

## Debating Iran's Nuclear Aspirations

The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) June 2003 report on Iran's nuclear program has stripped the Islamic Republic of the agency's seal of approval and elevated international concern about Tehran's nuclear intentions. Heightened suspicion that Iran's civilian nuclear energy infrastructure masks a clandestine weapons program has galvanized international cooperation among the United States, the European Union, and Russia and is likely to result in increased external pressure on Iran to remain in compliance with its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments. This international pressure will aim, at a minimum, to ensure Iran's adherence to the enhanced safeguards system contained in the IAEA's Additional Protocol (the so-called 93+2), intended to increase the transparency of a state's nuclear program; yet, the regime in Tehran has resisted or placed conditions on its adherence to this measure. To justify its position at home, the regime has again played the political trump card of Iranian nationalism and has cast its defiance as principled resistance to a discriminatory effort inspired by the United States to deny advanced technology to Iran.

Because the exact status of Iran's nuclear program is unknown, the time available to attempt to resolve this thorny issue diplomatically is uncertain as well. External pressure is undoubtedly a necessary element of such a strategy, but it is unlikely to be sufficient in the long term even if it is successful in buying some time in the short term. A complementary effort is needed to influence nuclear politics within Iran by generating a real debate among the Iranian public. This type of political transparency would end Iranian radical hard-liners' monopoly on information and debunk the putative energy ratio-

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nale for the nuclear program. Moreover, informed discussion would help Iranians distinguish between the development of nuclear technology and that of nuclear weapons, that is, between programs that are legal and accompanied by assurances and inspections and those that are used to cover up illicit activities. Such a debate could similarly subject to hard scrutiny the important strategic motivations for a weapons option, which remain either unstated or mentioned obliquely because the regime denies violating its NPT obligations in the first place.

Formidable political impediments exist, but in the quasi-democracy of contemporary Iran, the nuclear issue could become contested turf—a process that could potentially lead to a positive long-term change in the country's strategic culture and thus help curtail nuclear proliferation in Iran. Government hard-liners have long determined the security policies of the Islamic Republic. The particular experience of Iran—revolution, war, sanctions, and estrangement from international society—has created a shared sense of embattlement in a hostile environment, leaving little scope for debate. In addition, foreign and security policies historically have not been at the forefront of the reformists' concerns. This situation has changed in recent years; as the costs of the hard-liners' choices in security policy have mounted, affecting Iran's development prospects, so have public scrutiny of such security policies as well as the inclination to question their rationale.

The particular character of the Iranian proliferation challenge and the country's dynamic domestic politics present an opportunity for the United States and its allies to pursue a comprehensive strategy that promotes the transformation of Iran's internal debate in tandem with external efforts to induce or compel Iranian compliance with nonproliferation norms.

## **Iran's Proliferation Challenge**

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The IAEA's June 2003 revelations confirmed earlier reports and cited Iran for violations of its safeguard obligations because of its past failures to disclose the importation of nuclear material and the construction of a heavy-water production plant and facilities for uranium enrichment, processing, and storage. The IAEA did not go so far as to say that Iran had violated the NPT, a step that would have immediately led to the referral of the matter to the United Nations Security Council. Rather, the IAEA framed the issue more narrowly as a failure of transparency, prompting calls from the EU and Russia for Iran to accede to the Additional Protocol. The revelations about Iran's expanded nuclear capabilities, however, also heightened concerns about its intentions. In Washington, the IAEA report was received as further confirmation of a persistent, decade-long pattern of Iranian material

procurements that clearly points to a clandestine weapons program. The document indicates how far along the path toward developing nuclear weapons a state can go while remaining technically in compliance with the NPT's Article IV, which permits access to atomic energy technology. Iran's advances in acquiring fissile material for weapons production also raised concerns that the country was approaching a threshold of indigenous capability that would soon make it invulnerable to even a complete embargo. Moreover, some have questioned whether the increased transparency required by the Additional Protocol can be effective in dealing with a determined cheater, which the Bush administration believes Iran to be.

The IAEA report was published in the aftermath of the war on Iraq, or at least after the completion of "major combat operations." But the war on Iraq was a unique case, not a counterproliferation policy that can be generalized. Formulating effective strategies to prevent or roll back weapons of mass destruction (WMD) acquisition must begin by recognizing that states neither undertake such programs lightly nor reverse course on a whim. Concern for a country's own national security has been paramount among the motivations attributed to states that have decided to acquire nuclear weapons.

