

# CONFRONTING A NUCLEAR IRAN

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Chairman Hunter, distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the threat posed by a nuclear Iran, and policy options available to the United States.

Since August 2002, when a controversial Iranian opposition group disclosed previously unknown details of Iran's clandestine efforts to develop a nuclear capability, the world has been jolted awake to a new threat: the frightening specter of a nuclear Iran. Three-and-a-half years on, much is still unknown about the Islamic Republic's atomic endeavor. However, all the available evidence points to an ambitious, complex and diffuse national program that is geared toward providing the Iranian regime with the capacity to field a nuclear arsenal.

Estimates of exactly when the Islamic Republic will be capable of doing so vary wildly. In the past, the U.S. intelligence community has assessed that a nuclear Iran is unlikely until substantially later this decade.<sup>1</sup> More recently, it appears to have softened even these projections; according to leaked accounts of the intelligence community's most recent National Intelligence Estimate, Iran is now judged to be ten years away from developing an indigenous nuclear capability.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, other nations believe such a capability will emerge dramatically sooner. This past December, Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, the chief of staff of the Israeli defense forces, told a Knesset parliamentary committee that Iran will reach the "point of no return" in acquiring the knowledge to build a nuclear weapon by March 2006.<sup>3</sup> Based on such calculations, Israeli intelligence officials now believe an Iranian bomb could emerge by 2007.<sup>4</sup>

But, while there may be disagreement regarding the exact timing, there is an emerging global consensus on the central point: that the Islamic Republic's accelerating quest for nuclear capability constitutes a grave and growing threat to international peace and security.

## BRACING FOR NUCLEARIZATION

Iran's atomic advances represent a direct challenge to the success of U.S. policy and American objectives in the greater Middle East. A nuclear Iran can be expected to drastically reconfigure regional geopolitics, altering U.S. strategic calculations throughout the Middle Eastern theater. Concretely, the United States can expect to confront six trends in the near future:

**GROWING IRANIAN INFLUENCE**—Over the past several years, despite an American deployment of unprecedented scope in support of the War on Terror, Iran's influence in the Persian Gulf has increased dramatically. Since the year 2000, in a manifestation of growing regional concern over Iran's expanding strategic capabilities, the Islamic Republic has succeeded in codifying bilateral security accords with Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.<sup>5</sup> Over time, such steps by Iran—and ongoing regional doubts about America's long-term commitment to Gulf security—will make the already-problematic Persian Gulf increasingly inhospitable for the United States, as regional states eschew contacts with Washington in favor of a *modus vivendi* with Tehran.

**A NEW ARMS RACE**—Iran's nuclear advances can be expected to spur neighboring states to accelerate their efforts to acquire counterweights to the Iranian bomb. Already, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt have begun to exhibit telltale signs of clandestine nuclear development and/or procurement.<sup>6</sup> Other countries—including Turkey and Iraq—may soon be prompted to follow suit. The ability of the U.S. to control such impulses on the part of regional states would be far from absolute, and would require costly investments in regional security structures and a major reconfiguration of military deployments to the Middle East.

**EXPANDED PROLIFERATION**—In the hands of Iran's ayatollahs, an atomic capability is likely to become a dangerous export commodity. U.S. officials are already concerned with Iran's "secondary proliferation" of WMD components and know-how to such clients as Syria and Lebanon's radical Hezbollah militia.<sup>7</sup> As Iran moves closer to nuclear capability, these activities should only be expected to increase. Iran's radical new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, already has announced that his government stands ready "to transfer nuclear know-how to the Islamic countries due to their need."<sup>8</sup>

INCREASED TERRORISM—Iran is the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism, supporting and sustaining an array of terrorist groups, including Lebanon’s Hezbollah militia, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Acquisition of a nuclear capability can be expected to embolden Iranian sponsorship of terrorism, and its use globally as a strategic tool against Western interests. By the same token, a nuclear Iran will feel greater freedom to export its radical revolutionary principles abroad, and to assume an even greater role in the current insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

STRATEGIC BLACKMAIL—For many years, Iran has used its strategic location in the oil-rich Persian Gulf as a geopolitical tool, repeatedly levying the threat of a military closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a key “chokepoint” which serves as the principal passageway for roughly two-thirds of global oil trade, in response to negative regional developments. Today, Iran’s capability to carry out these threats has expanded substantially as a result of the sustained national military rearmament undertaken by the Islamic Republic over the past several years. According to the U.S. intelligence community, Iran now possesses the most capable navy in the region, and has the ability to shut off the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf for brief periods of time, even with a Western military presence in the region.<sup>9</sup> An atomic arsenal would make this situation much worse, and empower Iran’s clerics to use nuclear blackmail to virtually dictate energy terms to Europe and the United States.

