

# The ‘Demand-Side’: Avoiding a Nuclear-Armed Iran

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by Bradley L. Bowman

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*Abstract: This article examines the historical record of “nuclear rollback” and the motivations for Iran’s apparent pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability in order to identify the broad principles that should guide U.S. and international efforts to resolve the nuclear crisis with Iran.<sup>1</sup> The author argues that Iran, like all states, seeks security and respect. For many Iranians, the past three decades provide proof that such security and respect can only be attained with a strategic nuclear deterrent. In 2009, if the United States can show Tehran a genuine path to security and prestige that does not require nuclear weapons, Tehran might give it serious consideration. However, if the United States and the international community fail to address Iran’s legitimate need for security or its desire for international respect, Bowman believes it may only be a matter of time until Iran obtains a nuclear weapons capability.*

## Introduction

One of the most important, yet overlooked, conclusions of the highly controversial December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was that Iran now possesses the “scientific, technical, and industrial capacity eventually to produce nuclear weapons if it decides to do so.” If this conclusion is accurate—and many technical experts believe it is—the international community must place greater emphasis on the *demand-side* of the issue. In other words, U.S. policy must address the “nuclear drivers” that

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<sup>1</sup> Many of this article’s arguments are based on interviews and meetings with more than 200 individuals between July and December of 2007. These interviews were conducted in the United States, as well Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.

motivate Iran to pursue nuclear weapons. The international community should continue its efforts to monitor Iranian nuclear activities and regulate Iran's access to nuclear technologies and materials. However, these steps are not enough. An effective strategy to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons must be comprehensive, focusing on both the availability of nuclear materials and technology, as well as the demand for nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, U.S. efforts to avoid a nuclear-armed Iran have been decidedly one-sided—failing to evaluate the reasons Iran seeks nuclear weapons. If U.S. policy continues to neglect the “nuclear drivers” that motivate Iran to pursue nuclear weapons, U.S. efforts to avoid an Iranian bomb will almost certainly fail.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Lessons of History**

Since the advent of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II, 29 states have pursued nuclear arsenals. However, 18 of these states willingly abandoned their programs—a decision often called nuclear “rollback.”<sup>2</sup> These 18 case studies provide ample evidence that states can be dissuaded from pursuing nuclear weapons when the international community—and often the United States in particular—addresses the motivations behind the state's quest for nuclear weapons. A review of these case studies offers four particularly important lessons.

First, rarely is there a single explanation for a nation's decision to pursue nuclear weapons. According to a National Defense University (NDU) study, the most influential “roll forward” factors have been: assessment of threat, breakdown of global nonproliferation norms, national pride and unity, personal leadership, strategic deterrent, and perceived weakening of security alliances.<sup>3</sup>

The most influential “rollback” factors have been: foreign pressure, impediments to development, international standing, personal leadership, net loss of security, and a reassessment of the threat. While this list clearly underscores the preeminent role of security calculations in states' decisions regarding the development of nuclear weapons, other factors consistently impact the nuclear decision as well. Scott Sagan, a respected nuclear proliferation scholar, highlights the importance of security considerations in the nuclear “roll forward” decision, but he also emphasizes the influential role of

<sup>2</sup>The countries that have “rolled back” include Norway, Italy, Indonesia, Egypt, Switzerland, Sweden, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Yugoslavia, South Korea, Taiwan, Romania, South Africa, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Libya. The Iraqi program was discovered and reversed by force and the Iranian program appears to continue. Rebecca Hersman and Robert Peters, “Nuclear U-Turns: Lessons from Rollback for Preventing Future Proliferation,” Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction PowerPoint Presentation (Washington, DC: National Defense University, June 27, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

domestic sources. According to Sagan, the parochial interests of actors in the nuclear energy establishment, important interests within the professional military establishment, and domestic interests of politicians can increase the likelihood that a country will pursue nuclear weapons.<sup>4</sup>

Other scholars agree that one cannot dismiss the importance of domestic factors, yet they place greater emphasis on individual political leaders. For example, it is difficult to ignore the pivotal role of Nasser (Egypt), Gaddafi (Libya), Ben-Gurion (Israel), and the Shah (Iran) in their respective country's nuclear decision.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the factors one chooses to emphasize, the overall point is clear: although security considerations usually play a preeminent role in the nuclear proliferation of states, a number of other factors usually play a decisive role, as well.