For the Bush administration, which maintains its intention to pursue non-proliferation strategies tailored to the particular circumstances of each case, Iran presents conditions that warrant a different policy from those applied to the other two members of the "axis of evil." The United States views, with reason, outlaw states that indulge in or sponsor terrorism, regional aggression or intimidation, domestic repression, and anti-Western postures as countries that pose the greatest threat if they acquire WMD capabilities. Iran, however, is not a pariah state under UN sanction like Saddam Hussein's Iraq, nor is Iran a hermit-like failed state like North Korea. Iran's nuclear program is far less developed than that of North Korea but more advanced than that of Iraq prior to the 2003 war (although Saddam was closer to acquiring nuclear weapons prior to the 1991 Persian Gulf War than he was before the latest conflict). The latest IAEA report indicates a significant expansion of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, but it is doubtful that Iran possesses all the elements needed for a complete weapons program. Unlike North Korea, which may have reprocessed nuclear material for up to two weapons and is poised to acquire more, Iran is estimated to be two or three years away from having a bomb, according to the Israeli government's worst-case scenario.<sup>1</sup>

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## Debating Iran's Nuclear Needs

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Perhaps the most important feature distinguishing Iran from the other axis of evil states is its quasi-democracy. In Saddam's Iraq, where insulting the president (liberally interpreted) was punishable by death, politics simply did not exist. In North Korea, Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il, have created a dynastic political system and cult of personality that even Saddam must have envied. By contrast, Iran has a vibrant, restive, and skeptical public, which is increasingly given to criticism, debate, and scrutiny of a regime that has squandered its political legitimacy.

With a recent public opinion poll indicating that 70 percent of Iranians seek normalization of relations with the United States and engagement with the global community, Iran is in a different league from North Korea and Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Public opinion in Iran supports an active international role for the country that allows it to be taken seriously and does not undermine its neighboring states' legitimate search for security. In short, unlike North Korea and Iraq, Iran's dynamic domestic politics present an avenue for influencing the country's decisionmaking about its nuclear program. The gap between the hard-line conservatives in Iran and the rest of society has widened and is evident in almost every issue facing the country. On foreign and security policies, this gap is manifested in the difference between those with an ideological approach toward international relations and those who emphasize national interest, which leads to disparate assessments of Iran's defense needs and of the degree to which the country should be engaged in cooperative or common security with its neighbors and the international community at large. This distinction will only become more acute as international pressure is brought to bear on Iran for its nuclear (and missile) programs.

Some Western observers, in an effort to remain impartial, have sympathized with Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, allegedly because the country is located in a rough, nuclearized neighborhood (with Israel and Pakistan) and because proximate U.S. military power, now extended into Iraq and Afghanistan, poses a threat to the country's security. Some of these same observers also argue that Iran's aspirations to develop nuclear weapons are not peculiar to this regime, given the shah's decision in the 1970s to construct the Bushehr nuclear reactor. Viewed through this political prism, Persian nationalism is said to be the nuclear program's principal impulse. Yet, both of these propositions are oversimplified and unhelpful.

With the demise of Saddam's regime in neighboring Iraq, an Iranian nuclear weapons program has lost any compelling strategic rationale. Iran has used Israel as an all-purpose bogey to criticize the United States for picking on select regimes that possess WMD, to ingratiate itself with the Arab states by

supporting the Palestinians, and to argue that the threat posed by Israel justifies Iran's own missile program. No one in Tehran or elsewhere has suggested that Iran seeks to confront Israel militarily or that Iran would be willing to enter into conflict with Israel on behalf of the Palestinians. Indeed, this is precisely the reason that Iran has preferred to use support for proxy groups (such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad) to demonstrate its support of the Palestinians. Israel has served as a diversion and a pretext in that Tehran uses its support for the Palestinians to deflect its neighbors' concerns about Iran's own WMD programs. At the same time, Iran's support for the Palestinians is the Islamic Republic's cynical attempt to gain leverage against the West.

