



Iran: Recent Developments and Concerns



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INTRODUCTION

“History has shown that the Iranian nation has overcome obstacles. The bigger the obstacles, the more determined the Iranian nation is.” These words from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad come in context from increasing international pressure and unprecedented tensions between the Islamic Republic and the West. The recent escalation of exchanges between the United States and Iran has the potential to exacerbate the path to war, as most of the international community appears to remain committed to preventing Iran from attaining nuclear weapons capabilities. As diplomatic and economic pressure continues to represent the preferred tactics, the United States

and Israel (regarded as the Big and Little Satan by Iran, respectively) are the only two countries with both the motivation and capabilities to obstruct Iran's nuclear progress through both ongoing covert responses and potential military confrontation, should all other options fail. Will Israel attack Iran's nuclear installations? Would the United States consider unilateral military action or prefer to coordinate with NATO? Will the international community 'allow' the mullahs in Tehran to develop nuclear capabilities similar to the North Korean experience? It is clear that the diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions have thus far failed in curbing Iran's aspirations. Some believe that living in a world with a nuclear Iran is inevitable and the international community must prepare accordingly. A nuclear armed Iran would surely lead major regional countries such as Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia to strongly consider developing their own nuclear weapons to re-adjust the balance of power as their respective security situations would naturally deteriorate. Such a nuclear arms race would have unprecedented ramifications for Middle Eastern stability. What is clear, however, is that this is a pivotal year with regards to Iran's nuclear development, the outcome of which will profoundly alter the global security paradigm and change the course of history forever.

RATIONAL DEBATE?

There is extensive debate surrounding the ability of Israel to deter a nuclear Iran. Some analysts believe that the Mutually Assured Destruction characterizing the Cold War is unattainable when dealing with a nation that espouses self-sacrifice in its quest for the destruction of the "Zionist entity". Former President Rafsanjani stated that when Iran develops nuclear weapons "the strategy of the West will hit a dead end - since the use of a single atomic bomb has the power to destroy Israel completely, while it will only cause partial damage to the Islamic world."¹ If these are the calculations of a 'liberal reformer', what do the 'hardliners' bring to the table? Even if these "wiping Israel off the map" type statements are simply rhetoric, the fact that the Islamic Republic sent thousands of Iranian children, with symbolic keys to 'Paradise', as human mine-clearers during the 1980's war with Iraq illustrates that an earlier generation of the regime promoted a fundamentalist suicidal philosophy. The Islamic Republic has proved that it is willing to lose a considerable segment of its innocent populace to achieve its objectives through not only statements, but deeds as well. This is reinforced by the fact that Iran has been implicated in numerous suicide terrorist plots, by surrogates such as Hezbollah and even the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as well. Yet this does not mean that the regime itself is suicidal; the survival of the Islamic Republic has and always will be Iran's main priority. These aspirations and actions only emphasize the utmost priority attributed to regime survival and can essentially be construed as "rational."

Many analysts and observers believe that the regime has historically acted rationally and appropriately in response to most developments vis-à-vis the United States and the international community. Western conceptions of rationality, in itself difficult to define, cannot be directly applied to a fundamentalist regime situated in a region that attributes the utmost respect for power and where the language of force is the norm. The fact that the U.S. and Soviet Union were

at relative conventional parity and established a direct channel of communication, allowed the two superpowers to maintain a stable deterrence. Israel's superior conventional power may force a nuclear Iran to rely on threatening to employ such capabilities in a potential confrontation. Furthermore, the absence of a hot-line between Jerusalem and Tehran may lead to an unintended and unnecessary escalation between the two rivals. The absence of both of these vital conditions between the Jewish State and the Islamic Republic dictates that a nuclear armed standoff between the countries would be inherently more unstable than the situation characterizing the Cold War. The fact that both apparently rational superpowers came to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis despite mutual understandings and the ability to interact emphasizes the importance of preventing further nuclear proliferation throughout the most volatile region on earth. It appears that the two civilizations who have avoided extinction from ancient times are in a confrontation of devastatingly modern proportions.