GREATER REGIME LONGEVITY—The Islamic Republic is widely understood to be in a pre-revolutionary state. The ruling regime is wildly unpopular among ordinary Iranians.<sup>10</sup> Half of its nearly 70 million-person population is below the poverty line.<sup>11</sup> Unemployment and drug addiction are rampant, and corruption has decayed virtually every sector of the Iranian economy.<sup>12</sup> In short, Iran today is a failed state reminiscent of the nations of Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War. A nuclear capability, however, has the potential to profoundly dampen the resulting urge for change visible on the Iranian “street.” With an atomic arsenal, Iran will have far greater ability to quash domestic dissent without concern over decisive international retaliation—much the same way China did in its brutal, bloody 1989 suppression of student protests in Tiananmen Square. A nuclear capability therefore can be expected to substantially dim prospects for internal transformation within the Islamic Republic.

Moreover, because of the inherent uncertainties associated with gauging the pace of Iran’s nuclear progress—and because the Islamic Republic is unlikely to provide overt benchmarks as to its nuclear possession—the United States and its allies should expect to be confronted with these trends even before the Iranian regime verifiably reaches nuclear status.

## AMERICAN OPTIONS, IN CONTEXT

What can be done? Over the past two years, a number of options for dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions and countering and Iranian nuclear capability have been proffered. These range from diplomacy to economic sanctions to containment and deterrence to preemption. In order for their effectiveness vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear program to be properly understood, however, these proposals must be viewed through the prism of regime ideology.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a revolutionary state dedicated to the worldwide spread of its radical religious principles. Its original constitution, formulated in the aftermath of the successful 1979 revolution, enshrined the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's idea of "exporting the revolution" as a key regime principle. The Islamic Republic's armed forces, it outlined, "will be responsible not only for safeguarding the borders, but also for accomplishing an ideological mission, that is, the Jihad for the sake of God, as well as for struggling to open the way for the sovereignty of the Word of God throughout the world."<sup>13</sup>

Twenty-six years later, this principle continues to animate the Iranian regime. Indeed, Khomeini's vision has greater resonance in Tehran today than at any time since his death in 1989. Over the past three years, internal political changes—and deepening disaffection among ordinary Iranians—have contributed to the ascendance of a radical new elite of regime hard-liners committed to revitalizing and expanding Iran's Islamic Revolution. The summer 2005 election of former *Pasdaran* commander (and relative political unknown) Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president was a public confirmation of this dramatic shift in power.

Against this backdrop, the Iranian regime has embraced the concept of nuclear possession. While the Islamic Republic's nuclear program dates back to the mid- to late-1980s, it has accelerated considerably since the start of the War on Terror. In a February 2003 interview with the conservative Iranian daily *Saisat-e Rouz*, then-Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi highlighted this focus when he outlined the Iranian regime's new asymmetric warfare concept, known as "deterrent defense."<sup>14</sup> Since then, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime—and the persistence of a newly nuclear North Korea—has only served to confirm the importance of a nuclear arsenal to Iranian regime stability.

These calculations should inform our thinking about possible responses to the emerging Iranian bomb. Diplomacy, for example, may delay and complicate Iran's

path to the nuclear bomb, but it cannot change it. The Iranian regime has made a clear strategic choice in favor of nuclear possession, and has demonstrated unequivocally that it will not abandon its efforts to acquire the ability to independently develop nuclear weapons.