**Iran is in a different league from North Korea and Iraq.**

Moreover, Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, combined with its record of not recognizing Israel, supporting attacks against it, and seeking to derail any peace process that might be in motion, adds to the concerns about Iran as a proliferator. An Iran that changed its policy toward Israel, especially its policy of supporting terrorist attacks, would still be of concern as a proliferator, but less so. In theory, Iran might seek to trade a change in its Middle East policies for somewhat more leeway on its nuclear aspirations. In reality, however, such a distinction does not appear likely. Iran seems to have linked the two so publicly that a reversal of its policy toward Israel would have to provoke an examination of why Iran needs nuclear weapons at all.

Iran's invocation of its proximity to Pakistan as a rationale for developing nuclear weapons appears to be even less realistic. Iran and Pakistan have no major bilateral disputes; the principal tensions arise from Pakistan's failure to manage its domestic sectarian rivalries, which has resulted in occasional violence between Pakistan's Sunni and Shi'a communities. Pakistan is necessarily preoccupied with its problems with India, largely over Kashmir, leaving it little energy or inclination for other confrontations. Iran has now established good relations with India, which provides Tehran with further insurance. The only conceivable rivalry that might arise between Iran and Pakistan would result from Iran's very decision to acquire nuclear weapons, thus making the rivalry a self-fulfilling prophecy. In that event, Pakistan might be tempted to assist Saudi Arabia down the same path. In sum, it is difficult to find a plausible strategic rationale for Iran to seek nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup>

The currently changing nature of public opinion in Iran on the Palestinian issue provides an example of what can happen when an issue becomes the subject of debate. Until about two years ago, the conservatives in Iran had

**Iran's dynamic domestic politics present an avenue for influencing its nuclear program.**

preempted a debate on policy by monopolizing the definition of the issue and hence its implementation. Iranian policy toward the Middle East peace process was based on the proposition that Iranians felt sympathy for the Palestinian cause, and the hard-liners were allowed to define how this sympathy would be expressed. In recent months, however, the floodgates of the debate have widened as Iranians, especially members of parliament, have begun to question the hard-liners' *carte blanche* on this issue. Although generally

agreeing on support for the Palestinians, Iranians increasingly question the form this support should take, asking, for example, why support for the Palestinian cause entails support for groups using violence. Why does it undermine support for the Palestinians' own elected representatives?<sup>4</sup> How does the adoption of radical positions help the people in the region? Can Iran not help diplomatically? Does a militant, rejectionist approach advance Iran's national interests? What price is

Iran willing to pay for such policies?

With the reformers and general public now raising such questions, Iran's conservatives have lost control over the issue and are now on the defensive. Even if those authorities not elected by the public but appointed to positions by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hoseini Khamenei still pursue this policy, it will have a short shelf life when Iranians recognize the cynicism with which the people have been manipulated. Hard-liners will find it increasingly difficult to justify their policies and their retention of power by referring to a hostile, predatory external environment and to burnish their revolutionary credentials by adopting extreme positions, such as nonrecognition of Israel, which goes beyond those of many Arab states.

Could the precedent set by debate over supporting the Palestinians, in which issues are aired and policies come under public scrutiny, breaking the hard-liners' monopolistic grip on policy, apply to Iran's nuclear program? Until now, there has been no nuclear debate on the pluses and minuses of a weapons program for obvious reasons: the government has renounced the right to develop nuclear weapons as a signatory to the NPT, and there is little knowledge about the program in Iran for it has been conceived and developed clandestinely, insulated from public knowledge as much as possible. Compounded with the dearth of public knowledge about nuclear weapons, their history, and capabilities, this secrecy has ensured that whatever limited public debate has occurred to date has been notably ill informed and inexperienced.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of Iran's right to nuclear technology has often fronted as a code for its right to nuclear weapons. The energy rationale for Iran—the ostensible argument for Iran's nuclear program—has itself never been subjected to a rigorous debate. As noted, Iranian authorities have not had to do much to argue its merits; they need only point to U.S. attempts to issue blanket prohibitions denying Iran access to any nuclear technology to make the domestic case that the program therefore must be worthwhile. In arguing that the nuclear energy program seeks to make Iran a modern state with access to advanced technology, the regime strikes a sensitive chord.

