



Strengthening America's Options on Iran

10 Key Questions to Inform the Debate

Rudy deLeon, Brian Katulis, and Peter Juul with Matt Duss and Ken Sofer April 2012

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

The United States has multiple options to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and it is essential that the American people participate in a full debate with complete confidence that the most difficult questions are being addressed by their leaders. This report outlines the key questions that should frame this debate.

Our nation is increasing and strengthening all of its options to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. With U.S. troops no longer deployed to Iraq, we now have more military options. Renewed American diplomacy has led to unprecedented economic pressure on Iran from a growing roster of nations.

While the window to block Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions is not unlimited, there is time for a disciplined approach. We have time because most estimates place Iran at a year away at minimum from producing a crude nuclear weapon—the capacity to produce the highly enriched uranium necessary for a bomb being the key factor in these calculations.

This crisis is driven by Iran's own failure to live up to its international responsibilities, and one Tehran could resolve if it opened facilities unconditionally to the representatives of the International Atomic Energy Agency and answered fully the agency's lingering questions about the military aspects of its nuclear programs. Since that is unlikely, the current U.S. strategy is pressing Iran to live up to its international responsibilities and come clean about all of its nuclear efforts by using all tools of American power at the right time. The United States has the strategic high ground and is taking advantage of this valuable position.

Finally, in our national debate over Iran's nuclear program, we must avoid presenting ourselves with the false choice of either bombing Iran now or an Iran getting a bomb. The reality is that the Obama administration's successful campaign to increase pressure on Iran on multiple fronts stands a good chance if its leaders realize the high costs of seeking nuclear weapons.

Indeed, amid an array of political transitions and military conflicts around the globe, the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons has galvanized a global debate on how to stop the regime in Tehran from getting the bomb. This debate has spilled over into the domestic politics of the world's great powers, becoming a talking point in the 2012 U.S. presidential election and the subject of behind-the-scenes discussion during China's transition to its next generation of political leadership at their Party Congress this fall. In the Middle East and Central Asia, Iran's nuclear program has implications for the ongoing civil war in Syria, a political transition beset by economic troubles in Egypt, and U.S. and NATO ground combat operations in Afghanistan entering their 10th year. Oil price surges worldwide threaten economic recoveries around the globe—recoveries Iran could thwart in a number of ways depending on how it reacts to global pressure to come clean on its nuclear program.

Events are quickly producing a decision point: A concerned Israel warns the diplomatic community that its window for military options to delay or deny Iran's potential weapon is not unlimited due to the progress Iran has made in hardening its nuclear facilities beyond Israeli capability to penetrate them. At the same time, a vigorous roster of nations is tightening the burden of economic sanctions against Iran—isolating the country's already feeble economy, which survives only because of its vast oil reserves. Iran—a longtime supporter of terrorism, both directly and through its proxies, with a track record of dissimulation on its nuclear ambitions—has no reservoir of credibility or good will, and its repeated professions that its nuclear program is peaceful deserve no benefit of the doubt.

Of course Iran could quickly defuse the crisis and allow the inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency full access to all facilities of interest so it can measure and catalogue Iran's capability to produce highly enriched uranium (the essential element required for weapons production), and Iran could come clean on its known nuclear weapons research. As IAEA Director General Yukio Amano affirms, Iran needs “to cooperate fully with the [International Atomic Energy] Agency on all outstanding issues, particularly those which give rise to concerns about the possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program, including by providing access without delay to all sites, equipment, persons and documents requested by the Agency.”²¹ It is Iran's lack of response that fuels concerns about their nuclear ambitions.

Importantly, there is a strong bipartisan consensus in America and within the international community on this single point—an Iranian nuclear weapon would destabilize the one of the world's most important oil-producing regions at a critical point

in the global economic recovery, would harm Israel's security, and would severely undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Unfortunately, much of the political debate in this U.S. election year now distracts from these central realities.

Today the United States is leading a successful three-year global effort to isolate Iran diplomatically and implement a broad range of strict economic sanctions targeted at undermining its nuclear program. The Obama administration's initial outreach to the Iranian regime in 2009 did not achieve immediate constructive results, but the demonstration of American good faith forged greater international unity around the problem and served as an important force multiplier for subsequent successful efforts to pressure the regime. Now, as talks with the P5+1 approach, Iran must choose how to respond to the growing global concerns about its nuclear program and make the choice to live up to its international obligations or face increased international isolation.

During the 2008 campaign, candidate Obama defended his proposed engagement policy by explaining that "we're [not] going to be able to execute the kind of sanctions we need without some cooperation with some countries like Russia and China that ... have extensive trade with Iran but potentially have an interest in making sure Iran doesn't have a nuclear weapon." Affirming his goal of "tough, direct diplomacy with Iran," Obama acknowledged that diplomacy "may not work, but if it doesn't work, then we have strengthened our ability to form alliances to impose tough sanctions."

Over the past three years, this is precisely what the Obama administration achieved. The engagement policy has served as an important force multiplier for efforts to pressure the Iranian government. By giving Iran repeated opportunities to meet its international responsibilities, this administration has been able to forge a far stronger and more enduring international coalition to pressure Iran. Far from strengthening the Iranian regime, as some critics have alleged, Obama's engagement effort has in fact further isolated it. The United States and its partners in the P5+1 group are operating from a position of strength that would have been hard to imagine four short years ago.

U.S. policy on Iran should not be determined by partisan politics and easy sound bites. Nor will U.S. policy objectives be quickly accomplished. Instead, this crisis requires policymakers and all citizens to challenge their own preconceived notions and make decisions based on facts while preparing fully for all contingencies.

Therefore as the Obama administration conducts its due diligence on its policy options for Iran, here are the 10 key factors the United States must consider:

- What are the best estimates on the transition time from research and development to weapons production in Iran's current nuclear program?
- What are the best estimates of Iran's efforts to transition its research and development program into a weapons program with a delivery system suitable for operational use?
- What are the current consequences of sanctions and other measures against Iran's nuclear program?
- What is the current impact of sanctions on Iran's economy?
- What capacity exists to boost oil deliveries to countries now dependent on Iranian oil in the event Iranian oil shipments are not available?
- What is the status of commercial and military access to international waters in the Strait of Hormuz?
- Does Israel have the military capacity to go it alone in any military action against Iran?
- What links already exist between Iran and Middle East terrorist groups, and how might these groups react to an Israeli attack on Iran?
- What might the negotiations between Iran and P5+ 1 countries (the United States, Russia, China, England, France, and Germany) produce?
- What additional diplomacy is required?

There are no simple answers to these questions, but there are facts and figures backed by sound analysis that point to conclusions that can help policymakers in Washington and around the world consider how far and how fast to push Iran on its nuclear program to achieve the ultimate goal—an Iran that is verifiably not seeking nuclear weapons.

Iran's known nuclear sites

Natanz: First publicly revealed in 2002 by the Mujahideen-e Khalq, an antiregime terrorist group, from intelligence believed to have been provided by Israel. Construction is believed to have begun in 2000. There are currently about 7,000 centrifuges installed at Natanz, with about 5,000 operating to produce low-enriched uranium.¹

Isfahan: Operational since 2004. This plant processes uranium ore concentrate, known as “yellowcake,” into uranium hexafluoride gas, which is then enriched in centrifuges at other sites. In November 2011 a mysterious explosion occurred in Isfahan. Iranian officials deny that the nuclear facility was damaged, but Israeli officials suggest otherwise.²

Ardakan: This plant processes the uranium ore mined at Saghand into uranium ore concentrate, known as “yellowcake.” It is not believed to be fully operational yet.³

Saghand mine: A domestic source of uranium ore but of very low grade, requiring extensive and expensive processing. If and when mining operations begin, annual estimated output is 50 tons of uranium ore.⁴

Bushehr: Begun by the shah of Iran in 1975 with German assistance to provide civilian electrical power. The project was revived in 1995 with Russian help. In September 2011 Bushehr became Iran's first nuclear reactor to come online.⁵

Arak: Heavy water research reactor. First publicly revealed in 2002 by the Mujahideen-e Khalq and commissioned in 2006.⁶

Fordow: Built inside a mountain near the seminary city of Qom, first revealed by the Iranians in September 2009 after they became aware of its detection by Western intelligence. In January 2012 Iran announced that it had begun to enrich uranium at Fordow.⁷

Tehran research reactor: A light water reactor given to Iran by the United States in 1967 as part of the “Atoms for Peace” program begun under former President Dwight D. Eisenhower. In the proposed 2009 fuel-swap deal between Iran and the so-called P5+1 countries—the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany—Iran would have sent out a portion of its low-enriched uranium in exchange for delivery of 20-percent enriched uranium to fuel this research reactor.⁸ The failure of that deal prompted Iran to announce that it would begin to enrich to 20 percent on its own.



Parchin: A site suspected of conducting experiments on nuclear weapons development. The International Atomic Energy Agency wants clarification of its operations and repeatedly requests access to the site, which Iran has continued to deny.

Endnotes

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10 key questions

1. What are the best estimates on the transition time from research and development in Iran’s current nuclear program to weapons production?

Iran could not produce a nuclear weapon before this time next year, assuming it faces none of the many foreseeable technical obstacles. There remains time for a disciplined approach. The most common estimates by U.S. and Israeli government officials, as well as outside groups such as the nonpartisan Institute for Science and International Security, are that Iran could develop a crude but workable nuclear explosive device within a year of deciding to do so.² Importantly, though, in recent congressional testimony Director of National Intelligence James Clapper indicated that this timeframe was “technically feasible but not likely” given the complexities involved in developing nuclear weapons and suitable delivery systems.³

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, by late 2009 Iran had acquired sufficient information to produce a nuclear explosive based on high-enriched uranium—uranium enriched to a greater than 20 percent concentration of the fissile U-235 isotope—although greater than 80 percent is generally considered necessary for a weapon.⁴ Citing this agency data, the Institute for Science and International Security estimates that Iran could produce enough highly enriched uranium for a single nuclear weapon in existing, safeguarded nuclear facilities within four months of deciding to do so.⁵ Given the International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards, such a breakout would be easily detected and would give the international community time to impose draconian sanctions, quarantine Iran using naval capability, or launch military strikes—and Iran would still need to design a nuclear warhead and a system capable of delivering it.

Further, Iran could acquire enough uranium enriched to 19.75 percent levels that could be further enriched to weapons-grade material by the end of 2012 or early 2013 if it produces the uranium at three times the current rate.⁶ The Institute for Science and International Security notes, however, that Iran is having great difficulty

acquiring the materials necessary to further advance its nuclear activities due to international sanctions, forcing the program to develop second-rate domestic substitutes that have the potential to slow the program even more. Despite these setbacks, the Institute for Science and International Security estimates that Iran's ability to break out and produce a nuclear weapon will increase in the coming years.

Other estimates such as the joint technical assessment by a U.S.-Russian team of scientists reached similar conclusions in early 2009, with the caveat that the year timeframe for a simple nuclear explosive would occur only "under the most favorable circumstances." This estimate was based not on the technical knowledge required to build a bomb but on the conversion of low-enriched uranium—uranium enriched to a less than 20 percent concentration of the U235 isotope—into highly enriched uranium and the subsequent conversion of that highly enriched uranium gas into metal necessary to build a bomb.

In fact, Russian team members concluded that more unfavorable circumstances would be more realistic, leading them to suggest a timeframe of two years to three years to build a simple nuclear bomb. The U.S.-Russian team estimated it would take Iran another 5 years after testing a bomb to develop a deliverable nuclear weapon.⁷ University of Southern California professor and nuclear proliferation expert Jacques Hymans concurs with the longer estimates of Iranian nuclear weapons capabilities given Iran's poor technical infrastructure and managerial incompetence. He argues that current estimates of two to three years are unrealistic.⁸

2. What are the best estimates of Iran's efforts to transition the R&D program into a weapons program with a delivery system suitable for operational use?