Second, a state's decision regarding the development of nuclear weapons should not be viewed as a single, distinct, irreversible decision. On the contrary, history consistently demonstrates that the proliferation decision-making process of states can be better understood as a series of decision points in which states "dial up" or "dial down" their programs to keep options open. Decisions related to proliferation evolve slowly and incrementally. Undoubtedly, leaders make specific policy decisions in response to a particular set of initial motivations, but these decisions are frequently reassessed and reversed as the program progresses in response to new developments. While this finding provides hope for those who seek to reverse Iran's nuclear program, it also suggests that the international community can never "rest on its laurels," trusting that Iran has irreversibly turned its back on nuclear weapons. In other words, the United States can never declare victory in nonproliferation, either regarding Iran or any other country. Nonproliferation will have to remain a permanent fixture of U.S. policy, especially as the increasing diffusion and availability of nuclear technology and know-how will make it easier for states to "dial up" their nuclear weapons programs.

Third, the "drivers" of a state's nuclear weapons program should not be viewed as constant. In other words, the motivations catalyzing a state's nuclear program probably differ from the motivations that help to sustain that nuclear program. The "drivers" propelling the program forward continue to evolve over time. Often, as a state's nuclear program develops, constituencies emerge, momentum builds, and people "rally around" the program. As a result, stopping a program that has already begun often presents more of a challenge than preventing the onset of a program in the first place. Once leaders decide to pursue nuclear weapons and work begins, discontinuing the pursuit in the face of international pressure can promote an image of weakness

<sup>4</sup> Scott D. Sagan, "The Causes of Nuclear Proliferation," *Current History* (April 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation and the Middle East," *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* (Winter 2005) p. 408.

that could likely result in political difficulties. Although the initial motivation may have been overwhelmingly security-centric, the political desire to create a domestic and international image of strength may heighten a regime's determination to continue nuclear weapons development.

Fourth, due to its relative power and global influence, U.S. policy often has a strong influence on the decision-making of states regarding nuclear weapons. Whether the state represents a potential adversary or a consistent friend, U.S. policies often play a decisive role. With potential adversaries, the respect and recognition of the United States, the extension of a nonaggression pact, or the credible promise of economic and political benefits can sometimes convince potential adversaries to "rollback" their nuclear weapons programs.

In sum, addressing the Iranian nuclear program represents one of the most difficult and complex challenges the United States has confronted in some time. The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran extend well beyond Iran's specific actions. Fortunately, U.S. decision makers can refer to a significant case history of nuclear "roll forward" and "rollback" when formulating current decisions. The four lessons offered by these case studies can inform current U.S. policy toward Iran. The degree to which these lessons guide U.S. policy will largely determine the state of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East in coming years.

### **The "Demand-Side" of the Iranian Nuclear Weapons Program**

The 2007 Iran NIE shifted the ground beneath the contemporary debate surrounding Iran's nuclear program. Many cite the NIE as evidence that the Iranian nuclear program no longer represents a serious challenge to U.S. interests and security. Undoubtedly, the NIE's revelation that a nuclear-armed Iran remains unlikely before 2010–2015 permitted a welcome exhalation, as it became apparent the international community has more time than many believed to persuade Iran to forgo nuclear weapons. However, it would be a serious mistake to use the NIE as the basis for demoting Iran's nuclear program to the second tier of U.S. national security concerns or reducing U.S.-led pressure on Iran.

Since Iran now appears to have the domestic ability to eventually acquire nuclear weapons, it is essential for the United States to address the demand-side of Iran's nuclear program. If the United States seeks to persuade Iran to abandon its long-term quest for nuclear weapons, policy-makers must address the key Iranian motivations. Before the U.S. and the international community can address these motivations, they must first identify them. Based on interviews with hundreds of government officials, journalists, and scholars in the United States and throughout the Middle East, I believe Iran is overwhelmingly motivated by a quest for security and respect.

## Security

An Iranian desire for security appears to drive long-term Iranian interest in obtaining a nuclear weapons capability. One need not delve into the long history of British, Russian, and American involvement in Iran to appreciate the Iranian desire for security from foreign intervention in domestic affairs. In just the last three decades, Iraq invaded Iran, the United States encircled Iran by invading Iraq and Afghanistan, and the United States threatened Tehran with regime change. To appreciate the central role that security plays in motivating the apparent Iranian nuclear weapons program, each of these events deserves additional attention.

The Iranian nuclear energy program and a nascent nuclear weapons program predated the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, evidence suggests that the Iranian progression toward nuclear weapons resumed with even greater vigor in the early 1980s, prompted primarily by the Iran-Iraq war. On September 22, 1980, Saddam Hussein launched a full-scale invasion of Iran. Notably, rather than turning against the Khomeini regime, Iranians rallied around the clerics and rushed to the front to fight the Iraqi invasion. Within two months, an estimated 100,000 Iranian volunteers arrived at the front.<sup>6</sup> Quick victory eluded Saddam, and the war became a lengthy and bloody conflict for both sides. In one four-week period in early 1984, Iraq reportedly killed 40,000 Iranians.<sup>7</sup> The horrific nature of the war was exacerbated by Saddam Hussein's missile attacks against Iranian cities and especially his use of chemical weapon attacks against Iranian soldiers. By 1983, Saddam used mustard gas extensively against Iranian troops. This use of chemical weapons appears to have played a central role in catalyzing the Iranian nuclear weapons program.<sup>8</sup>