With pressure now exerted on Iran to clarify its program, however, some Iranians have begun to refer to the necessity to balance the country's needs with its responsibilities to the international community. President Muhammad Khatami stated, "We have the right to use this knowledge and you [the IAEA, international community] have the right to be assured that it would be channeled in the right way."<sup>6</sup> A member of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee observed that, "[i]f we do not sign the additional protocol, it will give the impression that Iran is moving towards the non-peaceful use of nuclear energy. Thus we must remove all doubts by talking to, and negotiating with, other countries and signing this protocol."<sup>7</sup>

International pressure on Iran has already led to a certain amount of public questioning of Iran's program and its rationale. For example, in June 2003 the newspaper *Mardom Salari* raised the possibility that the nuclear energy program might be serving as a cover for a nuclear weapons program and as "a kind of deterrence ... [whose] sell by date expired" a decade ago. Another source, the pro-reform newspaper *Hambastegi* argued in a June 2003 issue that, if indeed Iran's intentions were peaceful, accepting the Additional Protocol should not pose a problem.<sup>8</sup>

The important point is that international pressure is forcing the regime to confront choices about its hidden weapons program. Does it continue to argue the energy rationale? In that case, how can it rationalize certain purchases and activities, such as the uranium-enrichment plant? Should the regime avoid signing the Additional Protocol? Does it sign and hope to continue its illegal weapons program undiscovered? International pressure is also forcing the regime to confront a more restless Majlis and press, seeking clearer answers about the program.

As argued above, analysts have often inferred the unstated case for Iran's nuclear weapons development to be the rough regional neighborhood—the possession of nuclear weapons by Pakistan; Israel; Russia; and the new Middle East actor, the United States. Yet, Iran has no historic enemies; existential threats; or giant, hostile neighbors requiring it to compensate for a military imbalance with a nuclear program. A realistic assessment of Iran's

security interests does not stretch to include confronting Israel on behalf of extremist Palestinians, a minority within their own land.

The implicit rationale for the nuclear weapons program lies in the worldview of the hard-liners, who see the program as the ultimate guarantor of Iran's influence and security and, not incidentally, their own political power. Meanwhile, by arguing that all nuclear technology, peaceful and military, is necessary for Iran's development, the hard-liners have been able (with considerable help from Washington) to confuse the issue, at least within Iran. If encouraged actually to examine the motivations for pursuing a nuclear weapons program, Iranians would likely realize that it makes little strategic sense.

Clearly, a public debate on the merits of developing a nuclear weapons capability could be problematic within Iran. First, as mentioned, the level of public expertise is low; confusion, emotion, and generality tend to predominate when these issues surface. Second, a debate about a decision theoretically already decided, that is, Iran's renunciation of the right to nuclear weapons by its accession to the NPT, might not send a good signal to the outside world. Third, in the current, charged climate of U.S. saber rattling, such a debate might encourage extremists to argue more persuasively the merits of an asymmetrical strategy to deter the United States.

Discussion in Iran on the country's acquisition of nuclear weapons thus far has tended to focus on Iran's right to acquire the technology needed to develop an independent nuclear energy program, even though weapons-related implications clearly follow. U.S. efforts to impede the flow of requisite technology have been cast by the hard-liners as an attempt to keep Iran backward and dependent. Washington's policy has been depicted as animated by hostility toward an independent Iran. The principle of independence, of course, was one of the touchstones of the Iranian revolution, and few Iranians of whatever political persuasion—nationalists, secularists, or advocates of a strict religious government—would dissent from its importance. The long and painful history of foreign intervention in Iran (of Russia and Great Britain in Persia and, more recently, of U.S. influence in Iran) makes the issue of independence a critical point for Iranians.

At the same time, the regime has cultivated the sense of victimization, grievance, and embattlement that Shi'ite culture finds so congenial to give the government a free hand in defining Iran's defense and security needs. Iran's leadership has attempted to use the Iran-Iraq War to assert Iran's need to prepare for technical surprises and to foster the public mentality of preparedness and vigilance. The regime has sought to capitalize on the early experience of the revolution when Iran was caught friendless and militarily unprepared when Iraq launched a war in September 1980. These attempts



to inculcate a mentality of circling the wagons and to appeal to national security at the slightest excuse, however, have begun to wear a little thin. In recent years, Iranians have increasingly seen this tactic for what it is: an excuse to retain power, to monopolize decisionmaking, and to cover an opaque style of leadership.