Iran needs at least one to two years to develop a warhead and delivery system suitable for operational use, according to estimates from the U.S. intelligence community, Israeli military intelligence, and outside groups such as the Institute for Science and International Security.⁹ Therefore if Iran made the decision today to acquire a functioning nuclear weapon, the soonest it could have a working delivery system is early 2014. While Iran's first nuclear weapons would likely be too large and heavy in design to be easily adapted as a missile payload, they could still pose a serious threat to U.S. forces, Israel, and other local countries if placed on an aircraft, ship, or ground vehicle. Indeed, the demonstration of nuclear capability alone would roil the Middle East and possibly provoke a regional nuclear arms race.

Iranian missile capabilities are generally estimated to lag behind its potential nuclear developments. Its most advanced missile—the solid-fuel Sejil-2—has yet to become operational and in any case is not believed to be a suitable nuclear delivery system unless used with a substantially smaller nuclear warhead than Iran is believed to be capable of producing.¹⁰ Experts from the U.S.-Russian joint technical assessment team and the International Institute for Strategic Studies believe that an Iranian intercontinental ballistic missile is not likely to be produced before the 2020s.¹¹

In addition, these team members concluded that existing Iranian missiles are generally not suitable for the delivery of first-generation nuclear weapons and would prove unwieldy if developed more.¹² Further efforts to either develop a new, suitable missile or a small-enough warhead for existing Iranian missiles will be required before Iran can field a viable nuclear delivery capability. These estimates are consistent with current NATO plans to construct theatre missile defenses based on the Aegis air defense system in Europe.

3. What are the current consequences of sanctions and other measures against the Iranian nuclear program?

International sanctions and other measures appear to be seriously hindering Iran's ability to advance its nuclear research, thus delaying Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions. In May 2011 a report by a special panel of U.N. experts stated that multilateral sanctions adopted under a June 2010 U.N. Security Council resolution were “constraining Iran's procurement of items related to prohibited nuclear and ballistic missile activity and thus slowing development of these programs.”¹³ The Institute for Science and International Security reports that international sanctions have slowed down Iran's nuclear program significantly—to the point where the organization believes Iran would have already produced nuclear weapons without sanctions and other measures against its nuclear effort.

Most importantly, sanctions—international, regional, and unilateral—make it more difficult for Iran to acquire the necessary resources from overseas to further its nuclear program. As the Institute for Science and International Security notes, Iran “is by no means self-sufficient in making all the goods it needs for its nuclear program or is it able to solve problems encountered in its deployment of nuclear technologies.”¹⁴

Indeed, Iran is dependent on imports to sustain its centrifuge enrichment program, relying on foreign suppliers for maraging steel—a specific type of steel

especially suitable for use in centrifuges—carbon fiber, vacuum pumps, and vacuum measuring equipment, all of which have been restricted by U.N. sanctions that have been enforced with unanimity and stringency. As a result, it is unclear whether Iran can actually acquire the materials necessary to build the centrifuges it desires at Natanz and Fordow. In the final analysis, the Institute for Science and International Security explains that sanctions “are forcing Iran to make less than desirable design choices and these choices further slow its progress and increase the technological risks that complicate any Iranian decision to dash to a bomb.”¹⁵

In addition, public reports indicate that the Stuxnet computer worm that struck Iran’s nuclear program in 2011 hampered its nuclear efforts by directly destroying 1,000 centrifuges and likely exacerbating existing regime paranoia over penetration of the program by foreign intelligence agencies. Further cyber warfare against Iran’s nuclear program could cause additional physical damage to Iran’s nuclear infrastructure in similar ways or could serve to gather more information about its capabilities and intentions. The fall 2011 discovery of the Duqu worm by computer security firm Symantec Corporation appears to indicate that further cyber attacks against Iran’s nuclear program are likely.

Moreover, the Institute for Science and International Security states that more traditional forms of sabotage and information gathering via penetration of Iranian smuggling networks by foreign intelligence agencies have also caused setbacks to Tehran’s nuclear efforts.¹⁶ Indeed, efforts to prevent Iran from smuggling components for its nuclear program have been ramped up: U.S. law enforcement officials are investigating 30 percent more cases this year than they were three years ago.¹⁷

Increased general international scrutiny of and pressure on Iran’s nuclear program may also be slowing its progress. The apparent success of foreign intelligence agencies in penetrating Iran’s nuclear program will likely increase the inherent suspicion of Iranian security services and could lead to actions intended to decrease the nuclear program’s vulnerability to foreign intelligence agencies. This would further slow the program’s progress.

More concretely, increased international scrutiny of Iran’s nuclear program forced several of its more troubling aspects underground and diverted Iranian resources to attempts to avoid the prying eyes of the international community. Despite its failure to come clean to the International Atomic Energy Agency on its past and possibly present nuclear weapons efforts, Iran’s 2003 decision to shut down its

unified weapons program after its clandestine nuclear facilities were discovered the previous year effectively fragmented its weapons efforts.

Even if Iran is continuing to work on various aspects of nuclear proliferation, the lack of a unified program probably makes progress toward a weapon more difficult by inhibiting information-sharing via compartmentalization and the excessive secrecy necessary to prevent discovery of patently illegal weapons work. In addition, the halt of Iran's nuclear weapons program has apparently demoralized top Iranian nuclear scientists, who, according to U.S. intelligence intercepts, continued to complain about the decision years after it was made.¹⁸

4. What is the current impact of sanctions on the Iranian economy?

International sanctions appear to be taking a major toll on Iran's economy. Specifically the sanctions are significantly harming the nation's critical oil industry and the country's access to much-needed trade financing and foreign investment. This in turn is putting the Iranian leadership under tremendous strain and could well influence its decision on whether to pursue nuclear weaponry.

Sanctions on the oil industry

Oil tankers are canceling trips to Iran and lowering oil shipments from Iran by 300,000 barrels to 400,000 barrels per day. According to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, Iran produced less oil in February 2012 than it has in any other month since September 2002.¹⁹ The EU oil embargo in particular prevents insurers from covering tankers carrying Iranian oil and has contributed strongly to the decrease in Iranian oil shipments.²⁰ The International Energy Agency estimates that the EU embargo would impact a greater proportion of Iran's oil production than total EU imports of Iranian oil.²¹

These effects, including recent decisions by Japan and South Korea to deeply cut Iranian oil imports, are being felt even before both the EU embargo and the latest round of U.S. sanctions are fully implemented. At the same time, high oil prices could make up for some of the losses inflicted by sanctions, though it is difficult to determine the exact tradeoff at this point. Anonymous U.S. officials have expressed concerns that Iran may be trying to create tension in order to drive up prices.²²

Sanctions on financial transactions

In November 2011 Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad admitted that earlier rounds of international sanctions were preventing Iranian banks from making transactions overseas.²³ The prospect of further sanctions caused a run on the Iranian currency,²⁴ causing it to lose half its value against the dollar from December 2011 to February 2012,²⁵ with inflation running at 20 percent or higher at the beginning of this year.²⁶ This caused the Iranian Central Bank to raise interest rates in an effort to head off further damage from the prospect of the implementation of new U.S. and EU sanctions.²⁷

Iran's central bank also was forced to recognize the market exchange rate for its currency—19,000 rials to the dollar rather than its official rate of 12,260 rials to the greenback—due to the lack of buyers for rials at the official rate.²⁸ What's more, recent sanctions have forced Iran to barter with other countries rather than risk the wrath of the United States or the European Union.²⁹ It should be noted that Turkey is now implementing the U.N. resolution, even though it voted against the sanctions, joining the United States and the European Union in the financial inspection regime.

The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication based in Belgium now blacklists Iranian financial institutions subject to European Union sanctions. The society serves as the primary international financial messaging and transaction service, and its move to comply with EU sanctions effectively cuts many Iranian banks, including the Central Bank of Iran, off from international financial markets. This cutoff was instituted on March 17, 2012, and has been characterized by the organization as “unprecedented.” As a result, Iranian banks will be unable to make large-scale financial transactions overseas, severely harming Iran's ability to receive revenues from oil exports.³⁰

On March 30, 2012, President Barack Obama made a formal determination that there was a sufficient global supply of oil to allow sanctions against Iran passed in December 2011 to go forward.³¹ This move comes after months of diplomacy to persuade countries such as Japan to significantly reduce their dependency on Iranian oil while convincing oil producers, including Saudi Arabia, to put more petroleum in the global market. These sanctions will effectively force countries to choose between buying Iranian oil or accessing the U.S. economy, though President Obama has issued waivers to several countries that have cut back their Iranian oil imports.³² Should economic or market conditions change, President Obama has the authority to waive these sanctions.

As a result, this dual set of sanctions on the oil industry and on Iranian financial transactions is now beginning to hit average Iranians as well. The price of staple foods has increased by 40 percent, the price of meat and milk has gone up by 50 percent, and government subsidies are being eaten away by inflation.³³ For an already unpopular regime, this is not good news for Iran's rulers. (see box)

A who's who of Iran

The 20 most important government (political and military) leaders and opposition leaders in Iran

Government leaders



Ali Khamenei: The supreme leader, the highest political and religious authority in the Islamic Republic of Iran. He succeeded Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 and has steadily worked since then to increase his office's power and marginalize all internal opposition.

Mojtaba Khamenei: The second son of the supreme leader. Mojtaba in 2009 took control of the Basij militia—a volunteer paramilitary wing of the Revolutionary Guards—and oversaw its crackdown on green movement protesters. Many believe he is being groomed to succeed his father as supreme leader.



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: The current president of Iran, first elected to the position in 2005. His controversial re-election in 2009, which many believe was fraudulent, led to massive street protests. His subsequent efforts to expand his own power resulted in a backlash from Khamenei and his supporters and a severe curtailment of his influence.

Mohammed-Taghi Mesbah Yazdi: A hardline cleric and former spiritual advisor to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Yazdi is leader of the ultraconservative faction in the parliament.

Mohammed-Javad Larijani: A top advisor and spokesman for the supreme leader. Larijani is often a spokesman for the regime to Western media.



Ali Larijani: Current chairman of the Iranian Parliament. The younger brother of Mohammed Javad, he is also the former secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf: The current mayor of Tehran. Ghalibaf is seen as a frontrunner to succeed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran.



Saeed Jalili: Currently the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, the equivalent of the U.S. national security council, as well as Iran's lead nuclear negotiator. Previously he served as Iran's deputy foreign minister for European and American Affairs.

Major General Mohammed Ali Jaafari: Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. Jaafari was appointed to the position by the supreme leader in September 2007.

Major General Qassem Soleimani: Commander of the Quds Force, a unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps tasked with managing Iran's relationships with extremist groups outside Iran. He has held the position since 2000 and is seen as a possible future commander of the Revolutionary Guards.

Continued on next page



Mohsen Rezaei: Currently the secretary of the Expediency Council, which manages disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council. Rezaei was formerly the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps commander. A 2009 presidential candidate, Rezaei initially complained about voting irregularities but later withdrew his complaint. He has been critical of the treatment of protesters detained during the 2009 demonstrations.



Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani: Served as president of Iran from 1989 to 1997. He was recently reappointed by Khamenei as chairman of the Expediency Council.



Ahmad Jannati: A hardline cleric and chairman of the Guardian Council, which approves all legislation and vets political candidates. Jannati has promoted loyalty to the supreme leader as a central qualification for running for office.



Ali Akbar Salehi: Iran's foreign minister since January 2011 and previously the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran. From 1997 to 2005 Salehi was the Iranian representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency.



Fereydoon Abbasi: The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, the government body that oversees Iran's nuclear industry. Abbasi is also serving as one of President Ahmadinejad's vice presidents.

Opposition



Mohammed Khatami: President of Iran from 1997 to 2005. One of Iran's most prominent reformers, Khatami is a persistent critic of President Ahmadinejad.