IRANIAN MOTIVATIONS

There are real indications that demonstrate Iran's willingness, under the right circumstances, to employ nuclear weapons in a confrontation. However, there is no reason to believe that they would do so arbitrarily, as the regime is pursuing this capability as a necessary deterrent to the West and its neighbours who are perceived to be increasingly hostile. Most observers believe that the regime is primarily pursuing nuclear capabilities to consolidate power and enhance control domestically. The fact that opposition groups within Iran appear to be relatively more ambitious and determined throughout the past few years only reinforces the regime's pursuit. Moreover, under these circumstances it can be seen as logical for Iran to pursue a nuclear weapons program in their quest to achieve regional hegemony and to end its perceived historic vulnerability to foreign intervention and subjugation. Iran believes that its security is in jeopardy, surrounded by a vast American military presence in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, the neighbouring nuclear armed nations of Pakistan, India, China, Russia, and "allegedly", Israel, significantly diminish Iran's security perceptions. Therefore the nuclear pursuit should be viewed in nationalistic, as opposed to religious, terms. From this perspective, many opposition groups also advocate for a nuclear weapons program, albeit a far less belligerent stance. The international community must accept and embrace these concerns, whether real or perceived, in its attempts to engage in negotiations and curb their nuclear program.

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

Iran has thus far endured four rounds of penalties by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and numerous Western imposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic's vital oil industry and other financial transactions. However, the application of concurrent, full-scale economic sanctions, from a unified international community would have a better chance of forcing the target nation to acquiesce. As China and Russia, two permanent members of the Security Council, remain committed to preventing further sanctions, Iran will continue to weather the ineffective gradual escalation of measures undertaken by key Western countries. Some experts

believe that it is increasingly apparent that tougher sanctions are unlikely to affect the regime's cost-benefit analysis. According to most observers, achieving nuclear status has been enshrined as national necessity and it appears that Tehran is willing to endure the economic hardship.

Some experts and U.S. officials believe that sanctions are taking an economic toll and encouraging Iran to participate in negotiations. Others observe that Iran is finding ways to protect itself from crippling effects and have therefore entered discussions with more leverage than anticipated. Sanctions have certainly applied significant pressure; however, Iran is a large regional country with a comparatively diversified economy, which is not entirely dependent on oil. In many cases, economic sanctions affect the population most and Iran is no exception, as these penalties have had enormous repercussions on the Iranian people. With the depreciation of the Iranian currency and rescinding of social programs in light of the sanctions, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Iranian citizens to purchase essential goods.² Unfortunately, the dire circumstances endured by the population has not compelled the elite from changing course thus far, as the regime has prepared to withstand the harshest impact of economic sanctions.

Despite rifts between ruling clerical and elite circles, sanctions and diplomatic pressure has not forced Iran to reconsider their position. These measures have arguably reinforced the regime's concerns of foreign subjugation, furthering Tehran's siege mentality. The fact that the West openly discusses regime change as the optimal goal only reinforces Tehran's motivations and vision. President Ahmadinejad publicly acknowledged that the latest round of US-EU sanctions is the most severe yet to be imposed on Iran; however, he has reiterated that these measures would have no influence on the Iranian position vis-à-vis its nuclear energy program. Even though such assertions may be attributed to mere rhetoric, there is no doubt that Iran's existing economic challenges are further stressed by the sanctions. According to Western and Israeli intelligence, the sanctions have not deterred the Iranian regime thus far from continuing to pursue nuclear weapons. The future impact of these measures on coercing the regime to desist from the nuclear path remains to be seen.

TIT-FOR-TAT

The past year has witnessed a drastic increase in Iranian provocations towards Israel and the West. The assassination attempt of the Saudi ambassador to Washington revealed a daringly unprecedented mission to inflict damage to American interests on its soil. This plot was uncovered at a time when Iranian backed Shi'ite militias increased their attacks on U.S. soldiers in Iraq for the purposes of facilitating an embarrassing withdrawal. The U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet was also subject to more Revolutionary Guard provocations in the Persian Gulf throughout this period.