The same tension is evident in the nuclear policy area. Regime references to Iran's right to nuclear technology have become shorthand for its right to acquire nuclear weapons. Yet, the rationale for an energy program, let alone the rationale for a weapons program, has not been addressed. Thus, the question of whether Iran's determination to pursue an ambitious nuclear program for power generation is based on sound economic or energy foundations has not been subjected to scrutiny. The energy rationale frequently is cited as a response to Iran's population growth and increased domestic energy consumption or to the decline in oil production (or the need to conserve oil domestically so that it can be sold to generate foreign exchange revenues). In the past 11 years, fuel consumption in Iran has doubled, leading to current plans to establish nuclear power plants that will generate 7,000 megawatts of electricity by the year 2020. Tehran aims to become self-sufficient when it comes to providing fuel for these plants.

At present, no public debate exists to examine the assumptions on which the nuclear energy program is based or honestly analyze its costs and benefits vis-à-vis other forms of power generation. Observers have frequently noted that Iran annually vents off as much energy in natural gas as any nuclear power program would generate. A candid nuclear energy assessment would have to look at the life-cycle costs of imported reactors; dependence on foreign suppliers; plant costs; spent fuel disposition; facilities maintenance; operations staff training; the environmental aspects of eventual decommissioning; and the risks involved, including accidents, threats to plant safety, and earthquakes. To inform the public debate, such an evaluation would need to consider the costs of the nuclear energy program relative to other approaches to fulfilling Iran's energy needs.

Debating Iran's nuclear energy program on strictly economic grounds would take the issue out of the grasp of a small group of regime hard-liners who have basically made policy in secret, framing the issue thus far as one of Iran's sovereign right to advanced technology being thwarted by a hostile United States. Informing the public and allowing Iranians, including mem-

**The limited, public nuclear debate that has occurred has been notably ill informed.**

bers of parliament, to reach their own judgment on the merits of pursuing a nuclear program for power generation purposes would mark a significant shift. The regime's current appeal to instinctive Iranian support for national independence and equality allows the nuclear program to escape the kind of cool scrutiny now being applied to the issue of Palestine.

Because Iranians across the political spectrum support Iran's rights to acquire the most modern forms of technology necessary for the country's development and to be treated the same as other states are treated on this issue, they have been and remain susceptible to the clerics' critique of the United States' selective concern about nonproliferation norms. This sentiment, however, by no means equates with support for a policy of acquiring nuclear weapons. As the quotes above suggest, Iranians would support a responsible policy that can balance and reconcile their treaty obligations (in letter as well as in spirit) with their own country's needs. This approach entails balancing the right to appropriate technology for power generation and other peaceful applications with the need to reassure the international community of Iran's benign intentions.

### **How Can the United States Shape the Debate?**

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Unlike the current crisis with North Korea, where the danger of nuclear weapons breakout is imminent and the prospects for rolling back the program appear bleak, the international community still has time to address Iran's proliferation challenge. The Bush administration has already ruled out a low-key policy that denies the existence of a crisis. At the same time, the White House has evidently given up on Khatami as an agent of political change and simply cannot wait for the regime to collapse.

Following the release of the June 2003 IAEA report, in what White House officials characterized as "a carefully worded escalation" that went beyond previous expressions of "concern," President George W. Bush baldly asserted that the United States "will not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon" in Iran.<sup>9</sup> This formulation, albeit somewhat ambiguous about the meaning of "construction," elevated the issue of Iran's nuclear capabilities and helped ratchet up international pressure from the EU and Russia, who were also furious with Iranian cheating and therefore needed little prodding. The IAEA report both diplomatically isolated the regime in Tehran and placed the political onus on Iran to ensure the transparency of its program and its nuclear intentions.

While rejecting inaction, U.S. administration officials repeat the policy mantra that all options are on the table. Yet, U.S. deliberations on Iran are shaped by a persisting tension in policy between the twin objectives of near-

term change in behavior and eventual regime change. Administration statements accentuating regime change undercut Iran's incentives to change behavior. For U.S. policymakers, the issue of Iran's nuclear program remains embedded in the broader one of the future evolution of that country. After the war in Iraq, some U.S. administration officials depicted that action as a cautionary example for those regimes that refuse to abandon their WMD programs, while others worried that the war might lead these leaders to conclude precisely the opposite, that only a nuclear weapon could deter the United States.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. administration basically has two policy options for addressing Iran's nuclear program: military preemption or negotiation. In response to the September 11 attacks, preemption against rogue states and terrorist groups has been elevated to official U.S. doctrine. The National Security Strategy document, issued by the White House in September 2002, characterizes preemption as "a matter of common sense."<sup>11</sup> The historical record, however, reveals force to be far from the definitive instrument of nonproliferation policy that some allege or wish it to be. Indeed, a policy of preemption is as problematic as its nonmilitary alternatives, and its ability to produce the desired outcomes has proven uncertain.