Mir Hossein Mousavi: Prime Minister of Iran from 1981 to 1989. In 2009 he was the reform candidate for president around whom the green movement coalesced. Considered one of the green movement's leading figures, he has been under house arrest since February 2011.



Mehdi Karroubi: Former chairman of the Association of Combatant Clerics, a political party, and a member of the Expediency Council. Karroubi ran for president in 2009. Similar to Mousavi he is considered a leading green movement figure and has been under house arrest since February 2011.

Nasrin Soutoudeh: Prominent lawyer who represented activists arrested during the 2009 election protests. Arrested in September 2010 she was sentenced in January 2011 to 11 years in prison. Numerous human rights organizations have continued to call for her release.



Shirin Ebadi: Lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize-winning human rights activist. Ebadi has lived in exile since traveling abroad during Iran's 2009 elections.

ALL PHOTOS: THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

5. What capacity exists to boost oil deliveries to countries now dependent upon Iranian supply in the event that Iranian oil shipments are not available?

U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu believes there is enough capacity in global oil markets to make up for reductions in Iranian exports,³⁴ despite the U.S. Department of Energy’s Energy Information Administration’s determination that spare oil production capacity “is currently quite modest relative to historical levels.”³⁵ The Energy Information Administration says that Libyan production capacity had not returned to prewar levels, and new capacity additions have not kept pace with demand. As a result, in January and February 2012, the world (excluding Iran) has consumed more petroleum than countries (again excluding Iran) have produced.

The International Energy Agency believes that despite producing oil at a higher rate than any other point in the past 30 years, Saudi Arabia still has 2 million barrels per day of spare capacity—well above the expected 500,000 barrel per day shortfall from Iran due to sanctions. Yet the International Energy Agency also expects the narrowing cushion against other shocks to increase the risk premium and thus the overall price for oil at the same time.³⁶ The Economist Intelligence Unit recently issued similar though slightly higher numbers for current Saudi spare capacity—about 2.5 million barrels per day.³⁷

Should Libyan production recover in the near term, further capacity would also be available to make up for lost Iranian supplies. In addition, the International Energy Agency estimates that Iraqi oil production can reasonably be expected to double by 2015. Steady increases in Iraqi production would also serve to offset losses of Iranian oil.³⁸

In its latest analysis, however, the International Energy Agency notes that spare oil production capacity has tightened, reaching a 30-year high—despite Saudi production levels and Libya returning to prewar production—due to unexpected supply disruptions in South Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and the North Sea. While the agency expects a “bumpy ride in the months ahead,” it predicts that production increases in Angola, Nigeria, Libya, and Iraq will later this year offset the current disruptions.³⁹

Should the Strait of Hormuz be closed by Iran, the ability of the major energy exporters in the Persian Gulf to offset Iranian oil lost to sanctions will be severely curtailed.

FIGURE 1
Market shock

Price of a barrel of crude oil in current US dollars from 1973 to present



Source: St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank

Iraq, whose projected increased production is critical to offsetting a loss of Iranian oil, has extremely limited options for alternative oil export routes. The closure of an internal north-south pipeline prevents Iraq from exporting fully via Turkey, while alternative pipelines to Saudi Arabia and Lebanon have been deactivated.⁴⁰

Saudi Arabia currently exports three-quarters of its oil from the Ras Tanura terminal in the Gulf, and one-quarter from the Yanbu terminal on the Red Sea. The Yanbu terminal has a maximum capacity of 4.5 million barrels per day, and the east-west pipeline from Saudi oil fields near the Gulf to Yanbu has a maximum capacity of 5 million barrels per day.⁴¹ Saudi Arabia exported 7.5 million barrels of oil per day in 2010, the latest year for which the Energy Information Administration gives data. That number is likely higher today due to increased

production to offset the impact of Iran sanctions. But Saudi oil exports would likely decrease dramatically in the event that Iran closes the Strait of Hormuz, something it has threatened in the past.

6. What is the status of commercial and military access to international waters in the Strait of Hormuz?

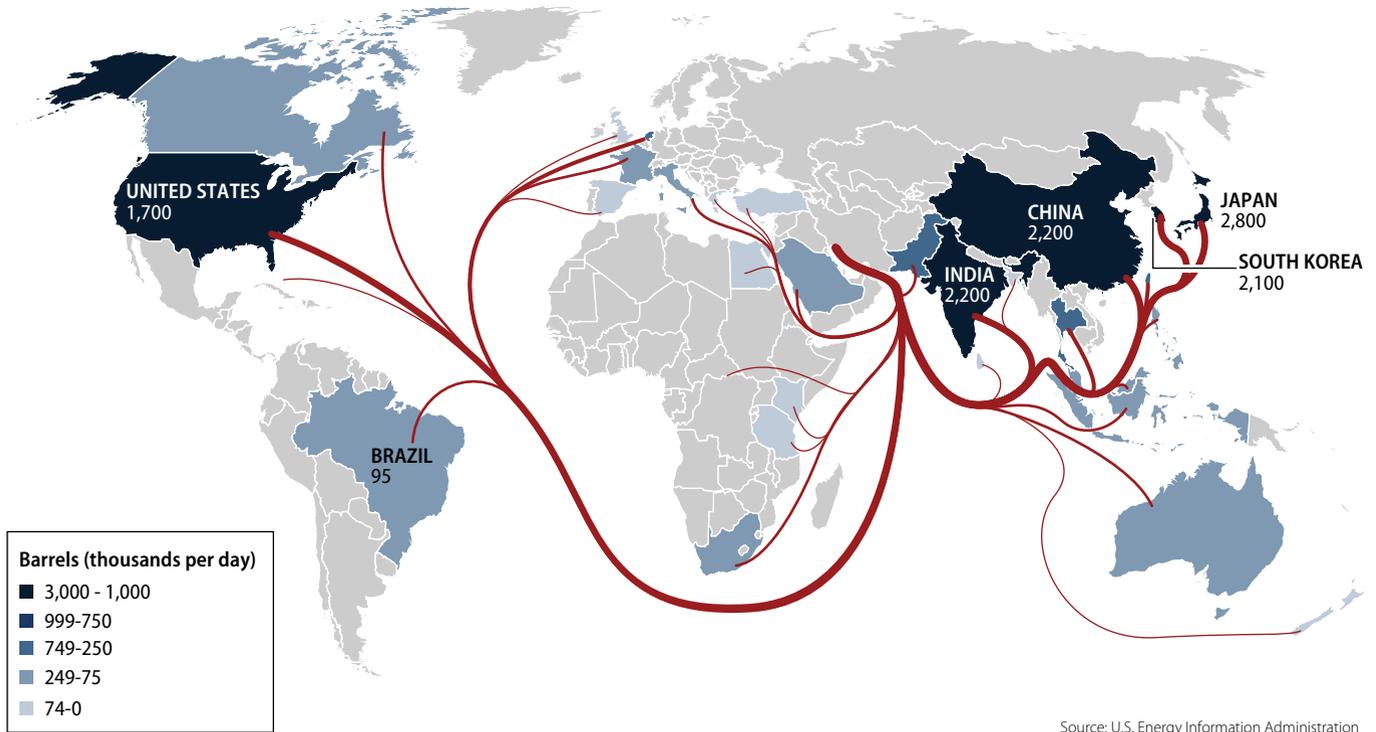
The Strait of Hormuz remains open to military and commercial traffic despite Iranian threats to close it by force. This waterway is a critical chokepoint for global energy supplies, with the Energy Information Administration estimating that 20 percent of all oil traded worldwide—almost 17 million barrels per day—flowed through the strait in 2011. More than 85 percent of oil exported through the strait is destined for Asian markets, with Japan, India, South Korea, and China being the largest buyers. In 2011 an average of 14 tankers filled with crude oil passed through the strait every day, with a similar number entering the Persian Gulf to take on oil. According to the Energy Information Administration, “closure of the Strait of Hormuz would require the use of longer alternate routes at increased transportation costs.”⁴²

A 2008 analysis published in *International Security* assessed that Iranian military ships and submarines could lay nearly 700 mines in the Strait of Hormuz without utilizing specialized mining vessels or helicopters, which would be more easily detected. Given the volume of shipping and space restrictions in the strait, the author estimates that this number would be sufficient to deter shipping and would close the strait. Projecting from U.S. mine clearance efforts against Iraq in 1991 and 2003, the analysis suggests that clearing the Strait of Hormuz of all Iranian mines with 15 mine countermeasure ships could take between 35.5 and 39 days if no Iranian opposition were encountered. Clearing a simple safe route through minefield could take between three and four days.

These figures are likely underestimates given the greater area and superior mines that would be involved in clearing the strait, as well as the prospect that clearing mines from the strait would involve an air campaign to neutralize Iranian antishipping and antiair capabilities near it.⁴³ Closing the strait also cuts off incoming shipping, and it would prevent Iranian oil from leaving the Persian Gulf.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Army General Martin Dempsey, acknowledges that Iran could “for a period of time” close the Strait of Hormuz

FIGURE 2
A critical chokepoint Crude oil flows from the Strait of Hormuz



but adds that the United States has the capabilities necessary to reopen it.⁴⁴ In the event that Iran attempted to forcibly close the strait, the United States could probably count on the support of Great Britain and France, whose ships accompanied the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln* when it transited the strait following recent Iranian threats against U.S. military ships using it.⁴⁵

7. Does Israel have the capability to “go it alone” in any military action against Iran?

Iran has four major nuclear facilities. There is a heavy water plant at Arak, a uranium conversion facility at Isfahan, and two enrichment plants at Natanz and Fordow. The enrichment facilities are hardened and require penetrating, “bunker-buster” precision-guided weapons to destroy them, with the Fordow facility believed to be susceptible only to the U.S. military’s 30,000-pound massive ordnance penetrator.⁴⁶ While a 2007 study in *International Security* concluded that Israel could probably attack the Arak, Isfahan, and Natanz facilities with existing capabilities and with some

degree of confidence in success, an attack against all four known Iranian nuclear facilities with any degree of confidence could prove to be an exceptional challenge.⁴⁷ Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak has gone so far as to say that Fordow's full operation would place Iran in a "zone of immunity" from an Israeli strike.

In addition, the Parchin facility, where the International Atomic Energy Agency believes Iran is working on nuclear weapons components, would likely not be struck.⁴⁸ Israel's limited aerial refueling capabilities would also limit the size of a potential strike package, though the key issue is Israel's lack of a weapon capable of doing sufficient damage to the Fordow facility—and a delivery system to carry such a weapon—to make a strike worthwhile. Were Israel to attack all facilities except Fordow or deliver an ineffective attack on Fordow, it is likely Iran could use Fordow to reconstitute its nuclear program.

8. What links already exist between Iran and Middle East terrorist groups, and how might they react to an Israeli or U.S. attack on Iran?

There are three Middle East terrorist groups that could react in a variety of ways to a strike on Iran: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories. Let's look at the ideological focus and offensive capabilities of each of them in turn.

Hezbollah

Iran considers Hezbollah an important strategic asset, and both sides benefit materially and politically from this relationship. Hezbollah Chief Hassan Nasrallah repeatedly pledges his organization's support for Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, most recently during the revolt against his rule in Syria at least in part due to Syria's role as a conduit for Iranian material support for his terrorist group.⁴⁹ At the same time, Nasrallah tells Hezbollah members that Iran will not ask the group to fight in the event Israel strikes Iran, but that he would not rule out retaliation on behalf of Tehran.⁵⁰ Ultimately, Nasrallah appears to be hedging as to what Hezbollah will or will not do in the event of a military strike against Iran's nuclear program.

