding in keeping his commitments to the Iranians. Since the two countries have mutual interests with their neighboring Central Asian states and continue to be strong trading partners, Putin has maintained that Iran's program is solely for peaceful purposes.

While the Security Council's permanent members are in accord over limiting Iranian proliferation, unanimity over Iran policy is currently untenable. Tehran recognizes that, in the event of a negotiation stalemate, the nuclear issue would be brought before the Security Council only if unity among the council members with vetoes were guaranteed. In the meantime, the Iranians have continued to take advantage of international disunity. Clearly, they hope to use the uproar over their nuclear aspirations to extract as many concessions as possible.

THE EU AGREEMENT

However, when the EU last year presented Iran with a firm deadline and a more detailed proposal on the scope of both sides' commitments, Tehran was forced to concede. On November 15, 2004, the Iranian government agreed to suspend all uranium enrichment. In skeletal form, the new agreement affirmed Iran's cooperation in halting all efforts to attain nuclear weapons and in ratifying the NPT Additional Protocols in parliament, in exchange for the negotiated expansion of trade and cooperation with the EU and support for Iran's ascension to the World Trade Organization. More specifically, the EU

guaranteed that Iran would be permitted to pursue a nuclear-power fuel supply, civilian nuclear technology, and even a light water research facility. Had Iran rebuffed the EU's "final" offer, the consequences were to be decided through sanctions.

While this agreement is only a confidence-building measure, not a legal obligation, considerable effort has been invested in negotiating rather than forcing Iranian compliance. IAEA head ElBaradei has affirmed Iran's suspension of nuclear activities, but the duration of the suspension has yet to be determined. In the wake of this agreement, an exiled Iranian opposition group, the National Council for Resistance in Iran, has attempted to subvert the deal by accusing Iran of continuing a secret uranium enrichment program. In support of the EU-3 initiative, eight European foreign ministers rallied to call on American participation in the deal.

The EU hopes to fashion with Tehran a scenario similar to that negotiated with the Libyan regime. After years of international sanctions, isolation, and threats of force, Libya in 2004 renounced its weapons program—nuclear, chemical, and ballistic—and agreed to become a partner in the war on terror. In exchange for normalized relations and the removal of sanctions, Libya has accepted intrusive monitoring and inspections and extensive access to its scientists and technicians. The Libyan about-face has motivated the EU to seek a similar resolution with Iran.

During the 2004 presidential campaign, the Bush administration continued its policy of outsourcing the Iran issue to the EU while voicing criticism of Tehran. In the aftermath of Bush's reelection, the administration reasserted its position toward the Iranians. On Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's February 2005 tour of European capitals, she was vociferous in her opposition to the Islamic regime. Castigating the clerical theocracy as an "outpost of tyranny," Rice consistently reinforced the US position of remaining aloof from the EU-3 negotiations and refusing to offer incentives. Recently, upon President Bush's return from his own trip to Europe, the administration budged somewhat, endorsing the EU-3 talks and suggesting it would consider contributing economic incentives to help entice Iranian cooperation. Meanwhile, the EU-3 has continued to hold negotiations divided into three areas: nuclear concessions, trade and cooperation agreements, and security arrangements.

Thus far, Iran has held to its promises, including the apparent suspension of uranium enrichment activities. Yet the outcome of the discussions

remains to be seen. Some Iran watchers contend that the clerics are seeking to avoid a contest with the Security Council and United States. Less optimistic observers suggest the talks are part of a duplicitous plan designed to buy time while the Iranians secretly continue to pursue their nuclear aspirations. What is clear is that the international community's desired outcome will require an intense and decisive commitment from all sides. If the EU-3 does make good on its package of tempting carrots, then the Iranian bluff will be called. The Iranian rejection of any good-faith offer will ultimately be met with some form of sanctions policy. The months ahead will undoubtedly reveal the true nature of the clerics' intentions.

COMMON AND CONFLICTING INTERESTS

It is widely suggested that only with American participation in the negotiations—and American inducements of security guarantees and normalization of relations—will Iran be motivated to abandon its nuclear ambitions. As Iran's new neighbor in the region—with military forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and many parts of Central Asia—the Americans are closely monitoring Iran's every move. US interests in both Iraq and Afghanistan are now intertwined with those of Iran. Both the United States and Iran have a stake in the security and stability of the region, as well as in securing their national interests.

For the Bush administration, which has overseen groundbreaking elections in Iraq and Afghanistan, the number one priority is to ensure that its efforts to combat terrorism and promote democracy do not end in vain. The administration has been unrelenting in seeking to transform the ugly rage of 9-11 into an opportunity for change in the region. For President Bush, the cause of democracy is a calling; any country or organization that undermines his righteous ambitions is ultimately at odds with America's divine plan.

Indeed, for the Bush administration, Iran is among the primary perpetrators of mischief. Because it has tactically diversified its contacts and interests in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran is strategically positioned to protect its ambitions while subverting those of the United States. Ironically, the "Great Satan" did Tehran a favor by displacing its two most menacing neighbors—Iraq's and Afghan-

istan's regimes—but even so, relations between Iran and America have yet to evolve out of their 26-year pattern of hostile rhetoric.