This traumatic war—punctuated by Iraq's use of chemical weapons—served as a formative experience for Iran's current political and military leadership. After Iraq's 1983 use of chemical weapons against Iranian forces, the Iranians circulated color pamphlets in Western Europe, attempting to highlight Iraq's gruesome violations of the Geneva Protocol.<sup>9</sup> Despite these efforts, Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran received little attention, and Iran received no substantive help. Facing continued Iraqi chemical attacks, the Iranians persisted in lobbying efforts from 1984 to 1986. Although these Iranian efforts to rally the international community against Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons led to some international condemnation, no concrete action was taken to protect Iran or to punish Iraq.

<sup>6</sup> Trita Parsi, *The Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Javed Ali, "Chemical Weapons and the Iran-Iraq War: A Case Study of Noncompliance," *The Nonproliferation Review* (Spring 2001) p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, *Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Real and Potential Threat* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2006) p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> Javed Ali, "Chemical Weapons and the Iran-Iraq War: A Case Study of Noncompliance," p. 48.

Many Iranians were left feeling abandoned by the international community. Referring in hindsight to the Iran-Iraq war, Hashemi Rafsanjani, the influential former President of Iran, said, “The war taught us that international laws are only scraps of paper.”<sup>10</sup> A widespread Iranian perception developed that the international community “dropped the ball” during the Iran-Iraq war, imbuing many of the current commanders of the IRGC with an “absolute disdain for international rules and regulations.” Iran believed they could trust nobody and needed to develop the independent means to protect itself.<sup>11</sup> These Iranian leaders dedicated themselves to ensuring that nothing like the Iran-Iraq war happened again. The most effective way to achieve this end, they concluded, was to develop an independent nuclear deterrent. Almost two decades after that war, lessons of this period continue to pervade the thinking of Iranian leaders. In November 2007, trumpeting the launch of a new submarine apparently built completely in Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said, “Today, you have bee[n] able to design and build many of the military requirements. We have become self-sufficient from other countries, thanks to your valuable self-confidence.”<sup>12</sup> This frequently repeated theme, probably not designed in this case for an international audience, demonstrates the Iranian emphasis on self-sufficiency. In short, the Iran-Iraq war demonstrated irrefutably to many Iranians that serious security threats existed and that Iran could not rely on others to defend itself. This lesson served as a powerful impetus for Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

While the Iran-Iraq war appears to have served as the primary motivator for the Iranian nuclear weapons program after the 1979 Revolution, developments since 9/11 have exacerbated the Iranian sense of vulnerability and insecurity. After the events of 9/11, the United States invaded Afghanistan to attack Al Qaeda and to destroy the safe haven provided by the Taliban. Long opposed to the radical Sunni Taliban, Iran provided humanitarian aid, tactical intelligence, and other forms of cooperation to assist the United States in the early stages of the invasion. Undoubtedly, Iran did not take these steps out of benevolence; Iran wanted to overthrow the Taliban. However, this Iranian-American cooperation was notable and perhaps, in Iranian eyes, provided an opening for some kind of *rapprochement*. Instead, however, President Bush included Iran in the “axis of evil” a few weeks later during his 2002 State of the Union Address. Referring to North Korea, Iran, and Iraq, Bush said, “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world . . . And all nations

<sup>10</sup> Ray Takeyh, “Iran at the Strategic Crossroads,” *Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East*.

<sup>11</sup> Phone interview with Vali Nasr (August 29, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> “Tehran Launches Second Sonar-Avoiding Light Sub,” Associated Press (November 29, 2007) <http://www.gulfintimedia.com/index.php?id=361847&news&sim;type=Top&lang=en>.

should know: America will do what is necessary to ensure our Nation's security."<sup>13</sup>

As the Bush administration began the verbal escalation to war, Iran opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The relative ease with which the U.S. military overthrew Saddam Hussein and occupied Baghdad in three weeks—something Iran could not do in eight years—seems to have caused great consternation in Tehran. After the Iraq invasion, then-Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said, “They tell us that Syria is the next target, but according to our reports, Iran could well follow.”<sup>14</sup> In April 2003, Iran found itself essentially surrounded by U.S. forces commanded by a U.S. administration suggesting that Iran could be next. To Iran's south, a powerful U.S. naval presence patrolled the Persian Gulf, augmented by an impressive string of U.S. military bases in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirate (UAE). To Iran's west, over 100,000 American troops guarded Iraq. To Iran's North, U.S. troops were present in Azerbaijan and the central Asian republics.<sup>15</sup> To Iran's east, significant numbers of U.S. and other NATO troops patrolled Afghanistan.