One of Nasrallah's deputies warned that a war with Iran would "set the whole region alight," though this statement appeared to be more directed toward potential American involvement in a strike.⁵¹ Both Israel and Hezbollah probably realize,

The experts on Iran's nuclear timetable

A range of technical experts believes that despite its progress, Iran remains far enough away from a nuclear weapon to give sanctions and diplomacy an opportunity to persuade Tehran to live up to its international obligations. Here are their views in their own words:

U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (January 29, 2012—"60 Minutes" interview): "The consensus is that, if they decided to do it, it would probably take them about a year to be able to produce a bomb and then possibly another one to two years in order to put it on a deliverable vehicle of some sort in order to deliver that weapon."¹

U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper (February 16, 2012—congressional testimony): "No, sir, I do not disagree [with Secretary Panetta's assessment], and particularly with respect to the year, that is, I think, technically feasible but practically not likely. There are all kinds of combinations and permutations that could affect how long it might take should the Iranians make a decision to pursue a nuclear weapon, how long that might take."²

Major General Aviv Kochavi, director of Israeli military intelligence (February 2, 2012—Herzliya conference speech): "If Khamenei issues a command to achieve a first nuclear explosive device, we estimate it would take another year before that's achieved. ... if he asks to translate that ability to obtain a nuclear warhead that would take another year or two."³

Former senior American intelligence official (March 17, 2012—New York Times article source): "Mossad does not disagree with the U.S. on the [Iranian nuclear] weapons program. There is not a lot of dispute between the U.S. and Israeli intelligence communities on the facts."⁴

International Atomic Energy Agency

According to his February 24, 2012, report to the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors and the U.N. Security Council on the implementation of its safeguards agreement with Iran,⁵ IAEA Director General Yukio Amano states that Iran has:

- "declared to the Agency 15 nuclear facilities and nine locations outside facilities where nuclear material is customarily used."
- "54 [enrichment centrifuge] cascades installed in three of the eight units in Production Hall A [at the Natanz enrichment facility], 52 of which were declared by Iran as being fed with UF₆ [uranium hexafluoride, the uranium gas used in enrichment]. Whereas initially each installed cascade comprised 164 centrifuges, Iran subsequently modified 30 of the cascades to contain 174 centrifuges each.

All the centrifuges installed are IR-1 machines. As of 19 February 2012, no centrifuges had been installed in the remaining five units, although preparatory installation work had been completed in two of the units, including the placement in position of 6,177 empty IR-1 centrifuge casings, and was ongoing in the other three units."

- As of late February 2012, Iran therefore had 8,828 centrifuges enriching uranium at Natanz.
- "The Agency has confirmed that, as of 16 October 2011, 55,683 kg of natural UF₆ had been fed into the cascades since the start of operations in February 2007, and a total of 4,871 kg of UF₆ enriched up to 5% U-235 had been produced [at Natanz]. Iran has estimated that, between 17 October 2011 and 4 February 2012, it produced 580 kg of UF₆ enriched up to 5% U-235, which would result in a total production of 5,451 kg of UF₆ enriched up to 5% U-235 since production began in February 2007. The nuclear material at FEP (including the feed, product and tails), as well as all installed cascades and the feed and withdrawal stations, are subject to Agency containment and surveillance."
- "Since 13 July 2010, Iran has been feeding low enriched UF₆ into two interconnected cascades (Cascades 1 and 6), each of which consists of 164 IR-1 centrifuges."
- "As previously reported, the Agency has verified that, as of 13 September 2011, 720.8 kg of low enriched UF₆ had been fed into the cascades in the production area since the process began on 9 February 2010, and that a total of 73.7 kg of UF₆ enriched up to 20% U-235 had been produced. Iran has estimated that, between 14 September 2011 and 11 February 2012, a total of 164.9 kg of UF₆ enriched at FEP was fed into the two interconnected cascades at PFEP and that approximately 21.7 kg of UF₆ enriched up to 20% U-235 were produced. This would result in a total production of 95.4 kg of UF₆ enriched up to 20% U-235 at [the Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant at Natanz] since production began in February 2010."
- "On 14 December 2011, Iran began feeding UF₆ enriched up to 5% U-235 that it had previously transferred from [Natanz] into one set of two interconnected cascades in Unit 2 at [the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant at Qom], containing 348 centrifuges. Since the Director General's previous report, Iran has installed 348 centrifuges in a second set of two interconnected cascades in Unit 2 and, on 25 January 2012, began feeding it with UF₆ enriched up to 5% U-235. To date, all the centrifuges installed are IR-1 machines. Iran has estimated that, between 14 December 2011 and 17 February 2012, a total of 99.3 kg of UF₆ enriched up to 5% U-235 was fed into the

two sets of interconnected cascades at FFEP and that approximately 13.8 kg of UF₆ enriched up to 20% U-235 were produced.”

- “As of 15 February 2012, in the four remaining cascades of Unit 2 and in the eight cascades of Unit 1, 2088 empty IR-1 centrifuge casings had been placed in position [at Fordow] and all of the piping had been installed.”

According to IAEA figures, Iran has 9,688 operational IR-1 centrifuges enriching uranium at two main enrichment facilities. Of these, 860 are enriching uranium to a 20 percent concentration of U-235, 696 of which are at Fordow. An additional 8,265 centrifuge casings have been installed at the Fordow and Natanz facilities. Iran has produced a total of 5,451 kilograms of low-enriched uranium with a 5 percent concentration of U-235 and 109.2 kilograms of 20 percent U-235.

Institute for Science and International Security

According to its March 5, 2012, report, titled “Preventing Iran From Getting Nuclear Weapons,”⁶ the nonpartisan Institute for Science and International Security states that Iran has the following capabilities and potentialities:

- “Iran’s essential challenge remains developing a secure capability to make enough weapon-grade uranium, likely for at least several nuclear weapons.”
- “Iran is now capable of using the [Natanz enrichment facility] to conduct a dash to the bomb using safeguarded low enriched uranium (LEU) to produce weapon-grade uranium. Iran is producing 3.5 percent LEU hexafluoride at a rate of about 150-170 kilograms per month and has produced about 5.5 tonnes of 3.5 percent LEU hexafluoride, enough to make over four nuclear weapons if further enriched to weapon-grade.”
- “It has recently started making 19.75 percent LEU at the Fordow plant, at a rate of more than double the rate of [19.75 percent LEU] production at [Natanz].”
- “The net amount of 19.75 percent LEU hexafluoride [Iran has produced according to the IAEA] is still far short of enough for a nuclear weapon, if further enriched to weapon-grade, but the existing 19.75 percent LEU would allow for a quicker dash. Its efforts to test two production-scale cascades at [Natanz] have gone slower than expected.”

- “Based on ISIS’s most recent calculations, reflecting reduced performance of the centrifuges in the FEP [at Natanz] over the last year, but more enriching centrifuges, Iran would need about four months to produce enough weapon-grade uranium for just one bomb.”
- “Ten years after construction started at Natanz, Iran has installed fewer than 20 percent of the 50,000 centrifuges planned for this facility, and the bulk of these machines continue to operate poorly.”
- “In 2011, its centrifuges at the [Natanz] FEP performed worse than during the previous year. While Iran managed to increase its monthly output of low-enriched uranium during this time, the number of centrifuges needed to produce this product increased disproportionately compared to the previous year.”
- “As a result [of sanctions], Iran has faced a shortage of the raw materials it needs to build significantly more of its current generation of IR-1 centrifuges at its enrichment sites ... Outer [centrifuge] casings are relatively easy to manufacture and installation is just a matter of bolting them to the floor, explaining how Iran could have installed such a quantity within a few weeks. But their installation normally would imply that Iran is getting ready to install the sensitive and difficult to make rotor assemblies. One of the key raw materials in short supply for the IR-1 centrifuge is maraging steel (grade 300). It is used to make the sensitive, thin-walled bellows, three of which are used in each rotor assembly. The current question is whether Iran can actually build over 8,000 more rotor assemblies.”
- “Increasingly, Iran’s enrichment program appears to be geared toward making 19.75 percent LEU as opposed to just stockpiling 3.5 percent LEU. If this is the case, most of its total monthly 3.5 percent LEU production at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant would be turned into 19.75 percent LEU, producing about 15 kilograms of 19.75 percent LEU hexafluoride per month.”
- “At a three-fold rate of production, Iran could produce enough 19.75 percent LEU for a nuclear weapon by late 2012 but more likely by early 2013.”
 - This statement implies that Iran would require about 500 kilograms of 19.75 percent LEU to produce one nuclear weapon—9 months of production (March to December 2012) of 19.75 percent LEU at a rate of 45 kilograms per month (three-times the current ISIS estimated rate of 15 kilograms a month) plus the 109.2 kilograms of 19.75 percent LEU that Iran has already produced.

Continued on next page

- “[U]sing about 2,700 IR-1 centrifuges and starting with 19.75 percent LEU, breakout times to produce weapon-grade uranium in IR-1 centrifuges would be about three months.”

According to ISIS, Iran has produced enough low enriched uranium to make at least four nuclear weapons with further enrichment. If Iran were to make a dash for a bomb, however, it would take four months of enrichment at its main facility at Natanz to produce enough high enriched uranium for one nuclear weapon. The amount of 19.75 percent low enriched uranium Iran has produced thus far remains well below the amount needed for further enrichment to a nuclear bomb. If Iran increased its production of 19.75 percent low enriched uranium by a factor of three, it could have enough to produce a weapon by late 2012 or early 2013. Should Iran acquire sufficient 19.75 percent low enriched uranium, it would then take three months to produce a weapon, assuming 2,700 current Iranian centrifuges configured to enrich to weapons-grade levels.

Joint Technical Assessment report

A 2009 assessment of Iran’s nuclear and missile programs by a team of Russian and American scientists—known as the Joint Technical Assessment team—concluded the following about Iran’s nuclear program:⁷

- “If Iran were to decide to convert its LEU into HEU, how long would it take to produce a nuclear device? The answer depends on several factors, among them: the speed with which the Iranians could convert their centrifuge configuration to the production of HEU; the speed with which they could then convert the highly-enriched uranium hexafluoride into metal; and their possession of — and confidence in — a workable design for a nuclear device. Under the most favorable circumstances, it might take Iran one year from the date of deciding to do so to make a simple nuclear device: three to six months to convert the LEU into HEU and perhaps another six months to convert the HEU into uranium metal. If the circumstances are not so favorable — if Iran encounters difficulties in perfecting these processes — it could take two or three years to produce a simple device. The Russian members of this JTA group have concluded that this is a more realistic estimate than one year.”
- The lower end of the low enriched uranium to high enriched uranium conversion process—three to four months—remains consistent with ISIS estimates of the time needed for an Iranian crash program to produce enough HEU for a bomb.

- “It could take Iran perhaps five years — and additional nuclear tests — to move from the first test of a simple nuclear device to the development of a nuclear bomb or warhead with a yield of several tens of kilotons capable of being fitted onto existing and future Iranian ballistic missiles. Such a warhead would most likely weigh more than 1,000 kg, unless substantial help were obtained from abroad in the design and development of the warhead. The technological challenges lie not only in the design of the nuclear charge, but in the design and engineering of the warhead as well.”
- “Unless Iran has an enrichment program separate from the one being monitored by the IAEA, there would be warning that Iran intended to make nuclear weapons. It would have to end IAEA containment and surveillance of the nuclear material and all installed cascades at the Fuel Enrichment Plant. (The same would apply to the heavy water reactor when it comes into operation.)”

Professor Jacques Hymans

Jacques Hymans, associate professor of international relations at the University of Southern California and author of *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (2006) and *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians, and Proliferation* (2012), said this in a January 17, 2012, article in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*:⁸

- “It is one thing for Iran to want nuclear weapons; it is an entirely different matter for it to actually build them. Even taking the darkest possible view of Iranian nuclear intentions, the historical record provides ample reason to doubt that Iran is on the verge of entering the nuclear weapons club.”
- “This is not to deny that the Iranian regime has made some progress toward the bomb during its quarter-century of intensive nuclear efforts. Most notably, Iran has accumulated a decent amount of low-enriched uranium, enriched to about 3 percent, and a small amount enriched to around 20 percent. The country has recently embarked on a major campaign to build up its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium, and once this is accomplished, Iran will be well-positioned to amass a significant quantity of bomb-grade, 90 percent enriched uranium. Bottom line: Today, Iran is about halfway to its putative goal; not many countries have been able to make it even this far.”