The same issues continue to color the Iranian and American imaginations. The former is threatened by the active American encirclement of the Middle East. The latter disapproves of Iran's theocratic regime and takes issue with its sponsorship of terrorism and constant interference in Israeli-Palestinian affairs, as well as its alleged pursuit of WMD. To ease Iranian fears, the clerics ultimately seek respect, legitimacy, and resolution on issues of frozen assets and sanctions. The United States, emulating the Libyan model of coercion, wants absolute Iranian renunciation of its WMD program and full participation in the war on terror. Toward this end, the Bush administration has so far refused any direct participation in the nuclear diplomacy despite appeals from Western leaders. (Iran and the United States severed diplomatic relations during the revolutionary uproar of 1979 and the holding

of American hostages from the US embassy in Tehran.)

The rhetoric from Washington revolves around supporting the EU-3 negotiations from the sidelines. If the talks fail, the adminis-

tration hopes to rebuke Iran through the legal framework of the Security Council. Armed with a UN resolution of condemnation, the Bush administration might then emulate Israel's 1981 bombing of the Osirak nuclear facility in Iraq and try to stall Iran's WMD program. Many analysts have argued that, with the United States overextended in Iraq and with little allied support, such a campaign would prove a diplomatic and logistical disaster.

The Islamic government has prepared for this possibility by placing its nuclear facilities in or near urban and highly populated areas. The United States would be challenged even to identify the many nuclear sites scattered throughout the country. In addition, military strikes would galvanize anti-American opposition throughout the region and especially in Iran. While such opposition might be short-lived, since most of the population despises the clerical elite, fiercely nationalistic Iranians would undoubtedly band together in response to attack. If America's long-term ambition is to force some form of regime change, an attack

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would be counterproductive because it would only enhance the power of the clerical elite.

It is important to note that Iranian national support for the WMD program is not overwhelming, even though government polls indicate the contrary. While some national pride may attach to nuclear progress, ultimately the people are motivated far more by economic incentives that affect their daily existence than by ambiguous nuclear posturing. And yet, despite popular distaste for the clerical regime, the threat of military strikes would undoubtedly foster Iranian nationalism against the United States and strengthen the clerical regime's hold on power.

WAVERING IN WASHINGTON

Against this backdrop, the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh recently revealed in *The New Yorker* that the US government was conducting covert operations in Iran. After much speculation on the validity of his claims, it was confirmed that surveillance drones are indeed flying over Iran to gather information on its nuclear weapons program and defense capabilities. Yet the Bush administration's Iran policy is clearly still under review. While maintaining that an attack on Iran is not imminent, US officials have said the option remains available. President Bush betrayed the administration's uncertainty on his European tour in February when he stated, "This notion that the United States is getting ready to attack Iran is simply ridiculous. Having said that, all options are on the table."

While prospects of an American attack remain slim for now, in policy circles whispers of an Israeli one are buzzing. President Bush himself offered this as a potential solution, stating: "If I was the leader of Israel and I'd listened to some of the statements by the Iranian ayatollahs that regarded the security of my country, I'd be concerned about Iran having a nuclear weapon as well. And in that Israel is our ally and in that we've made a very strong commitment to support Israel, we will support Israel if her security is threatened." But the consequences of such a strike would be equally profound. Iran would not hesitate to respond using its conventional Shahab-3 missiles—which have a range of 900 miles—and nonconventional suicide-bombing tactics.

Ironically, President Bush's reelection was well received among the Iranian clerical elite. The mullahs historically have been more comfortable with Republican administrations. Democrats, while perhaps pursuing a more moderate Iran policy, are considered more duplicitous. Memories of Presidents

Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton and their economic sanctions are not favorable. It was during Ronald Reagan's presidency that, despite hostility toward the Iranian theocracy, the United States negotiated secret arms sales to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages in Lebanon (with profits diverted to Central American rebels). With the current President Bush, his "axis of evil" rhetoric aside, the clerics prefer the conviction espoused by his administration over the indecision of the Democrats. Bush's rhetoric has also served as a political rallying cry. His statements of intent and hostility toward the Islamic republic have the mullahs responding with equally inflammatory declarations.

As such, the Iranian regime is no longer lobbying for trilateralization of the negotiation process—that is, adding face-to-face talks with the United States. Direct dialogue with the Americans would most likely add to pressures on the bargaining, activate both sides' red-button issues, and mix the tarnished US-Iranian history with the nuclear issues at hand. In the event of a breakdown, it would also facilitate a more immediate international response. Conversely, for the EU-3, an American presence in the talks is viewed as the only means to force a productive end. While content with their initial progress, the EU-3 has tired of their "he said, she said" role in trying to placate both sides. From their perspective, only a tripartite discussion will lead to a decisive renunciation of Iranian nuclear intentions.