This sense of encirclement and strategic vulnerability prompted Iran to seek a “grand bargain” with the United States in May 2003, only three weeks after the Iraq invasion. This offer, apparently approved by the Supreme Leader and the result of intense internal debate in Tehran, represented a major shift in Iranian policy, offering to address every major U.S. objection to Iranian foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> When the United States rejected the offer out-of-hand, it confirmed the arguments of the hardliners and undercut those of the moderates, convincing many Iranians that the United States had a greater interest in regime change than in policy change. This rejection of the Iranian negotiating proposal may also have left some Iranians believing that the United States opposed Iranian power and regional influence, not just its policies. Such an Iranian perception led many in Tehran to conclude that they are unable to negotiate with the United States, motivating their leadership to push ahead with policies they might otherwise view as negotiable.

Some leading observers dismiss the security motivation for the Iranian nuclear weapons program, citing examples of confident and dismissive Iranian rhetoric. In a comment, before the 2007 NIE release, for instance, Brigadier General Mohammad-Ali Jafari, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, downplayed a U.S. attack as “highly unlikely.” If the United States were to

<sup>13</sup> George W. Bush, The President's State of the Union Address (Washington, DC, January 29, 2002) <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Takeyh, “Iran at the Strategic Crossroads,” p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> Trita Parsi, *The Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, p. 240.

<sup>16</sup> For the text of the Iranian negotiating proposal see: Parsi, *The Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, pp.341-342.



mount an attack on Iran, Jafari said Iran has “the proper means to nullify its aggression.”<sup>17</sup> U.S. analysts and decision makers should not consider such comments evidence that security from a U.S. attack does not represent an important motivation for the Iranian nuclear program. High level Iranian officials put forward a brave face in public, but are fearful in private. In public, Iranian officials issue the standard lines similar to those of Jafari; in private, these individuals quietly and anxiously ask questions such as, “Do you think the United States will attack?” These Iranian responses were echoed in multiple interviews with Arab Government leaders and scholars. There is a genuine concern in the region—among both Arabs and Iranians—that the United States will attack Iran. While the December 2007 Iran NIE undoubtedly diminished some of these fears, subsequent statements by Khamenei suggest Iranian fears of a U.S. attack are reduced but still palpable. For example, in January 2008, Khamenei argued that the time was not right for establishing relations with the United States by underscoring that relations between Washington and Baghdad did not preclude the United States from attacking Iraq.<sup>18</sup>

Some argue that Iranian fears of a U.S. attack will compel the Iranians to negotiate. However, my interviews suggest these Iranian fears are having the opposite effect. Fears of a U.S. attack validate a long-running Iranian belief that Iran needs nuclear weapons to deter a U.S. attack. Consequently, a self-reinforcing interplay has developed in which Iranian nuclear progress invites escalating U.S. threats, and these threats, in turn, encourage Iran to push ahead with its nuclear program. Until this cycle is broken, the likelihood of war or a nuclear-armed Iran will grow.

### **National Pride and Prestige**

In addition to Iran’s desire for security, national pride and prestige apparently play a major role in Iran’s long-term motivation to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. This is not surprising; nonproliferation scholarship has long identified national pride and prestige as major motivators for pursuing nuclear weapons. For example, these factors played a significant role in the nuclear “roll forward” decisions of Argentina, Brazil, France, India, Indonesia, Libya, and Romania. Today, the fact that five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council also represent the acknowledged nuclear powers under the NPT reinforces the idea that nuclear weapons are a prerequisite to great power status. The fact that several nuclear powers appear to attach great worth to

<sup>17</sup> Iran Daily. November 29, 2007. <http://www.iran-daily.com/1386/3003/html/national.htm#s276069>.

<sup>18</sup> “Khamenei criticizes US policy on Iran’s nuclear program; says US-Iran relations detrimental now, but may be possible in the future,” Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran (January 3, 2008).



their nuclear programs “reinforces just how important these weapons can be as sources of power and prestige.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1998, then-President Khatami called for a “dialogue of civilizations,” suggesting that Iran would speak for one of the civilizations.<sup>20</sup> Khatami repeated this call for a “dialogue of civilizations” in 2006.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, the Iranian term for the United States “the great Satan” has been eclipsed by the term the “global arrogance.”<sup>22</sup> The theme of dialogue in “mutual respect” reemerged in a 2006 six-page letter from President Ahmadinejad to the American people. Ahmadinejad’s letter “highlighted a central demand of Tehran: That it be treated as an equal by Washington.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the prestige and national pride projected internationally, Iran’s nuclear program has served a useful domestic purpose for the regime in Tehran. Ahmadinejad ran for office on an essentially populist platform, promising various economic reforms. For the most part, Ahmadinejad has been unable to deliver on these promises. In fact, the Iranian economy continues to suffer from spiraling unemployment and inflation. In April 2008, the outgoing Iranian economy minister blamed Ahmadinejad for the country’s economic woes.<sup>24</sup> Suggesting the degree of frustration that exists in Iran regarding the economy, 50 leading economists, risking regime retribution, published a harshly worded letter to Ahmadinejad decrying high unemployment and inflation in Iran.<sup>25</sup> By focusing on Iran’s nuclear enrichment program, Ahmadinejad has attempted to shift attention away from his economic failures and promote a degree of unity and regime support that would not otherwise exist due to the country’s economic woes. For Ahmadinejad, to a significant extent, the confrontation over Iran’s nuclear program has served to unify the Iranian people around themes of “Persian pride” and to distract them from his economic shortcomings.