- “That being said, however, it is crucial to recognize that the quality of Iran’s nuclear workmanship has been consistently poor, so it has been able to progress at no more than a snail’s pace ... Is it really reasonable to expect such low-quality, brittle technical infrastructure to create a single, Hiroshima-size nuclear device -- let alone a bona fide nuclear weapons arsenal?”
- “But even though Iran’s claims that it is open and honest with international nuclear inspectors are unbelievable, that does not mean it is hiding a sophisticated weapons program. In fact, the record shows that Iran’s distinct tendency is to exaggerate its nuclear accomplishments. The typical Iranian pattern has been to hold a grand celebration to announce a big technological breakthrough, and then to spend many subsequent years trying to live up to their own hype ... This is not the kind of regime that can be expected to keep quiet about the successful production of highly enriched uranium.”
- “The problem with the virtual nuclear weapon state designation is that there is a major difference between a stockpile of fissile material and an actual, reliable, deliverable nuclear weapon.”
- “Historically, the key driver of an efficient nuclear weapons project has not been a country’s funding levels, political will, or access to hardware. Rather, the key has been managerial competence. Nuclear weapons projects require a hands-off, facilitative management approach, one that permits scientific and technical professionals to exercise their vocation. But states such as Iran tend to feature a highly invasive, authoritarian management approach that smothers scientific and technical professionalism.”

Endnotes

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- 6 David Albright and others, “Preventing Iran From Getting Nuclear Weapons: Constraining Its Future Options” (Washington: Institute for Science and International Security, 2012), available at http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/USIP_Template_5March2012-1.pdf.
- 7 East-West Institute, “Iran’s Nuclear and Missile Potential: A Joint Threat Assessment by U.S. and Russian Technical Experts” (2009), available at <http://docs.ewi.info/JTA.pdf>.
- 8 Jacques E.C. Hymans, “Crying Wolf About an Iranian Nuclear Bomb,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (2012), available at <http://thebulletin.org/web-edition/op-eds/crying-wolf-about-iranian-nuclear-bomb>.

however, that any future conflict would inflict much greater damage to both sides than did the 2006 war, making a reprise an unattractive proposition. Nonetheless, it is entirely unclear what Hezbollah would choose to do with its massive missile arsenal in the event of an Israeli or American strike on Iran's nuclear program.

In addition, Lieutenant General Ronald Burgess, head of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, testified recently that the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps's elite Quds Force operates training camps in Lebanon,⁵² while the Quds Force commander claims southern Lebanon is effectively under Iranian control.⁵³ The presence of Iranian forces on the ground in Lebanon would probably increase the likelihood that Hezbollah (or at least some elements of it) would strike Israel in response to a military strike against Iran.

Finally, there remains the possibility that Hezbollah may retaliate indirectly against American, Israeli, or Jewish targets outside the immediate region after a strike on Iran, possibly in cooperation with the Quds Force. Hezbollah has a track record of indirect terrorist retaliation, and it has been accused of collaborating with the Quds Force in a recent string of plots and attacks against Israeli diplomats in central and south Asia.⁵⁴ American personnel and facilities overseas may also be at risk following an Israeli or U.S. military strike on Iran.

In short, the possibility of indirect retaliation by Hezbollah following a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities should not be ruled out.

Hamas

Relations between Hamas and Iran have become strained over multiple issues such as the civil war in Syria and a possible Israeli strike against Iran. Hamas officials also are giving conflicting statements in regard to their role in an Iran-Israel war. Hamas's Gaza leadership initially said it would stay out of any conflict between Israel and Iran unless directly attacked and denied it was part of a political alliance with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.⁵⁵ On a later visit to Tehran, however, Hamas Official Mahmoud Zahar stated that, "Retaliation with utmost power is the position of Hamas with regard to a Zionist war on Iran."⁵⁶

Nonetheless, it appears Iran's ties to Hamas are under severe pressure and fraying over their differing positions on Syria—to the point that neither considers the other a reliable partner at the moment. Hamas's external political leadership has

decamped from Syria and broken with the Assad regime over its crackdown on opposition forces. One political leader said the Iranians were “not happy” with Hamas’s position on Syria.⁵⁷

Hamas has not attacked American targets and—given its deteriorating relationship with Tehran—is unlikely to jeopardize itself by starting to do so in the wake of an American or Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear program. While the terrorist group proclaims its intention to stay out of a prospective Israeli-Iranian conflict, it may find circumstances too tempting to avoid advancing its own agenda through violence if an unrelated war breaks out.

Hamas’s relative silence during Israel’s 2006 war with Hezbollah, however, suggests that circumstances would need to be extremely propitious for it to risk its own position by engaging in an attack on Israel.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Palestinian Islamic Jihad is characterized as “the smallest but most violent Palestinian group”⁵⁸ and has the closest ties to Iran of any significant Palestinian militant organization. According to the U.S. Department of State’s latest global terrorism report, “Although U.S. citizens have died in PIJ attacks, the group has not directly targeted U.S. interests.”⁵⁹ While the terrorist group continues to plan large-scale suicide attacks, it more commonly fires rockets and mortars into Israel from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad has a contentious relationship with Hamas, firing rockets into Israel and provoking Israeli retaliation despite Hamas’s desire to maintain a ceasefire.⁶⁰ The small terrorist group probably lacks the capacity to attack U.S. interests outside the Gaza Strip but would likely use an American or Israeli strike against Iran as an excuse to launch rockets against Israel and challenge the authority of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Depending on Israeli calculations and the success of the Iron Dome antirocket system, Palestinian Islamic Jihad may be able to draw Israel and Hamas into another conflict in the Gaza Strip in the wake of an American or Israeli attack on Iran.

9. What might the negotiations between Iran and the United States, Russia, China, Great Britain, France, and Germany produce?

The best-case scenario for the next round of talks with Iran scheduled for Istanbul is the start of a diplomatic process in which Iran signals that it is ready to take serious steps toward living up to its international responsibilities and offer complete transparency about its nuclear research. If successful, the next round of talks between the P5+1 countries (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) and Iran would likely produce an initial step requiring mutual actions by both sides.

The worst-case scenario would be Iran refusing to cooperate and using the talks to voice its own conditions, as it did in the 2011 P5+1 talks in Istanbul. At that time, Iran called for its right to enrichment to be endorsed without conditions and demanded all sanctions be lifted. Continued grandstanding by Iran this year would lead to a complete breakdown of the talks, which would further escalate the discussions about possible military actions.

P5+1 negotiations are not likely to produce an immediate major breakthrough resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. At best they will start a process aimed at bringing Iran's nuclear research into complete review and inspection over time. If diplomacy proceeds, one main challenge will be to ensure that Iran is not simply using diplomacy to buy more time to advance its nuclear research toward producing a nuclear weapon. Iran is currently enriching uranium to 20 percent, below weapons-grade levels but above what is needed to generate power.

One possible immediate deal would be a pledge by the P5+1 to refrain from imposing further sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program in exchange for some concrete step by Iran such as suspending enrichment of its low-enrichment uranium to 20 percent levels or greater openness on what the International Atomic Energy Agency characterizes as "possible military dimensions" to Iran's nuclear program. The P5+1 nations have already demanded that Iran provide the agency access to the Parchin facility,⁶¹ but given agency suspicions that Iran is working on nuclear weapons components at Parchin and recent concerns that Iran is "scrubbing" the facility to remove traces of nuclear weapons work,⁶² it is unlikely that access to Parchin would be sufficient to obtain a "no further sanctions" pledge from the P5+1 group. Some confidence-building measures would include Iran agreeing to more open inspections by the agency than it currently does.

Longer term, Iran would have to agree to some sort of fuel swap arrangement that would ship enough of its stockpiles out of the country to prevent it from producing a nuclear weapon. This deal might include Iran receiving the fuel it needs for a peaceful nuclear program. In October 2009 Iran agreed to a fuel-swap deal in the P5+1 talks in Geneva, Switzerland, but it reneged on the deal a few weeks later.

Given Iran's poor record on living up to its responsibilities and engaging in serious diplomacy, U.S. and European diplomats have lowered expectations for the next round of talks. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear that the United States is entering the next round of discussions with a "sober perspective" about Iran's intentions, and that it was up to Iran to make the right choice.⁶³ French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe has already expressed skepticism that Iran will be willing to negotiate, while European foreign ministers made clear their desire to focus on the nuclear issue and not allow Iran to play for time.⁶⁴

EU High Representative Catherine Ashton stated in her letter to Iranian negotiator Saeed Jalili that the P5+1 nations would focus on "building confidence by developing concrete and practical steps" in talks. The P5+1 approach would be based on "reciprocity and a step-by-step approach based on practical and specific suggestions."⁶⁵

10. What additional diplomacy is required to avoid war?

Robust international diplomacy is essential on several fronts—and it must be central to the strategy before any possible military action against Iran. According to the Institute for Science and International Security, any Iranian decision to dash for a bomb in the near future will give an at least four-month heads-up to the United States and the international community to determine how to deal with an obvious Iranian violation of its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations. The fact that the International Atomic Energy Agency is on the ground and its safeguards would need to be purposefully violated for Iran to dash to the bomb in clear contravention of Tehran's international obligations lends credibility to the case for swift and crippling sanctions.

This timeframe gives the United States opportunity to make a strong argument for draconian actions against Iran and a clear deadline for the use of force. As the Institute for Science and International Security also notes, however, the further Iran progresses in its nuclear program, the smaller this diplomatic window will become.

Russia and China are obvious nations for additional diplomatic efforts due to their status as permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, where any debate about holding Iran to its nuclear obligations will take place. Incoming Russian President Vladimir Putin has already signaled strong opposition to an Israeli strike, calling it “catastrophic.”⁶⁶ Further, Russia appears more willing to take Iranian statements about its nuclear program at face value than other members of the P5+1 group.⁶⁷

Moscow’s proclivities against the use of force—displayed in its self-serving and after-the-fact rhetoric on the NATO intervention in Libya and in its vetoes of mild U.N. resolutions aiming to end the bloodshed in Syria—will necessitate an intense diplomatic effort to first convince Russia that Iran is not serious in resolving international concerns about its nuclear program and then that military force is the only tool left in the international community’s toolbox. An obvious Iranian attempt to flout their international obligations would undoubtedly be of assistance to U.S. diplomats in this regard.

In the absence of such a provocation, the United States will have to walk a delicate line between keeping the option of force open (both to reassure Israel and make sure Iran knows the possible ultimate consequences of continued progress in its nuclear program without international confidence in its peaceful purpose) and impressing upon Russia the dangers of Iran having nuclear weapons capabilities in violation of its international treaty commitments. Right now, Moscow appears to be more concerned about a potential Israeli or American military strike than it is about Iran’s irresponsible nuclear program. Reframing the issue so that Russia cannot get away with citing Iranian doubletalk will be critical, but emphasizing the possibility of conflict will probably backfire and cause Moscow to dig in its heels and oppose any action.

Russia's complex dealings with Iran and the West

Balancing its own interests with those of the world will be increasingly difficult

As Russia navigates its relationship with Iran, Moscow is forced to balance a complex series of interests and objectives that are often at odds with each other. Iran's geographical proximity to Russia as well as economic opportunities for Russian exports gives Moscow ample reason to seek amicable relations with whoever rules Tehran. At the same time, the security concerns of other nations—the United States, Israel, and European and Arab Persian Gulf states, all of which feel threatened by Iran's nuclear program, support of terrorism, and revisionist foreign policy—force Moscow to conduct more difficult calculations about its relationship with Tehran than a simple consideration of Russia's own security and economic interests.