The successful 1981 Israeli strike to destroy Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor before it became operational was not a paradigm but rather a rare instance in which all the conditions for success were present: specific and highly accurate intelligence and a negligible risk of collateral damage and retaliation.<sup>12</sup> Given Iran's multiple and redundant facilities, the intelligence and military requirements for preventive action are formidable. Beyond those practical issues, the political consequences of a military strike on Iran could be highly adverse; an attack might well trigger an anti-U.S. backlash that would be bound to undermine prospects for near-term political change and eventual rapprochement between the United States and Iran.<sup>13</sup>

For the time being, U.S. officials have declared force to be an instrument of last resort, and they have shown a willingness to allow time for diplomacy to achieve a satisfactory resolution of the nuclear impasse with Iran. Some have proposed that the United States should engage the current regime in a grand bargain in which U.S. security reassurances, that is, a pledge of nonaggression and noninterference, and an end to economic sanctions would be exchanged for major, verifiable shifts in Iranian behavior related to WMD and terrorism.<sup>14</sup> To induce such a road map, the United States would also

**The right to nuclear technology has become shorthand for the right to nuclear weapons.**

threaten tangible penalties, such as the imposition of multilateral sanctions if Iran did not fully comply with its IAEA obligations under the NPT. In light of the U.S. experience with North Korean cheating under the terms of the 1994 Agreed Framework, the Bush administration has resisted and expressed extreme skepticism about the efficacy of such agreements with odious regimes.

Bush would certainly have a freer hand than his predecessor had; the Clinton administration's limited engagement with North Korea triggered

**The U.S. should not interfere in an internal debate; it needs to help foster it.**

charges of appeasement from critics from the far Right. Yet, some would still see any incentives granted to Iran, even if reciprocated, as an instance of the United States' succumbing to nuclear blackmail. Although a senior official has declared that the administration does not have a cookie-cutter policy toward rogue states, some question whether the White House has a cookie-cutter mind-set that would effectively preclude security assurances to an axis of evil regime.<sup>15</sup> Such an offer could be seen as sacri-

ficing the moral standards of U.S. society and politically bolstering Iran's unelected leaders at the expense of the reformists.

On the Iranian side, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has hinted at receptivity to an agreement that would ensure the survival of Iran's regime, while the head of the IAEA, Muhammad ElBaradei, has suggested that Iranian hard-liners and reformists are now waging a power struggle over the issue of the IAEA's access to Iran's nuclear facilities.<sup>16</sup> Whether the regime would believe U.S. assurances of Iran's security is, of course, open to question. By waging war against Saddam's Iraq, the United States dealt with Iran's proximate security threat and created a possible opportunity to open a strategic dialogue between the United States and Iran. Still, the combination of axis of evil rhetoric, the new preemption doctrine, and the administration's assertion that the war in Iraq demonstrates the U.S. ability take out a regime without inflicting unacceptable collateral damage to the civilian population may have priced U.S. security assurances to Iran out of the market.

For the time being, despite discussions of a grand bargain outside government, diplomacy is confined to the more limited focus on the IAEA's effort to bring Iran into compliance with its nuclear safeguards obligations. Such external pressure, which may include the imposition of penalties if Tehran does not come around, is necessary but not sufficient. An internal process, in which the Iranians themselves debate and scrutinize the nuclear program in all its dimensions, is the essential complement to any outside effort.