The more determined and obstinate Ahmadinejad has been in pursuing uranium enrichment, the more enrichment has become the centerpiece of Iranian national pride. American, Arab, and Turkish scholars, as well as Arab Shia politicians, many of whom have spent time in Iran in recent months, consistently noted that the majority of Iranians proudly view nuclear enrichment

<sup>19</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, “Nuclear Proliferation and the Middle East,” p. 409.

<sup>20</sup> Robin Wright, “Former President of Iran Invited to Speak in D.C.,” *Washington Post* (August 22, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> E. A. Torriero and Stephen Franklin, “Khatami Encourages Muslims in the U.S. To Work for Peace,” *Chicago Tribune* (September 2, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Karl Vick, “Iran Calling Wider World to its Side; Tehran Looks Beyond Muslim Nations As It Faces Off With West,” *Washington Post* (February 1, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Slackman, “Iran’s President Criticizes Bush In Letter to American People,” *New York Times* (November 30, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Ali Akbar Dareini, “Minister blames Ahmadinejad’s policies for economic woes,” *The Associated Press* (April 23, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “Iran Cracks Down on Dissent, Parading Examples in Streets,” *New York Times* (June 24, 2007).

as a non-negotiable right of their state. When the Iranian people think Iran is being prevented from developing nuclear energy, there is a tendency to unite behind the regime. In January 2008, Khamenei said, “Thus, as all the Iranian people countrywide have declared, access to this scientific power and the power of nuclear energy is really the inalienable right of the Iranian nation.”<sup>26</sup> The leadership has trumpeted Iran’s accomplishments in enrichment so extensively and has made it so central to Iran’s national identity that it is difficult to imagine a politically viable way for the regime to agree to a permanent suspension of enrichment. A widespread sense currently exists that Iran will refuse to permanently give up its right to uranium enrichment.

### **A New Approach Toward Iran**

In devising a successful policy to address the Iranian desire to obtain nuclear weapons, it is helpful to return to the NDU study. The study found that foreign pressure, impediments to development, international standing, personal leadership, net loss of security, and a reassessment of the threat were the leading reasons states decided to “rollback” their nuclear weapons program. These six most common causes of “rollback” can inform U.S. grand strategy toward Iran.

*Foreign Pressure/Impediments to Development.* According to the December 2007 Iran NIE, the U.S. intelligence community concluded with high confidence that Tehran halted some aspects of its nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2003 “in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran’s previously undeclared nuclear work.” Based on this fact, the NIE argues that increased international pressure, as well as additional sanctions—combined with a credible offer to avoid both—could help persuade Iran to verifiably forswear nuclear weapons. This NIE conclusion is supported by Iran’s May 2003 negotiation proposal calling for an end to “interference in [Iran’s] internal and external relations,” as well as the “abolishment of all sanctions.”<sup>27</sup> It seems likely that Iran’s government would not have listed these two aims first if it did not have significant impact on Iran. However, the difficulty rests in convincing Iran that these U.S.-led measures are aimed at Iranian policy change and not regime change. The United States should continue to turn up the pressure against Iran, while simultaneously showing Iran a genuine and credible path to eliminating international pressure and sanctions. If key Iranian leaders remain convinced the U.S. desires to achieve regime change—rather than just policy change—this will only exacerbate Iran’s sense of insecurity and likely prevent a peaceful resolution.

<sup>26</sup> “Leader Underlines Iran’s Continued N. Progress,” Fars News Agency (January 5, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Parsi, *The Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, pp. 341-342.