As a long-term solution, economic sanctions are likely to be similarly problematic. While Iran remains vulnerable to international economic pressure, it is far less so today than in the mid- to late-1990s, when plummeting energy prices brought the Islamic Republic to the verge of economic ruin. The reason is Iran's status as a major energy power and the unexpected financial boom that it has experienced since the start of the War on Terror.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Iran is making every effort to increase foreign reliance on its energy output. Already, the Iranian regime has succeeded in signing at least two massive energy accords, estimated to be worth some \$100 billion over the next twenty-five years, with China<sup>16</sup>—effectively securing a Chinese veto on potential Security Council action against Iran for its nuclear program. Such steps threaten to fracture the international consensus surrounding the need to contain Iran's nuclear program, and weaken the effectiveness of any economic pressure attempted by the international community.

Containment, while possible, will be difficult to accomplish. In order to be effective, an American containment strategy will need to achieve three critical goals: successfully bolstering the Islamic Republic's vulnerable regional neighbors (through new security arrangements and the provision of missile defenses); rolling back Tehran's military advances through new forward-basing in the region's key waterways, such as the Strait of Hormuz; and curbing Iranian access to critical WMD technologies by expanding counterproliferation efforts in the region. By its nature, however, the adoption of a containment strategy alone toward the Iranian regime is likely to entail, however unofficially, an American acceptance of a nuclear Iran—and to be perceived as such regionally, with corresponding negative effects.

Neither should the United States bank on being able to deter the Iranian regime. The radical rebound that has taken place in Iranian politics has been mirrored by the ascendance of an ominous new messianic worldview on the part of at least some segments of the Iranian ruling elite. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for example, is a disciple of the Ayatollah Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi, an obscure Iranian cleric who preaches a radical brand of Shi'ite liberation theology.<sup>17</sup> And, like his mentor, Ahmadinejad believes fervently in paving the way for the return of the Mahdi, or Twelfth Imam—a second coming that will be achieved through a regional conflagration. In keeping with this belief, Ahmadinejad is actively courting a crisis with the West. In a recent closed-door session of the foreign policy and national security committee of the *majlis*, Iran's parliament, Ahmadinejad outlined that

international confrontation was the cornerstone of his foreign-policy strategy.<sup>18</sup> On other occasions, Iran's president has warned of a "final war" between Islam and the West.<sup>19</sup> All of this suggests strongly that classical deterrence, such as that used during the Cold War to stabilize U.S.-Soviet strategic relations, is not and will not be applicable vis-à-vis Iran in the months and years ahead.

Finally, military action against Iran, either by the United States or by its allies, should be viewed strictly as a last resort. While possible, a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities would be technically challenging, given the sophisticated and diffuse nature of the Iranian nuclear program. It would also likely be met with a costly asymmetric response, ranging from a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz to an increase in support for terrorism throughout the region and in the West. Most significantly, military action against the Iranian nuclear program may prove to be distinctly counterproductive in the long run, galvanizing Iranian public opinion against the United States and creating a "rally around the flag" effect that could prolong the lifespan of the current Iranian regime.

#### CAPITULATION, OR CONFRONTATION

For as long as the Islamic Republic of Iran has been in existence, the United States has vacillated between attempting to isolate Tehran, and trying to accommodate it. The United States no longer has the luxury of pursuing either approach. A nuclear arsenal in the hands of Iran's current theocratic regime will be a source of both regional and global instability. Just as significantly, an atomic Iran can be expected to profoundly complicate—if not completely frustrate—American objectives, both in the region and in the larger War on Terror.

With this in mind, the goal of the United States should not simply be to contain and deter a nuclear Iran. It should also be to create the necessary conditions for a fundamental political transformation within its borders, through forceful public diplomacy, economic assistance to opposition elements, international pressure and covert action.

In its September 2002 *National Security Strategy*, the Bush administration boldly articulated its support for a "forward strategy that favors freedom" throughout the world.<sup>20</sup> Four years later, Iran has emerged as a critical test of this principle. With the proper political will, the United States possesses the capacity to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions and to empower a post-theocratic transformation there. Just as easily, however, it can acquiesce to a new, antagonistic regional order dominated by a nuclear Iran. The choice is ours to make.

NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, “Weighing the Options: U.S. Faces Closing Window of Opportunity to Stop Iran’s Nukes,” *Geostrategy-Direct*, September 28, 2004, [http://www.geostrategy-direct.com/geostrategy-direct/secure/2004/9\\_28/do.asp](http://www.geostrategy-direct.com/geostrategy-direct/secure/2004/9_28/do.asp).