The United States should lead the attempt to energize such a debate in Iran by providing the data and encouraging forums required for such discussions, which, after all, are largely technical and specialized. The better informed the debate, the greater the chances of a healthy skepticism about the panacea promised by those pushing the nuclear program. U.S. policy choices are delicate, as Washington cannot appear to dictate terms or to bully, nor should it interfere in an internal debate. Rather, it needs to help foster that debate. To this end, the United States must first make clear why there are concerns about Iran's program, noting the precise components that are unarguably weapons related. Second, the United States should consider the alternatives to nuclear energy for Iran given the energy rationale for the program. Third, the United States should consider what technologies it would be prepared to provide, sell, or finance as substitutes. Finally, the United States should encourage nongovernmental organization (NGO) experts to discuss and analyze the economics of Iran's energy programs to improve the debate within Iran. This could include track II meetings of experts and contacts among specialized NGOs. At the very least, the debate in Iran would expose those in the regime who are reluctant to allow tighter inspections or more transparency in the program.

In addition to taking pride in their independence, most Iranians value their engagement with the world and their country's reputation; even the regime's domestic critics rankled at the Bush administration's inclusion of Iran in the axis of evil along with Saddam's Iraq and Kim Jong Il's North Korea. Iranians on the whole do not see any inherent contradiction between fulfilling their international responsibilities and assuring their national independence. They do not seek to threaten their neighbors or alienate the wider world. That the Group of Seven, the EU, the IAEA, and possibly Russia are lining up behind the current pressure on Tehran makes the question of the opportunity costs of the nuclear program even more salient.

By working to encourage public debate on the logic underlying Iran's pursuit of nuclear energy, the United States would in effect be helping Iranians to wrench the issue out of the grasp of the hard-liners, who have shielded the program from public scrutiny and shrouded it in secrecy. This effort would thus help to demythologize the benefits of nuclear technology, making it more difficult for elements of the regime to use the program as a cover for acquiring nuclear weapons. In addition, such a debate would create the basis for a sensible agreement that could meet both Iran's reasonable domestic energy needs and the international community's concerns.

An informed and democratized debate within Iran about the pros and cons of a nuclear weapons program would expose its major costs, including the strong negative reaction of neighboring states and the international

community, as well as the weakening of Iran's conventional forces through the diversion of the country's financial resources. An open internal debate would also publicly demonstrate the significant toll of the regime's policies, and subsequent international sanctions, on ordinary Iranians' living standards and expectations.

Debate would allow for similar distinctions between Iran's legitimate security needs and nuclear weapons that are illegitimate, as well as between

**Public debate would help Iranians wrench the nuclear issue out of the hard-liners' grasp.**

the regime's responsibilities to uphold its treaty obligations and Iran's sovereign right as an independent state to determine ways to assure its own security. A changed security environment—where a dangerous Iraq has been neutralized and anarchy there and in Afghanistan has abated—gives rise to a renewed possibility of a dialogue on arms control in the region. Such a dialogue would involve both Israel and the Persian Gulf states and would be based on the 1991 Arms Control and Re-

gional Security model, which was the first effort to bring key states together for multilateral talks.

For an internal Iranian debate to bear fruit, however, the United States will need to give the impression that it will accept Iranian compliance and not pocket concessions from Tehran as a prelude to making further demands. Some Iranians currently believe that, even if they accept the Additional Protocol, more demands will be forthcoming and that such concessions will open the door for the United States to seek regime change. Whatever the desirability of such a change, hard-nosed U.S. attitudes will not bring it to fruition. It is more realistic to pressure for legitimate ends, combined with the prospect of much better relations if and when the regime does change its policies as well as its politics. Washington will be challenged to pursue a subtle approach that supports democratic movements in Iran and feeds their impulse to install an accountable government that is under the scrutiny of the public and represented by elected officials.

What if such debate ensues, Iran's nuclear program continues, and suspicions of the weapons program are not allayed? Is it possible that a democratic debate could not lead to a less pliable Iran bent on nuclear weapons? How then does the international community sanction and target a more visibly democratic regime? This consideration is important because it reflects an awareness that there are no guarantees. At worst, however, a more democratic and accountable Iranian government would be a more desirable interlocutor than the current regime is; at best, a debate would put the nuclear

weapons issue in perspective, exposing the hollowness of the argument that nuclear weapons bring its owners international prestige or status (as if the example of North Korea were not enough) and advertising the degree to which nuclear weapons would complicate Iran's security without meeting any of its reasonable security needs.

After all, the only conceivable justification for Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons might be that they are needed as a deterrent against the United States. Yet, it is in fact only Iran's quest for nuclear weapons that makes a U.S. attack on Iran at all likely. A responsible Iran that abided by its NPT commitment to forgo nuclear weapons would be an internationally engaged Iran with better developmental prospects and that is more militarily secure and more secure in its status and role.