*International Standing.* The earlier discussion of the “drivers” for the apparent Iranian nuclear weapons program highlighted the central role that national pride and prestige play in Iranian motivations. To the degree that these factors play a role, a restoration and acknowledgment of Iran’s regional and international standing would be an essential part of any “grand bargain” between the United States and Iran. In fact, Iran does not view itself as a pariah state. Many indications suggest that several Iranian leaders desire to end Iran’s relative isolation and to regain Iran’s international standing. A U.S. policy that recognizes Iran’s legitimate interests and welcomes a reformed Iran as a full member of the international community would go a long way toward satisfying the Iranian desire for prestige and international standing. This is not to say the Iranians would eagerly abandon their nuclear enrichment. Some evidence suggests that most Iranians view a nuclear power program that includes enrichment as a non-negotiable symbol and right of Iran as a “great nation” and regional power; however the same cannot be said of nuclear weapons. Significant internal disagreement regarding the necessity of acquiring nuclear weapons exists. In other words, treating a reformed Iran with respect and recognizing it as a regional power will represent a necessary, but probably insufficient component of any “grand bargain” between the United States and Iran.

*Personal Leadership.* The fact that the personal leadership of a well-positioned leader has often played a pivotal role in a state’s decision to end a nuclear weapons program may tempt some U.S. decision makers to consider regime change in Iran. According to some strategists and policymakers, using targeted military attacks or subversion, the United States could eliminate Iran’s top tier of leaders, resulting in a change in Iranian nuclear policy. Undeniably, in Indonesia, Romania, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, Yugoslavia, Libya, and Egypt, a change of heart in an existing leader or the rise of a new leader played a central role in the state’s decision to “rollback” its nuclear program. However, as a general rule, these leadership changes did not occur through foreign intervention. Furthermore, due to the strong role that a desire for security plays in Iran’s long-term effort to obtain a nuclear weapons capability, a U.S. attack or subversion targeting Tehran’s regime would only validate Iranian security concerns and cause the country to rededicate itself to obtaining a nuclear weapons capability. In short, an Iranian regime change needs to originate within Iran.

A U.S. regime change effort would have the three following effects. First, it would cause the vast majority of the Iranian public to rally around the current Iranian regime. Some Iranian exile groups actively promote the idea that the nature of the Iranian regime, the significant number of non-Persians in Iran, and the western orientation of many young Iranians, make Iran ripe for a U.S.-supported revolution aimed at undermining the current regime. Some even suggest that much of the Iranian public would welcome and support U.S. military action narrowly targeting the regime in Tehran. The United States

would be wise to approach such assertions with great wariness. Virtually all Iranian experts interviewed believe that if U.S. troops arrived on Iranian soil or if a U.S. plot to overthrow the current regime was discovered, these efforts would severely backfire. In the case of military action, once the U.S. assault began, any Iranian admiration for America would evaporate, and Iranians would strongly oppose the United States and defend their homeland.

Second, there is evidence that the Iranian nuclear enrichment program enjoys widespread support within Iran. Thus, Iranians would perceive a U.S. regime change effort as another Western effort to deprive Iran of the technology and power it believes it has a right to as a great power and a Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatory. Furthermore, even if the United States succeeded in overthrowing the existing power structure, there is a significant chance that the new regime would also support Iran's enrichment efforts and perhaps even Iran's nuclear weapons program. The United States lacks the military resources or popular will necessary to occupy Iran for an extended period to ensure the new Iranian government would be positively disposed toward U.S. interests. Thus, a U.S. attack absent a long-term occupation would almost certainly result in an Iranian government more hostile to the United States and more determined to acquire nuclear weapons. While Iranian opinion regarding nuclear weapons is significantly divided, a U.S. regime change effort would validate Iranian hardliners' arguments, discredit the moderates' arguments, and increase Iranian popular support for a weapons program.

Third, depending on the nature of the U.S. regime change efforts, the Iranian government would likely respond fiercely and comprehensively. The Iranians would likely target U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and encourage Hezbollah and perhaps Hamas to attack Israel and encourage sympathetic populations in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to attack U.S. embassies and military bases. The Iranian response would likely be characterized by missile attacks, as well as asymmetrical operations consisting of terrorist attacks against U.S. interests.

*Net Loss of Security.* One or more states in the Middle East almost certainly would pursue nuclear weapons of their own if Iran obtains nuclear weapons. It is difficult to imagine Saudi Arabia passively accepting a nuclear-armed Tehran. At minimum, a nuclear-armed Iran would dramatically increase tensions in the region. At worst, it could spark a regional nuclear arms race. Even the current Iranian approach which appears to be a "nuclear hedging" strategy seems to be spawning similar—albeit nascent—programs among some of Iran's neighbors. Regardless of Iran's ultimate decision whether to cross the nuclear threshold, the current Iranian approach is having the net effect of reducing Tehran's security. This fact provides a powerful argument to dissuade the Iranians from their apparent present course.