Russia's Iran policy has thus become a factor in Russia's broader web of relationships with other great powers. This means Moscow faces a difficult problem of advancing its own interests in Iran while managing relations with other important international actors over international attempts to stop Iran from reaching nuclear-weapons capability.

In short, it is difficult to characterize Russia's multifaceted relationship with Iran in one word or phrase. So let's walk through the history of this relationship with Iran before presenting the analytical case for why Russia's balancing act is nearing the end of the road due to Iran's nuclear program.

History

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's relations with Iran have been an attempt to balance its own economic and security interests in Iran with overall relations with a United States concerned about Tehran's foreign policy and nuclear program. The 1990s became "the friendliest decade ever in Russian-Iranian relations," according to Iran-Russia relations expert Mark Katz—a decade in which Russia cooperated with Iran on security problems in Central Asia, sold weapons to Tehran, and agreed to finish the Bushehr nuclear power plant.¹ When the United States raised concerns over its military deliveries, Russia attempted to alleviate American anxiety by promising to halt arms sales to Iran by the end of the decade.²

Over the past decade, however, Russia has increasingly had to balance its apparent desire for greater influence and stronger relations with Iran with its more critical relations with countries, including the United States and key EU states such as France, Germany, and Great Britain, all of which have security concerns over Iran's nuclear program. Moscow has attempted to alleviate the tension between the imperative of working relations with the United States and Europe and furthering its influ-

ence in Iran by crafting a series of proposals with Russia itself serving as an intermediary between Tehran and the concerned states.

In 2005 Russia and Iran signed an agreement for Russia to supply nuclear fuel for the Bushehr reactor and for Iran to return spent fuel to Russia, a deal that received the tacit support of the United States.³ Former President George W. Bush later used the Bushehr deal to argue that Iran has no need to enrich its own uranium,⁴ and that Moscow itself attempted to use the agreement to force Iran to halt enrichment.⁵ In the same timeframe Russia repeatedly floated potential agreements to enrich Iranian uranium in Russia, only to be rebuffed by Tehran as in the joint U.S.-Russia-France Tehran Research Reactor proposal in 2009.⁶

Since 2010 when Moscow agreed to support a new round of U.N. sanctions and canceled the sale of advanced S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Iran,⁷ Russia has appeared to revert to its previous approach on Iran's nuclear program, as domestic pressure for unilateral American sanctions increased. It has offered compromises in an attempt to resolve the problem while seeking to avoid stronger measures intended to induce Iranian compliance with its international obligations.

Most recently, in July 2011 Moscow floated a "step-by-step" proposal of reciprocal actions by Iran and the P5+1 nations—the five permanent U.N. Security Council members and Germany—that failed to generate positive responses from either Iran or the United States.⁸ In November 2011 Russia adamantly opposed U.S. and European efforts to place another set of U.N. sanctions on Iran, claiming the sanctions were "an instrument of regime change."⁹

As tension has mounted in recent months over Iran's nuclear program, Russian leaders and officials have escalated their opposition to further action against Iran at the same time they have worked with other P5+1 members to resume talks with Tehran. Incoming President Vladimir Putin has claimed the United States and European Union seek regime change in Iran. Similar to other world leaders, however, Putin has worried publicly about the consequences of a potential military strike on Iran's nuclear program and characterized these consequences as "truly catastrophic" and "impossible to imagine their real scale."¹⁰ Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov disapproved of unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States, European Union, and others. He argued that the NATO-facilitated overthrow of Libyan dictator Moammar Qaddafi,

Continued on next page

who had given up his embryonic nuclear program, “gives certain countries grounds to think about running their own nuclear program.”¹¹ Finally, Russia continues to hope its step-by-step proposal for resolving the issue will be accepted by Iran and the United States and the European Union in forthcoming talks.¹²

Analysis

Russia’s Iran policy is the result of Moscow’s attempt to weld a set of diverse and divergent global and regional interests into a coherent approach to a major international problem. First and foremost, it seeks security and stability in the post-Soviet states on its southern border—goals that would be severely jeopardized by a military strike on Iran’s nuclear program or an Iranian nuclear weapon. Russia has legitimate worries that the unpredictable consequences of a military strike against Iran could spill over into the post-Soviet states to its south.

At the same time, a nuclear-armed Iran would also threaten to reduce Russian influence while increasing Tehran’s in those same post-Soviet states and could create another security challenge for Moscow.¹³ While Russia does not welcome the prospect of a nuclear Iran, it does not appear to share the threat analysis of the United States, Israel, or Europe when it comes to an Iranian bomb. The challenge for Moscow is to alleviate American, Israeli, European, and Arab security concerns over Iran’s nuclear program while avoiding a potential military strike against Iran driven by these concerns that Russia believes would be disastrous.

Russia also wishes to preserve and possibly expand its economic interests to the extent possible in Iran. Despite the prospect of new, hard-hitting sanctions against Iran’s financial sector from the United States, Russian energy company OAO Tatneft signed a \$1 billion oil field development deal with Iran in December 2011.¹⁴ Russia also profited substantially from its role in building the Bushehr reactor, netting \$1 billion for the project.¹⁵ But Russia also has shown willingness, however limited, to subordinate its economic interests to international concerns over Iran’s nuclear program: Moscow conditioned its participation in Bushehr on Iran returning spent fuel to Russia and supported U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929, which effectively banned sales of heavy weapons to Iran and canceled a major sale. Economic interests are therefore a major consideration in Russia’s Iran policy, but it has proven willing to abjure them to achieve goals deemed more important in certain circumstances.

Russian policy toward Iran also takes into account broader trends such as relations with the United States and Russia’s views on evolving international norms. Overall, Moscow’s cooperation with the United States on Iran’s nuclear program tends to improve and deteriorate along with the overall state of bilateral relations. When

relations have been relatively good, as they were in 2009 and 2010, Russia has signed up for expanded international sanctions in the U.N. Security Council and canceled arms sales to Iran. Moscow’s support for such sanctions has been grudging at best and it has announced major arms sales when ties have frayed.

Yet good relations have not prevented Russia from attempting to water down sanctions or from opposing unilateral ones. Bad relations have also not stopped Moscow from attempting to mediate a solution that enhances its own status with both the United States and Iran.

Russia’s position vis-à-vis the United States and Iran is also influenced by Moscow’s take on the international environment. In the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and again following the NATO-facilitated overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, Moscow has viewed American moves toward harsher actions against Iran over its nuclear program as a pretext for regime change. As its after-the-fact rhetoric regarding Libya and its shielding of the Assad regime in Syria appears to indicate, Russia views the emergence of the “responsibility to protect”¹⁶ doctrine and other norms and actions that compromise state sovereignty as a threat to its own internal stability and therefore vigilantly guards the traditional prerogatives of sovereignty as a matter of self-interest. As a result, Russia will be more resistant to attempts to change Iranian internal behavior (such as its nuclear program) via sanctions and more accepting of Iranian claims of nuclear “rights” if it believes the concept of state sovereignty to be under threat.

Ultimately, Russia knows it needs to address U.S. security concerns about Iran’s nuclear program and places greater importance on its relationship with Washington than its relationship with Tehran. At the same time, Moscow wishes to preserve or expand its economic influence in Iran and to resist what it believes, depending on events, to be the creeping diminution of state sovereignty organized by the United States. The result is that Russia has very gradually downgraded its relations with Iran or modified them to reflect U.S. concerns, as in the Bushehr reactor deal. It has engaged in the U.N. sanctions process but generally refused to assent to measures that might harm its economic or normative interests while averting unilateral sanctions and has repeatedly proposed a number of solutions that have won neither Iranian nor American support.

In short, Russia has attempted to safeguard its own security, economic, and normative interests regarding Iran while positioning itself as a key broker between Iran and the United States to avoid a military conflict.

So far, Russia’s approach has met with little success in achieving its multiple goals. Its diplomatic proposals have gone nowhere, and its increased distance from Tehran and membership in the P5+1 group has undercut its attempts to serve as a mediator. While Moscow has

had some success in watering down international sanctions, it could not prevent potentially crippling unilateral American and European sanctions from being enacted. What's worse, Moscow's blunt and harsh rhetoric against the United States and its European partners sows disunity among the P5+1 members, providing Iran with incentives not to comply with its international obligations. The longer progress is not made on a diplomatic solution, the greater the risk of an Israeli or U.S. military strike.

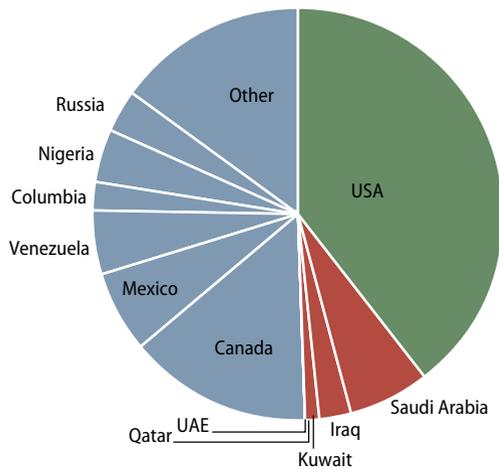
As tensions between the United States and its allies on the one hand and Iran on the other continue to escalate, Russia's efforts to maintain its diplomatic balancing act are proving increasingly difficult to sustain, and over time they increase the risks that something jeopardizing Russia's multiple goals will occur.

Endnotes

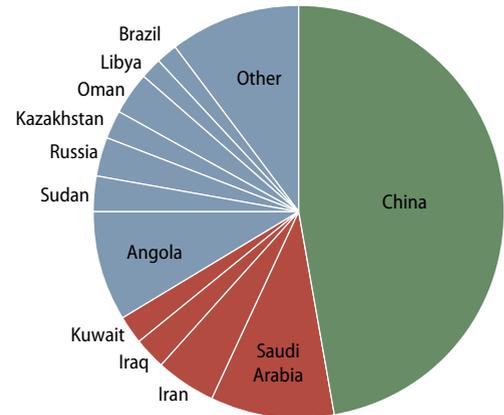
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- 16 The "responsibility to protect" norm was formulated as an international response to the mass atrocities of the 1990s and accompanying humanitarian interventions by the United States and other countries to stop them. According to the doctrine, adopted at the 2005 World Summit, a state's sovereignty entails a responsibility to protect its population from harms such as mass atrocities. When a state fails to live up to or actively contravenes this responsibility, it loses the traditional presumption of noninterference in its internal affairs. In extreme cases, the failure of a state to honor its responsibility to protect its population can justify external military intervention to halt atrocities perpetrated by a government or other groups operating in a state's territory. The United States and its European partners invoked this norm to secure U.N. Security Council authorization for the international military intervention in Libya in 2011.