The Iranian regime has issued multiple threats to cut off the Strait of Hormuz this past year. This led the Obama administration to embrace a tougher stance, relying on a secret channel of communication to warn the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei of the repercussions from

closing the strategic international waterway. Even though cutting off the Hormuz – where one fifth of the world’s oil passes each day – could amount to economic suicide for Iran, their continued threats for taking such action constitutes a “red line” for the United States. With other senior U.S. officials reiterating this position publicly, it is clear that Washington is making a conscious effort to enhance the credibility of the military option. The change in tone and magnitude of these statements exemplify the heightened tensions between both nations. This mutual exchange of threats came in context of the ongoing tit-for-tat confrontation, exemplified by Iran’s engagement in a 10-day naval war games exercises to demonstrate the regime’s naval capabilities and signal its apparent willingness to close the Hormuz should the need arise. Consequentially, Israel and the United States were planning for extensive joint military maneuvers on a vast scale; however, these exercises were postponed in an effort to alleviate the escalation with Iran and reduce hostilities.

THE RADICAL SHI’ITE AXIS

Iran is one of the largest state sponsors of global terrorism, actively funding its regional proxies and supporting attacks on Western and Israeli interests throughout the world. Iran continues to be the main benefactor of Hamas and Hezbollah, terrorist organizations who control the Gaza Strip and dominate Lebanon’s government respectively. Supporting these groups, who are directly situated on Israel’s northern and southern borders, is congruent with Iran’s goal of subverting a broader Arab peace with the Jewish state in its quest for regional hegemony. The Israeli military has stated that a nuclear Iran could deter Israel from striking Iran’s proxies. If Iran were to achieve nuclear capabilities, one plausible scenario envisions a transfer of the technology to these terrorist entities; however, many observers believe that Iran would not want to share these capabilities with external actors. Controlling nuclear weapons exclusively would fall in line with Iran’s pragmatic nature and demonstrate their intent for enhancing deterrence. The major ‘moderate’ Arab countries and the Gulf monarchies are extremely concerned about Iran developing nuclear weapons and some observers argue that these states privately feel more threatened by such a scenario than Israel. The Sunni vs. Shi’ite contestation for power is manifesting itself in multiple proxy wars throughout the region, most notably in Bahrain and Syria, waged between the respective denominations’ national leaders Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Iran attributed the wave of uprisings throughout this Middle East this past year to its own 1979 Revolution, referring to the Arab Spring as a broader “Islamic Awakening.” However, the initial optimism has been replaced with grave concern, as Iran is posed to lose its main Arab ally and central link to its proxies. Iran continues to arm the Syrian regime which has been responsible for approximately 20,000 deaths throughout the brutal civil war waging for the past 16 months. As Syria struggles to maintain stability, Iran is already witnessing a significant downgrade in relations with both Hezbollah and Hamas, who are seeking to build new relationships and support networks in anticipation of the Assad regime’s demise. This reality may reinforce Iran’s perception of global isolation and therefore bolster their pursuit of nuclear capability.

COVERT OPERATIONS & CYBER WARFARE

In early December, a U.S. drone was downed in Iran which was reportedly based in Afghanistan initially and may have been dispatched to monitor the Islamic Republic's nuclear sites. Iran has captured less-sophisticated unmanned aircraft in recent years; however, acquiring a RQ-170 drone intact has provided the Iranians with a valuable opportunity to improve their intelligence capabilities and better comprehend the vulnerabilities of American stealth technology. This is a tremendous Iranian achievement that also exposes U.S. reconnaissance efforts and demonstrates ongoing violations of its sovereignty. Moreover, the deaths of multiple Iranian scientists over the past few years have been largely attributed to foreign clandestine operations. Nuclear scientist Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, for instance, was assassinated following the detonation of a magnetic bomb attached to his car. Two other scientists were killed in similar attacks in 2010, resembling the tactics utilized against Iraqi scientists prior to Israel's 1981 nuclear reactor strike. Furthermore, multiple mysterious explosions were reported in key Iranian sites last year. The most notable explosion resulted in the death of the architect of the regime's missile program and 16 revolutionary guards at a military base. These various types of covert actions have successfully delayed progress; however, Iran has proved to overcome these real setbacks and remains resilient.