Often during the last century, one state's acquisition of nuclear weapons served as a powerful catalyst for another state's nuclear weapons

program. Various “drivers” motivate a nuclear program, but one cannot deny that one state’s nuclear weapon acquisition tends to beget rivals. More specifically, nuclear weapons proliferation often occurs in pairs. For example, the U.S. acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1945 helped motivate the Soviet Union’s acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1949. When the United States developed a more advanced “H-bomb” in 1952, the Soviets responded by exploding their own “H-bomb” less than a year later. The 1961 Chinese test of a nuclear device played a significant role in India’s decision in 1964 to research a “peaceful” nuclear explosive. A decade later, the Indians successfully tested a nuclear device. Responding to the Indian program, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto said his country would obtain nuclear weapons if India did even if his people had “to eat grass or leaves, even go hungry” to free up the resources required.<sup>28</sup> Over the next three decades India and Pakistan developed their nuclear capabilities, each spurred largely by the other. In May 1998, India tested five weaponized nuclear warheads, leading Pakistan to follow suit a few weeks later.

This brief history demonstrates that when a country develops nuclear weapons, the action frequently catalyzes the nuclear program of a potential adversary. In the cases of the U.S.-U.S.S.R. and India-Pakistan, one country’s acquisition of nuclear weapons played a major role in the next country’s acquisition. In both cases, the mutual acquisition of nuclear weapons led to periods of brinkmanship that could have easily ended in nuclear war. Admittedly, the current relationship between India and Pakistan appears more stable partly due to nuclear weapons. However, the increased number of states with nuclear weapons increases the likelihood that nuclear knowledge, materials, or technology will proliferate further to other state or non-state actors. The secret dealings of the Pakistani A.Q. Kahn network which shared nuclear know-how with several countries provides evidence of this. As the arguments of realists like Kenneth Waltz suggest, the relationship between India and Pakistan may be more stable now partly due to nuclear weapons. However, this stability has come at the cost of further nuclear proliferation. As a result, for both the country that originally obtains nuclear weapons and for the international community, nuclear weapons proliferation often leads to a net loss of security.

The case of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons further demonstrates this truth. Without concerted and comprehensive American action, an Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons could lead to an eventual Saudi nuclear weapon acquisition. Such a development could induce additional nuclear proliferation in the UAE, Egypt, or Turkey. Iranian leaders should have little doubt that such a development would be undesirable and could threaten Iran’s

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell B. Reiss, “The Nuclear Tipping Point: Prospects for a World of Many Nuclear Weapons States,” *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices*, Edited by Kurt M. Campbell, et al. (Brookings Institution Press: Washington, DC 2004) p. 6.

security. Furthermore, in many respects, Iran currently enjoys conventional superiority over the Saudis. The mutual acquisition of nuclear weapons would largely negate this Iranian conventional superiority, reducing Iran's relative security. As the United States and its international partners try to dissuade the Iranians from pursuing a nuclear weapon, this logic should feature prominently in U.S. efforts. An Iranian realization of this fact could play a central role in at least persuading the Iranians not to cross the nuclear threshold.

*Reassessment of Threat.* As already discussed, security concerns play a central—and perhaps preeminent—role in Iran's motivations to obtain a nuclear deterrent. Thus, the U.S. and the international community's ability to convince Iran to end its long-term pursuit of nuclear weapons will depend largely on whether Iranians perceive a lessening in the security threat. Currently, only two countries are frequently cited as conventional or nuclear threats to Iran: Israel and the United States.<sup>29</sup> However, Iranians consider Israel a distant second to the United States in this regard.

Iranians base this assumption on three factors. First, many Iranians believe that Israel lacks the military capability to conduct a conventional military strike that would destroy Iran's nuclear program and a sufficient amount of its retaliatory capability. Thus, an Israeli attack would infuriate the Iranians and invite asymmetrical retaliation, while failing to accomplish its purpose. Second, Iran realizes that the presence of a formidably re-armed Hezbollah on Israel's northern border provides a strong deterrent against an Israeli attack on Iran. Third, despite Iran's anti-Israeli political rhetoric meant primarily for Arab popular consumption, Israel's nuclear weapons did not preclude Iran from working with Israel for over 20 years, including over 10 years after the Islamic Revolution. Throughout the 1980s, the Khomeini regime maintained discreet yet multilayered relations with Israel despite the well-known fact that Israel possessed nuclear weapons.<sup>30</sup> An Iranian regime that feels threatened by Israeli nuclear weapons would not conduct itself this way. Like most Arab governments, Tehran does not approve of Israel's nuclear weapons, but realizes that Israeli nuclear weapons do not represent an offensive threat to Iran.

As a result, from an Iranian perspective, the United States represents the only major strategic threat to Iran. The degree to which U.S. decision makers address this fact will likely determine the outcome of the Iranian nuclear crisis. An essential component of any "grand bargain" between the United States and Iran must include a U.S. non-aggression pact that Iran can trust. Moreover, Iran must believe that the international community will take Iranian national security and legitimate interests seriously. Assuming conditions continue to improve in Iraq and depending on the result of the 2009

<sup>29</sup>Threat here is defined as a state with both the capability and likely intent to launch an attack.