<sup>2</sup> Dafna Linzer, “Iran Is Judged 10 Years From Nuclear Bomb,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2005, A01.

<sup>3</sup> “Iran at Nuclear Point of No-Return by March: Israel,” Agence France Presse, December 13, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> David Ratner, “Ze’evi: Iran Will be Able to Enrich Uranium in 6 Months,” *Ha’aretz* (Tel Aviv), January 12, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> See *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1* (Tehran), April 10, 2000; “Iran, Kuwait Sign Agreement on Military Cooperation,” Xinhua (Beijing), October 2, 2002; Ali Akbar Dareini, “Iran, Saudi Arabia Sign Landmark Security Pact,” Associated Press, April 17, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> In October 2003, the *Washington Times* revealed details of a secret agreement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan granting Riyadh access to Pakistani nuclear technologies in exchange for cheap, steady supplies of Saudi crude. See Arnaud de Borchgrave, “Pakistan, Saudi Arabia in Secret Nuke Pact,” *Washington Times*, October 22, 2003, A01; Similarly, discoveries of plutonium traces at Egyptian nuclear facilities have deepened international suspicions about the nuclear aspirations of the government of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. See “Traces of Plutonium Found Near Facility,” *Jordan Times* (Amman), November 7, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research Carl W. Ford, Jr., “Reducing the Threat of Chemical and Biological Weapons,” testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, March 19, 2002, [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107\\_senate\\_hearings&docid=f:79961.wais](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107_senate_hearings&docid=f:79961.wais).

<sup>8</sup> “Iran Offers Nuclear Technology to Islamic States,” Associated Press, September 15, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lowell E. Jacoby, “Current and Projected National Security Threats to the United States,” statement before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 24, 2004, <http://intelligence.senate.gov/0402hrg/040224/jacoby.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, “Poll on U.S. Ties Rocks Iran,” *BBC*, London, October 2, 2002, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2294509.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2294509.stm).

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Iran Country Report on Human Rights Practice for 2002*, March 2003, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18276.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Ramin Mostagim, “Corruption Eats into Roots of Society,” Inter Press Service, July 15, 2004, [http://www.ipsnews.net/new\\_notas.asp?idnews=24640](http://www.ipsnews.net/new_notas.asp?idnews=24640).

<sup>13</sup> Preamble of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, [http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/ir00000\\_.html](http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/ir00000_.html).

<sup>14</sup> *Saisat-e Rouz* (Tehran), February 18, 2003, as translated in “Iranian Defense Minister on Iran’s Defense Doctrine,” Middle East Media Research Institute *Special Dispatch* no. 502, May 9, 2003, <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=iran&ID=SP50203>.

<sup>15</sup> According to U.S. government estimates, the Islamic Republic’s official budget of \$127 billion for the year 2004-2005, approximately half of which was tied to oil earnings, was based on revenue projections of the price of crude oil at \$19.90 per barrel. Energy Information Administration, United States Department of Energy, “Country Analysis Brief: Iran,” April 2004, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/iran.html>. These projections indicate that, due to high energy prices stemming from global political instability, Iran has reaped an unexpected windfall measuring in the tens of billions of excess dollars from its foreign oil sales to date—dramatically increasing the funds available to the Iranian regime for defense procurement and WMD development, as well as insurgency operations in Iraq and support for terrorist groups abroad.

<sup>16</sup> Robin Wright, “Iran’s New Alliance with China Could Cost U.S. Leverage,” *Washington Post*, November 17, 2004, A21.

<sup>17</sup> Colin Freeman, “The Rise of Prof ‘Crocodile’ – a Hardliner to Terrify Hardliners,” *Telegraph* (London), November 20, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> “Iranian President Criticizes Past 16 Years of Détente With West,” *VOA News*, January 3, 2006, <http://www.voanews.com/english/2006-01-03-voa52.cfm>.

<sup>19</sup> “‘Final War’ Between Muslims, West – Ahmadinejad,” *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), January 21, 2006, [http://www.aljazeera.com/me.asp?service\\_ID=10517](http://www.aljazeera.com/me.asp?service_ID=10517).

<sup>20</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, 29.