FIGURE 3
Crude oil consumption by country

US crude oil and petroleum products consumption, 2011



China crude oil consumption, 2010

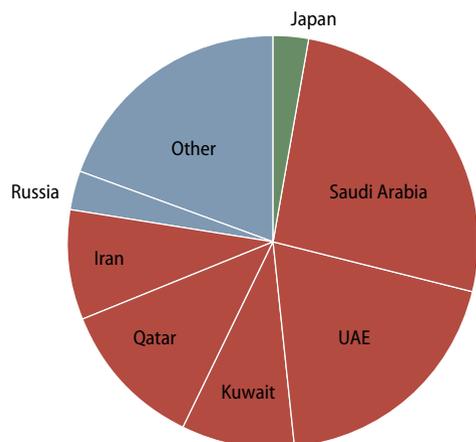


Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

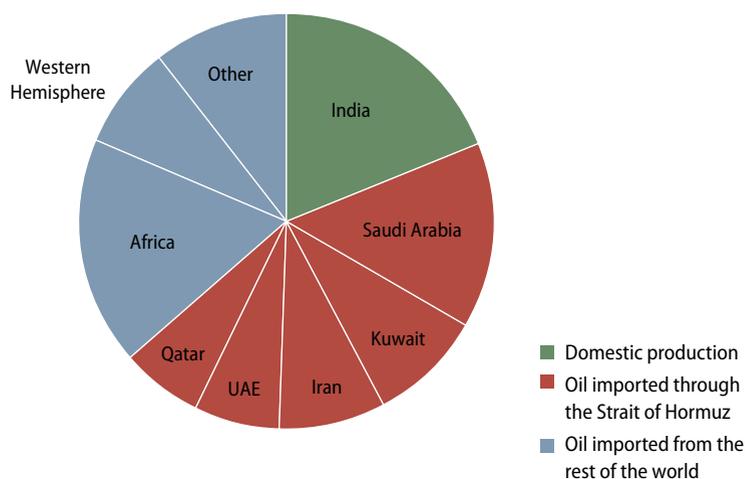
China has so far played a quiet and somewhat constructive role in responding to international concerns over Iran’s nuclear program.⁶⁸ At the same time, however, China’s economic interests in the Persian Gulf region—with nearly one-fifth of its oil imports coming from Gulf states—may force it to take a more active posture against a potential Iranian nuclear weapon.⁶⁹ American diplomats should continue to emphasize the danger to Chinese interests that both Iranian nuclear weapons and a potential conflict between Iran and either the United States or Israel would prove. Due to China’s geographic distance from the region (compared with Russia) and the largely economic nature of its interests there (as well as the importance of Sino-American relations), it may be more possible to get Beijing to try to persuade Iran to live up to its international obligations by pointing out the potential consequences of bombing Iran or an Iranian bomb for Chinese interests.

In addition, the United States will have to take additional diplomatic measures to ensure Japan and India both have sufficient oil supplies in the event of a potential breakout scenario. Both countries import most of their oil from the Persian Gulf—Japan nearly three-quarters and India almost 45 percent. Current sanctions are already forcing Japan to cut its oil imports from Iran, while Japan’s imports from Saudi Arabia increased almost 20 percent in January 2012 compared to the previous year and those from Iran decreased 12 percent in the same time period.⁷⁰ India, despite assertions that it would not cut off oil imports from Iran,⁷¹ is in

Japan crude oil consumption, 2009



India crude oil consumption, 2009



touch with Iraq and Saudi Arabia about expanding imports beginning in April 2012. Indian private oil companies also are cutting back on their purchases of Iranian oil due to U.S. and EU sanctions.⁷²

Both India and Japan will require further diplomatic efforts to assure energy supplies in the event of a breakout crisis, and India will likely require diplomatic measures similar to those outlined above with Russia in order to convince New Delhi of the danger of a breakout situation. The presence of millions of Indian migrant workers in Gulf Arab countries will also undoubtedly be a consideration of the Indian government that will have to be addressed in a crisis as well.

Conclusion

Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon would have negative consequences for global and regional security. To acquire a nuclear weapon, Iran will either have had to leave the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or brazenly violate it. This blatant violation of the global nonproliferation regime could lead to a wave of other countries—among them Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey—to either leave the Non-Proliferation Treaty or violate it in pursuit of their own nuclear weapons. These states and others may hedge, using civil nuclear programs as a cover for military efforts just as Iran did. As a result, the painstakingly crafted nonproliferation regime of the past 45 years could crumble in short order.

An Iranian nuclear arsenal also would create a much more dangerous region as Tehran tests the limits of its new power. While Iran's current and near-term ballistic missiles do not have the range to reach Israel with a first-generation nuclear weapon, if Iran develops such a delivery system, then the risk of a deadly confrontation between Iran, its proxies, and Israel increases.

Should other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia acquire their own nuclear weapons quickly, the risks of regional nuclear war would multiply. The risk of nuclear war between Iran and Israel or some other regional power that acquires nuclear weapons is not a question of regime irrationality or deterrent credibility—it is simply a matter of the chances that the inevitable human and organizational frictions attendant to any international crisis could lead to a cataclysmic result that neither party to the conflict desires.

Avoiding such an outcome is precisely why it is so important for the Obama administration to continue to use every available tool, including potential direct diplomatic engagement with the Iranian government, to deal with the issue. While the long-term goal remains an Iranian nuclear program fully under IAEA monitoring, the shorter-term goal should be to continue to lengthen Iran's nuclear timeline while keeping the door open for Iran and the international community to achieve a comprehensive understanding both on the nuclear issue and a broader

set of concerns. The international community has a vital common interest in maintaining a strong international nonproliferation regime. A strategy that continues to isolate and constrain Iran in response to its refusal to abide by its obligations, but which also offers a clear pathway to a negotiated solution, is the best one.

Speaking publicly on this subject in early March, President Obama made it quite clear that his administration “will take no options off the table” when it comes to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The challenge facing the United States and the global coalition seeking to rein in Iran’s nuclear ambitions will be to use the right tools at the right time—understanding that right now is the time to ask all the hard questions while preparing for any possible contingency.

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Appendix: Iran's government and current political divisions

The structure of the Iranian government

Unelected bodies

The supreme leader, or *Rahbare Mo'azzame Enghelab* (leader of the revolution), stands at the top of the Islamic Republic of Iran, having the final say on all political and religious matters. He is also the commander in chief of Iran's armed forces. The current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the second since the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The first was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, one of the leaders of the revolution and the founder of the Islamic Republic.

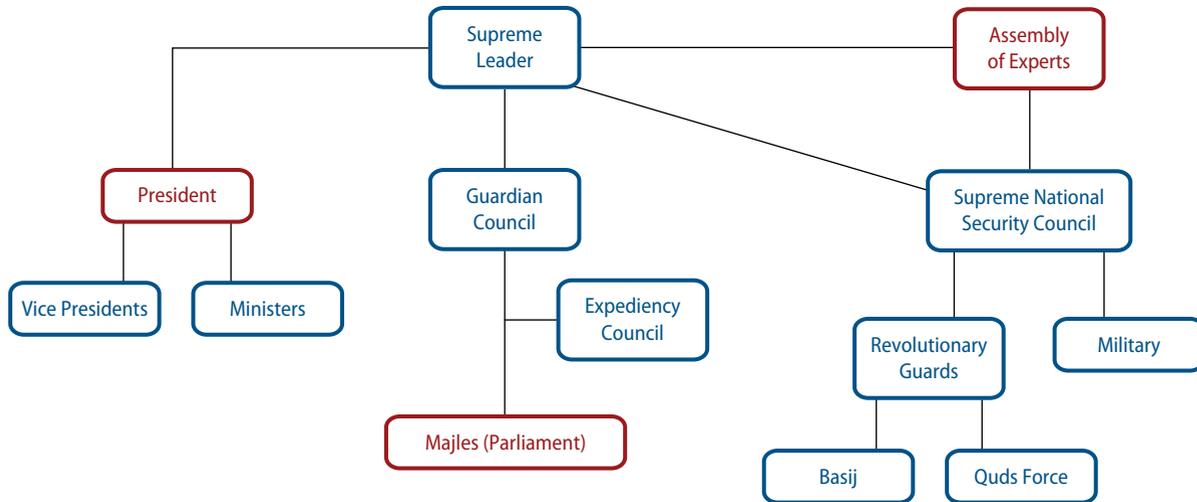
Unlike his predecessor, Khamenei is not known for his religious scholarship.¹ He was selected as successor shortly before Khomeini's death, when the long-intended successor, Ayatollah Montazeri, had a falling out with Khomeini over Montazeri's criticisms of the authoritarian excesses of the regime. Because Khamenei was not a senior cleric at the time of his selection, his ascent required a change to the constitution enabling a lesser cleric to serve as supreme leader. His lack of religious credentials has been a continuing source of political vulnerability and personal insecurity.

The most learned cleric, or *faqih*, acts as the earthly representative of the 12th imam, whose eventual return will inaugurate an era of peace and justice, according to Shia eschatology. The *faqih* has the final say on matters of state based on the guardianship of the most learned jurist, or *Velayat-e faqih*, the political-religious doctrine on which the Islamic Republic is based. Ayatollah Khomeini developed and promulgated this doctrine in a series of lectures while in exile in Najaf in neighboring Iraq in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As with other trends in Shia scholarship at the time such as that of Iraqi Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, founder of Iraq's Da'wa Party, Khomeini's ideas broke with

FIGURE 4
The Iranian system of government

■ Unelected
■ Elected



Shia tradition (in which clerics avoided overt involvement in politics) by advocating a much more prominent leadership role for clerics in political matters. As supreme leader, however, Ayatollah Khomeini had formal powers comparable to a constitutional monarch. But after a series of constitutional amendments hastily adopted shortly before Khomeini's death, the position became more powerful and effectively independent of any formal checks and balances under Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The Council of Guardians is made up of 12 persons, six clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six legal scholars selected by the head of the judiciary (who is himself appointed by the supreme leader) and approved by the Majlis (the Iranian Parliament), to serve for six-year terms. The council has veto power over all legislation and strictly vets candidates for political office, effectively acting as a check on Iran's democratic institutions.

The Expediency Discernment Council was created by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1988 to manage disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council. Shortly before his death in 1989, Khomeini ordered a constitutional revision process that would officially establish the council.² It currently consists of 28 members, all of whom are appointed by the supreme leader to serve five-year terms. Since 2002, the

council has been headed by Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. On March 14, 2012, Supreme Leader Khamenei announced Rafsanjani's reappointment.³

The head of the judiciary is tasked with ensuring that Islamic law is enforced throughout the judiciary system. He is appointed by the supreme leader for a five-year term and in turn appoints the chief justice of the Supreme Court and the chief prosecutor. The current head is Sadeq Larijani, the younger brother of Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani.

Elected bodies

The president is elected for a four-year term and is limited to two terms. Though the office has a high public profile, its power is severely constrained by the constitution, and the president's authority extends mainly to domestic and economic affairs. The current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was able to inject himself into foreign policy only when he had the backing of the supreme leader. Now that Khamenei has withdrawn his support, Ahmadinejad has found himself increasingly isolated. In October 2011 Khamenei proposed possibly abolishing the office of the president, but it's unclear whether he will pursue this.⁴

The Cabinet of Ministers is made up of 24 ministers, chosen by the president and confirmed by Iran's Parliament, the Majlis. The supreme leader has the ability to choose or dismiss cabinet ministers as he sees fit.⁵

Vice presidents oversee various aspects of the president's agenda. The constitution empowers the president of Iran to appoint as many or as few vice presidents as he requires. Currently there are 12 vice presidents serving under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Parliament, or the *Majlis*, was first created as a result of Iran's constitutional revolution in 1906, with both an upper and lower house. After the 1979 Iranian revolution, the lower house was abolished. The parliament is currently made up of 290 representatives, elected every four years. Both Majlis candidates and the legislation the Majlis produces are subject to the approval of the Guardian Council. The current Majlis speaker is Ali Larijani. For the 2012 Majlis elections, the council rejected the candidacy of 45 percent of some 5,200 applicants. Reasons for rejection included allegations of "not believing in Islam," "not being a practitioner of Islam," "not being loyal to the Constitution," and "not being loyal to the *Velayat-e Faqih*."⁶

The Assembly of Experts is made up of 86 clerics tasked with electing and overseeing the actions of the supreme leader, though they have never been known to publicly challenge any of the decisions of the supreme leader. They are elected by the public for eight-year terms after being vetted by the Guardian Council.

Other key institutions

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps was created after the 1979 revolution to safeguard the Iranian revolution against possible coup attempts and to enforce Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of the Islamic Republic. It currently consists of around 125,000 members, with ground, air (which oversees Iran's ballistic missile force),⁷ and naval divisions, the latter of which is primarily responsible for the Persian Gulf. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps has become deeply involved in politics and grown into a potent economic and political force as its veterans have moved into positions of power. Independent of the Iranian armed forces, the guards corps is believed to control monopolies in a number of key industries, including construction and telecommunications, in addition to a \$20 billion import empire. Politically the guards corps is not monolithic and contains supporters of the various political trends in Iran, including the reformists.