<sup>30</sup>Trita Parsi, *The Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, p. 240.

elections in Iran, a new U.S. administration in 2009 might provide a window of opportunity for a historic breakthrough in U.S.-Iranian relations.

U.S. security assurances would represent the core of any such “grand bargain” between the United States and Iran. However, the central role of prestige and international standing as “drivers” of the Iranian nuclear program would complicate any potential U.S. security assurances to Iran. Any public non-aggression pact perceived as a concession by the “powerful Americans” to not attack the “weak Iranians” would be internationally embarrassing and domestically intolerable to Iran. Based on the Iranian self-conception as a great civilization and a regional power, Iran would not accept any U.S. proposal that treated Iran as a vassal state eager for American protection. In diverse interviews, Arab, Turkish, and American Government officials and scholars reiterate the role of “Persian pride” in the Iranian nuclear program. The Iranians would seek rock solid assurances regarding U.S. peaceful intentions behind closed doors, while insisting that the negotiations be portrayed as a “dialogue of civilizations” or talks between equals. In any discussions between the United States and Iran regarding the Iranian nuclear program, many experts believe the United States must adroitly balance Iran’s critical need for security with its intense desire for respect. Many individuals interviewed believe the United States must craft a negotiation strategy allowing Iranians to verifiably “rollback” their nuclear program and declare victory simultaneously. If the United States refuses to adopt such a strategy, the result will likely be war, a nuclear-armed Iran, or both.

Some might respond to this dangerous dynamic by arguing the United States should explicitly rule out a U.S. attack to reduce the Iranian sense of insecurity. Most officials and scholars interviewed believe this would be unwise. Taking a U.S. military attack “off the table” would seriously reduce the Iranian motivation to negotiate. The refusal to rule out a U.S. attack does not represent the problem; rather, the problem is that the Iranians are not convinced that concessions would alter the U.S. desire to achieve regime change. While recent diplomatic overtures represent a step in the right direction, the U.S. tone, language, and policies since 9/11 have convinced Tehran that the United States remains determined to achieve regime change. Many believe that by rejecting the May 2003 negotiating proposal, supporting Iranian exile groups who seek to overthrow the Iranian regime, and declaring components of the Iranian military a terrorist organization, the Bush administration has convinced the Iranian regime that the United States is unalterably dedicated to regime change, regardless of Iranian actions. Many experts believe such an Iranian perception virtually guarantees Iran and the United States will not resolve their differences diplomatically. Therefore, the new administration in 2009 would be wise to undertake a concerted and unified diplomatic effort to change this Iranian perception. A successful resolution to this crisis requires the Iranians to be concerned that their continued pursuit of nuclear weapons increases the risk



of U.S. attack, while being fully convinced that Iranian concessions on their nuclear program would eliminate that risk.

### **U.S. Policy Going Forward**

As Shlomo Ben-Ami, Israel's former Foreign Minister, says:

The question today is not when Iran will have nuclear power, but how to integrate it into a policy of regional stability before it obtains such power. Iran is not driven by an obsession to destroy Israel, but by its determination to preserve its regime and establish itself as a strategic regional power, *vis-a-vis* both Israel and the Sunni Arab States . . . The answer to the Iranian threat is a policy of detente, which would change the Iranian elite's pattern of conduct.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, much of the U.S. approach toward Iran has largely neglected these Iranian motivations. The United States has focused on denying Iran the means to obtain nuclear weapons while largely ignoring the reasons behind Iran's desire for them. Undoubtedly, many of Iran's domestic and foreign policies deserve unambiguous condemnation. However, if the "drivers" of Iran's long-term desire for nuclear weapons remain unaddressed, the proliferation of nuclear technology virtually guarantees that Iran will be able to acquire nuclear weapons if it so desires. Acquiring nuclear weapons technology may not occur in the next year or two, but a failure to address Iran's motivations will virtually guarantee—when international attention and pressure wanes—that Iran will resume all facets of its nuclear weapons program in some capacity. As a result, neglecting Iran's motivations will almost certainly lead to an Iran with a nuclear weapons capability in the next decade.

As the 2007 NIE states, "In our judgment, only an Iranian political decision to abandon a nuclear weapons objective would plausibly keep Iran from eventually producing nuclear weapons." This political decision finds its grounding in Iran's perceived need for nuclear weapons. In the end, if Iran's core motivations remain unaddressed, no amount of international pressure and economic sanction will preclude this nation from obtaining nuclear weapons. A successful grand strategy toward Iran and its nuclear weapons program must address both the supply of nuclear technology and materials, as well as Iranian reasons for wanting a nuclear weapon. Any U.S. approach that neglects the demand-side of Iran's nuclear ambitions and exclusively focuses on the supply-side is doomed to failure.



<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 281.