Iranians can come to the right conclusion about the country's nuclear program for themselves if the issues are framed in terms of realistic advantages and disadvantages for their country and their individual livelihoods rather than wrapped up in the myth that a nuclearized Iran is tantamount to an independent, secure, and progressing Iran. Impartial and sustained encouragement from nations that assert themselves as friends of Iran rather than define it as their foe can help bring this needed debate to the surface as there exists no necessary or inevitable contradiction between Iran's security needs and nuclear nonproliferation.

Ultimately, the best nonproliferation decision is one that is made indigenously; based on Iranians' own assessment of their country's national interests, such a decision would prove durable and legitimate. Such a decision can be encouraged by the international community, and perhaps especially the EU, which is less shy about offering inducements for good behavior. Iran should be able to see the benefits and rights accorded to states that act responsibly as international good citizens. The United States and its allies should thus encourage this wide-ranging internal debate in tandem with external efforts to induce or compel Iran to comply with nonproliferation norms.

## Notes

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1. Michael Dobbs, "U.S. Using U.N. to Thwart Iran's Nuclear Program," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2003, p. A12.
2. An Ayandeh Research Institute poll taken September 2002 reported 75 percent of Tehran residents favored negotiations. The pollsters were subsequently jailed. See *RFE/RL Iran Report* 5, no. 36, October 7, 2002, [www.rferl.org/iran-report/2002/10/36-071002.html](http://www.rferl.org/iran-report/2002/10/36-071002.html) (accessed July 24, 2003).
3. See Shahram Chubin, "Whither Iran? Reform, Domestic Politics and National Se-

- curity,” *Adelphi Paper* no. 342 (London: Oxford University Press, 2002); Shahram Chubin, “Iran’s Strategic Environment and Nuclear Weapons,” in *Iran’s Nuclear Weapons Options: Issues and Analysis*, ed. Geoffrey Kemp (Washington, D.C.: Nixon Center, 2001), chap. 2.
4. For background on how the issue of policy on Palestine became subject to debate, see Chubin, “Whither Iran?” For examples of the debate and reformists’ view, see the comments of Mohsen Mirdamadi (head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Majlis) on the *Aftab-e Yazd* website, May 9, 2002, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, online edition (BBC online), May 13, 2002; *Nowrooz*, April 10, 2002, in BBC online, April 12, 2002 (editorial); *Bonyan*, April 4, 2002, in BBC online, April 7, 2002 (editorial).
  5. See Farideh Fahri, “To Have or Not to Have” in *Iran’s Nuclear Weapons Options: Issues and Analysis*, ed. Geoffrey Kemp (Washington, D.C.: Nixon Center, 2001), chap. 3, [www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/pdf/nixoniranwmd.pdf](http://www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/pdf/nixoniranwmd.pdf) (accessed July 24, 2003).
  6. BBC online, July 10, 2003.
  7. BBC online, July 13, 2003.
  8. Both references can be found in BBC online, June 30, 2003.
  9. David E. Sanger, “Bush Warns Iran on Building Nuclear Arms,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2003, p. A1.
  10. David E. Sanger, “Viewing the War as a Lesson to the World,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2003.
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  12. Robert S. Litwak, “The New Calculus of Pre-emption,” *Survival* 44, no. 4 (winter 2002–2003): 53–80.
  13. Michael Eisenstadt, “Iranian Nuclear Weapons, Part I: The Challenges of U.S. Preventive Action,” *Policywatch*, no. 760 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 27, 2003).
  14. See Geoffrey Kemp, “How to Stop the Iranian Bomb,” *National Interest*, no. 72 (spring 2003), pp. 48–58. Kemp characterizes this approach as “constructive containment.”
  15. For background on the “rogue state” concept and policy, see Robert S. Litwak, *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University Press/Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000).
  16. Najmeh Bozorgmehr and Guy Dinmore, “Anti-Government Demonstrations: Gunfire Heard During Clashes on Streets of Tehran,” *Financial Times*, June 14, 2003, p. 13; Roula Khalaf, “IAEA Chief: Insecurity Drives WMD Proliferation,” *Financial Times*, June 23, 2003, p. 8. See “Iran sous pression,” *Le Monde* (Paris), June 19, 2003, p. 18 (editorial).