The Quds Force is a special unit within the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps tasked with exporting the Islamic revolution. The Quds Force manages Iran's relationships with various militant and terrorist groups in the region and around the world. It reports directly to the supreme leader. Its current commander is Major General Qassem Soleimani. The Quds Force is also implicated in the alleged plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador. The plan was revealed in October 2011, with "Gholam Shakuri, an Iran-based member of Iran's Qods Force," named as a defendant.⁸

The Basij is a volunteer militia tasked with internal security and suppression of dissidents. Created in 1980 by Ayatollah Khomeini to assist the guards corps, the basij is believed to be responsible for much of the street violence during the June 2009 demonstrations under the direction of the supreme leader's son—and likely the intended heir—Mojtaba Khamenei. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was himself a member of this organization during the Iran-Iraq war.

The Judiciary was, similar to the Majlis, first created after the constitutional revolution in 1906, although it did not begin fully functioning until Reza Shah

came to power in 1925. After the Islamic revolution of 1978, the judiciary was reoriented around the principles of the revolution, with secular jurists being replaced by clerics and elements of Sharia law incorporated into the civil code. The Iranian court structure includes revolutionary courts, which deal with offenses that undermine the Islamic Republic of Iran, and public courts, which deal with basic criminal infractions.

The Supreme National Security Council was formed as a result of the 1989 constitutional revision. Presided over by the president, it includes the speaker of the *Majlis*, the chief of the judiciary, the heads of the armed forces, the ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Interior, and Information departments, heads of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and two representatives chosen by the supreme leader. Its current secretary is Saeed Jalili, who in this capacity also serves as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator.

The Armed Forces currently has around 220,000 regular army personnel, 18,000 navy personnel, and around 52,000 air force soldiers. The regular army, navy, and air force are overseen by Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps counterparts and supported by basij battalions.⁹

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security is the secret police/intelligence apparatus of the Islamic Republic of Iran, working both inside and outside the country. It is believed to be one of the most powerful ministries in the government. It operates with a secret budget and answers directly to the supreme leader. From the late 1980s through late 1990s, ministry agents were behind the brutal killings of a number of dissidents and activists in Iran, known as the “chain murders” or “serial murders.” This was eventually admitted by the ministry after years of public outcry, though it blamed the murders on “rogue elements.”¹⁰

Main current political divisions in Iran

Since the mid-1990s during the presidency of popular reformer Mohammed Khatami, Ayatollah Khamenei has worked diligently to marginalize the power of the reformist bloc in Iran's political system. The carefully stage-managed 2005 election of Khamenei's then-favorite Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—the conservative populist former mayor of Tehran—was a major step in this campaign. But even as he worked behind the scenes to marginalize the forces of reform (and sometimes even more openly, as in the rejection of large numbers of reformist candidates

by his representatives on the Guardian Council), he was careful to maintain the pretense of the office of supreme leader as above the usual political fray.

With President Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election, however, Khamenei's intervention on behalf of his protégé was so blatant, congratulating Ahmadinejad on his re-election even before all the votes had been tallied. Millions of enraged proreform voters took to the streets for days of protest, in what became known as the "Green Wave." With this intervention Khamenei showed that he considered his goal of marginalizing the forces of reform to be more important than the even the most minimal pretense of democracy.

Ahmadinejad vs. Khamenei

And yet, since the beginning of his second administration, Ahmadinejad undertook a number of initiatives that were seen as a direct challenge both to the supreme leader and to the larger clerical establishment. In the former case, Ahmadinejad fired Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi in April 2011 against the wishes of the supreme leader. Khamenei's insistence that Moslehi be reinstated, yet another very public intervention in political affairs, resulted in Ahmadinejad removing himself from the public eye for 11 days—even skipping meetings of the cabinet—in what was regarded as a shocking protest cum temper tantrum. Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, who had previously been considered a close spiritual adviser to Ahmadinejad, publicly warned him that disobeying the supreme leader is equivalent to "apostasy from God."¹¹

In regard to the clerical establishment, Ahmadinejad and several of his key aides, most prominently Esfandiyar Rahim Mashaei, Ahmadinejad's chief of staff, who many viewed as Ahmadinejad's chosen successor, began to speak more openly about their vision of a populist, Iranian-nationalist-tinged Islam, in which pride in Persian history and civilization mingled with conservative Shiism. Ahmadinejad and his circle promoted a heavily messianic form of Shiism in which he claimed to be able to commune with the Hidden Imam (whose return many Shiites believe will inaugurate an era of peace and justice under Islam) and suggested other lay worshippers could too.

This embrace of messianic populism by the president was seen as a direct threat to the political power of the clerics, who perceived it as an effort to sideline their authority to interpret scriptures. They responded with a series of political attacks on Ahmadinejad

and his aides, including accusing Mashaei of “sorcery.”¹² Mashaei was forced to step down as one of Ahmadinejad’s vice presidents, though he remains chief of staff.

All of this added up to a severely weakened and politically neutered Ahmadinejad. The president’s allies were trounced in the March 2, 2012, parliamentary elections by candidates much closer to the supreme leader. Khamenei’s supporters captured more than 75 percent of the seats in what was essentially a competition between conservative and ultraconservative factions jockeying for position under the supreme leader.¹³

Facing considerable internal tension and growing popular discontent resulting from increasing international economic and financial sanctions because of Iran’s continued nuclear program, Iran’s supreme leader was clearly desperate to present the elections as an affirmation of the regime’s flagging legitimacy and a rebuttal to international criticism and pressure over its controversial nuclear program. Iranian state television quoted Khamenei as declaring a religious obligation to vote, saying that a high voter turnout would “safeguard” Iran’s reputation.¹⁴ Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi similarly stated that a large turnout would “deal a heavy blow to the mouth” of Iran’s foes.¹⁵

The March 2012 Majlis elections were carefully managed, both at the front end by the vetting of candidates and at the back end with the actual voting. This year the Guardian Council barred 35 sitting members of the Majlis from seeking re-election and blocked nearly 2,000 others from running out of a total of nearly 4,500 applicants. Reports from foreign journalists indicate that the conduct and coverage of the election were even more tightly controlled than in previous elections. “I have never been corralled like this,” one Western reporter told PBS’s Tehran bureau. “Apart from the fact that people are very much afraid to talk in public, we have been constantly monitored and harassed.” Among the foreign media, he said, “We all agree this is the most tightly controlled we’ve ever seen it.”¹⁶

Reformists marginalized

Meanwhile the reformists announced their decision to boycott the election weeks before they took place, both as a gesture of protest and in anticipation of being prohibited from running by the Guardian Council—one of two official bodies responsible for vetting candidates along with the Interior Ministry. Leading green movement figures Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, both reformist candidates in 2009, have been under house arrest for more than a year.¹⁷

Former reformist president Mohamed Khatami came under intense criticism for his decision to cast a vote rather than boycott, but his move was seen as an effort to “stay in the game” by signaling continuing support for the system, as well as a tacit admission that the green movement is not an important player in Iranian politics at the moment.

Conservatives, ultraconservatives dominate

Though 13 different conservative coalitions fielded candidates for election in Tehran alone, the two largest coalitions—the United Principlist Front and the Stability, or Steadfastness, Front—together secured about three-quarters of the seats. The Principlists originally rose in response to Mohamed Khatami’s reformist presidency but splintered into a number of factions, including Ahmadinejad’s. The United Principlist Front was established in response to Khamenei’s call for unity among his supporters in the wake of the 2009 protests.¹⁸ It includes moderates, conservatives, and hardliners, including many former Ahmadinejad supporters, and is led by conservative Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, secretary general of the Militant Clergy Association.

The Stability/Steadfastness Front is made up largely of hardliners and is led by ultraconservative cleric Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, Ahmadinejad’s former spiritual adviser who has now withdrawn his support for the president. Yazdi has strong ties to the intelligence community and the Revolutionary Guards and is known to be a strong believer in the imminence of the return of the Hidden Imam (the Shia messiah, or *Mahdi*), a view he shared with his erstwhile disciple Ahmadinejad. There are also rumors that Yazdi belongs to the extremist *Hojattieh* society, a conspiratorial sect considered so extreme that it was banned by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1983.¹⁹ Similar to rumors about the Freemasons in Europe or the Gulenists in Turkey, the *Hojattieh* are believed by some Iranians to have infiltrated the various levels of Iranian government and exercise influence throughout the system.

Iranian officials declared a 64 percent turnout, a “victory”²⁰ for the Islamic Republic of Iran, though many observers doubted this number. At the very least it seems clear that the elections represent a victory for Ayatollah Khamenei’s efforts to reassert his power over Ahmadinejad’s upstart faction and re-establish himself as the unquestioned “decider” of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei’s confidence is apparently so great that on March 15 he reappointed Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as head of the Expediency Council, after having him removed after the June 2009 elections.²¹

Rafsanjani had been seen as sympathetic to Iran's reformers, and his own daughter was arrested for taking part in the post-election demonstrations. Rafsanjani's reappointment is a fairly clear sign that Khamenei no longer sees him as a threat.

Finally, the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in Iran's politics and economy has tracked with the supreme leader's efforts to marginalize the reformers in Iran's system. The Revolutionary Guards benefited from their close relationship to Khamenei, which has enabled them to place their alumni in key positions of influence. This in turn has delivered considerable benefits to the guard corps's networks in terms of government contracts and virtual monopolies in major industries such as telecommunications and construction, which has seriously diminished the influence of Iran's traditionally powerful *bazaari*, or merchant class, as well as control of Iran's considerable black market in smuggled goods. The Revolutionary Guard's influence in Iranian affairs has become so great that in 2009 Iran scholar Rasool Nafisi suggested that Iran "is not a theocracy anymore," but "a regular military security government with a facade of a Shiite clerical system."²²

A silver lining in Khamenei's reassertion of authority

It's unclear what the recent election results will mean for negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Khamenei himself has long been known to be one of the biggest skeptics of the possibility of a deal with Western powers. He believes the West is out to destroy the Islamic Republic. But if Khamenei has now once again established himself as the unquestioned arbiter of Iran's politics, he may feel more confident in allowing his representatives to engage with the so-called P5+1 countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany, which are negotiating with Iran on the nuclear issue—in a way that Iran has thus far been unwilling to do.

While it's important to be wary of over-interpreting signals out of Tehran, there have been a few recent indications that Khamenei could be willing to move on a nuclear deal. Last month, in what could be seen as an attempt to allay international concerns over Iran's possible weaponization, Khamenei said that having nuclear weapons "is a sin as well as useless, harmful and dangerous."²³ On March 8, 2012, Khamenei praised President Barack Obama's remarks downplaying the talk of war, declaring a "window of opportunity" for diplomacy with Iran.²⁴ And in a recent interview with CNN, published on March 16, 2012, Ali Larijani, a close adviser to Khamenei, disavowed Ahmadinejad's infamous remark that Israel must be "wiped

off the map,” saying that the remark was “definitely not” meant in a military sense, and that such a move was not “a policy of Iran.”²⁵

These are all mild statements to the extent that they represent Iranian leaders addressing two key issues of stated international—particularly U.S. and Israeli—concern. But Iran’s record of prolonged negotiating punctuated by deliberate breakdowns cannot be forgotten. Still, these remarks by Khamenei and Larijani should be considered seriously. Iran’s first supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, was able to reverse himself and “drink the cup of poison” by accepting a 1988 ceasefire with Iraq in part because he enjoyed unquestioned authority.²⁶ Now that Khamenei has demonstrated his own supremacy, he could have enough political space to make a similar, previously unacceptable compromise.

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