Recently, the Bush administration has opted for a united front in coercing the Iranian hand. Announcing US support for the EU-3 negotiations, Secretary of State Rice on March 11, 2005, said the United States would no longer block Iran's accession to the World Trade Organization and would allow Tehran to obtain parts for commercial planes. If the talks fail for any reason, the EU-3 will then support bringing Iran's case to the UN Security Council.

The Iranians were quick to reject the offer. Indeed, the clerical elite was insulted by the meagerness of the American carrots, which did not include security guarantees or the removal of sanctions and frozen assets. Tehran suspects the administration offered minimal carrots to facilitate its end goal of referring the Iranian case to the Security Council. Iran's rebuff likely will fuel the diplomatic fire and return the two sides to the usual exchange of hurt pride and hostile rhetoric.

It is important to note, however, that the EU-3 negotiations are distinct from those of the IAEA. For Iran to be sanctioned in the Security Council, there has to be a referral from the IAEA. As the UN's nuclear-

monitoring and compliance organization, the IAEA is the official body empowered with such responsibilities. The EU-3 was convened to provide supplementary support to the IAEA by attempting to persuade Iran to suspend its outlaw nuclear operations by means of coordinated carrots and sticks. Despite the IAEA's regulatory oversight and monitoring of Iran's nuclear developments, the Bush administration has accused the agency of continued passivity with regard to the Islamic regime. ElBaradei for his part has accused the United States of trying to subvert his mandate by eavesdropping on conversations between his agency and Iranian officials.

The conflict between the Bush administration and the IAEA, as well the more primary issue of Iran's proliferation potential, reveals the inherent failings of the NPT regime. Conveniently, an international NPT review conference, convened every five years, is scheduled to be held at the United Nations in May. Delegates of the NPT's 188 signatories will seek a new process to contain the spread of nuclear weapons and technology. While the agenda has yet to be determined, ElBaradei has argued for the addition of several terms to the nonproliferation regime, including enforcing a five-year moratorium on building new uranium enrichment and plutonium separation facilities, institutionalizing the Additional Protocols as a means of promoting treaty compliance, and asking the Security Council to prosecute any regime in violation of the treaty commitments. While these additions would not require any amendments to the treaty, the goal would be to reaffirm and fortify the IAEA's mandate. Only with a strengthened directive can the agency effectively seek to contain the spread of nuclear weapons. It would also help prevent Iran's clerics from continuing to exploit international confusion and disunity.

HIGH DRAMA, HIGH STAKES

If Iran were permitted to develop nuclear weapons, the implications would be profound—affecting the future not only of the NPT but of the entire Middle East. They would not, however, necessarily include a new nuclear arms race in the region. Undoubtedly, Tehran's nuclear posturing has threatened regional security alignments. Yet it seems unlikely that the Middle East would militarize to counter the Iranian threat. Rather, countries such as Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia might be forced to deepen their ties with the United States or seek American permission to expand their nonconventional military arsenals. Navigating through the domestic and international subtleties of these rela-

tionships is complicated, with each country juxtaposing domestic anti-American sentiments against its national security interests.

If these nations were to aggressively pursue nuclear technology, their ambitions might be tempered by a more assertive American reaction and presence in the region. For the United States, allowing further nuclear proliferation is unacceptable—especially in states like Saudi Arabia, where an increasingly uncontrollable radical Islamist presence could one day unseat the monarchy and gain command of this devastating weaponry. For its part, Egypt has lived next to the undeclared nuclear power of Israel for decades, and has yet to pursue a nuclear program. It is unlikely that a nuclear Iran would suddenly trigger Egyptian nuclear ambitions. Turkey, too, as the bridge between Europe and the Middle East, might see nuclear posturing as a means to enhance its domestic position in the region. But doing so would undoubtedly color its status not only with NATO but also as a prospective member of the EU.

Amid all the rhetoric and posturing, Iran awaits the outcome of its presidential election, scheduled for June, which could influence its nuclear policy. What will happen? The answer to this Persian paradox is unpredictable. There are countless variables at play. The regime will continue to extract as many concessions as it can in its negotiations with the EU-3. Iran's hostile and conflicting rhetoric will continue to confound and complicate the process. Ironically, the one consistent current will be the government's perpetual policy of confusion and duplicity, as evidenced by President Khatami's promise that "Iran will turn into a burning hell for aggressors" and former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's recent invitation to the United States to "enter through the gates of peace."

Iranian elusiveness almost certainly will continue to cloud the debate and obscure Tehran's intentions, but it does not change the stakes involved. The implications of a nuclear Iran are grave for the region and the future of the NPT and IAEA, as well as for the United States and EU. While nuclearization of the Middle East seems unlikely, the spread of nuclear weapons to terrorist organizations is possible. Iran has a history as a sponsor of terrorism. And questions about the long-term stability of the clerical regime heighten the uncertainty: Iran's revolutionary and opaque government conceivably could be uprooted by an even more irrational actor. In the months ahead, all the players involved must learn to navigate stormy and unpredictable diplomatic waters with confidence and a determination to succeed. ■