



Strengthening America's Options on Iran

10 Key Questions to Inform the Debate

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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.

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