The Islamic Republic has also successfully overcome attempts of cyber warfare, embodied by the infamous Stuxnet computer virus that allegedly inhibited approximately a fifth of Iran's nuclear centrifuges. Other advanced computer viruses, such as Duqu and Wiper, have also produced significant impact. The recently discovered Flame virus, one of the most sophisticated types of software ever developed, has spread like wildfire across the Middle East and other parts of the world; however, Iran was the subject of the largest number of infected computers.³ Unlike previous viruses which focused on physical damage or system disruption, the aim of Flame malware was developed to extract vital intelligence in preparation for cyber-sabotage, revolutionizing espionage tactics and significantly escalating the ongoing cyber warfare between states. According to unnamed Western officials, the U.S. and Israel have reportedly created the virus to monitor Iranian computers in an effort to obstruct Iran's ability to develop a nuclear weapon.⁴

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Iran in turn has been accused of enlisting its Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah to engage in attacks against Israeli personnel and interests in India, Georgia, Thailand, Azerbaijan, Kenya, and Cyprus in what is largely regarded as retribution for the covert campaign against the Islamic Republic. Intelligence analysts for the New York Police Department (NYPD) reported that Iranian Revolutionary Guards or their proxies have been involved in nine plots against Israeli or Jewish targets around the world this past year. Israel claims that this year witnessed twenty Iranian attempts at terrorist attacks abroad. U.S. officials are increasingly agreeing with Israeli assertions that Iran and Hezbollah organized the recent suicide bombing of five Israeli tourists

and a Bulgarian bus driver on an airport bus in the capital Burgas. The NYPD report states that Iran had “sharply increased its operational tempo and its willingness to conduct terrorist attacks targeting Israeli interests and the International Jewish community worldwide.”⁵

In response to the July 1st implementation of a total EU embargo against imports of Iranian oil, the Islamic Republic conducted a defiant three-day war game which test-fired dozens of missiles, including Shahab-3 and Sejil missiles. With a range of 1,200 miles, these ballistic missiles are capable of striking Israel and several U.S. military bases in the Gulf, in addition to the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain. Iran in turn has threatened to annihilate U.S. military bases across the region and target Israel within minutes of a potential attack.⁶ These developments are occurring as the United States has quietly increased its military presence in the Persian Gulf to deter Iran from attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz. This build up includes more aircraft that can strike deep into Iran, including the stealth fighter F-22 Raptor. Furthermore, the U.S. Navy has also been sending advanced ships, a converted amphibious transport and docking ship, and doubled the amount of minesweepers deployed to the region. The U.S. Navy reportedly deployed small, sophisticated underwater drones capable of destroying sea mines. These capabilities enhance America’s ability to monitor the Hormuz and reverse a potential Iranian blocking of the waterway. The U.S. is allegedly constructing a missile-defense radar station at a secret location in Qatar and planning for the largest-ever minesweeping exercises in the Persian Gulf involving 20 nations. Even though these actions are portrayed as defensive measures, they will certainly be perceived as provocative acts that will exacerbate tensions. A senior U.S. Defence Department official is quoted as saying “Don’t even think about closing the Strait. We’ll clear the mines. Don’t even think about sending your fast boats out to harass our vessels or commercial shipping. We’ll put them on the bottom of the Gulf.”⁷ These actions and statements are not only intended to deter Iran, but also assure Israel that the U.S. is taking the Iranian threat seriously and reinforcing the credibility of the military option in an effort to prevent Israel from initiating what the U.S. would perceive as a premature, pre-emptive strike.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

Israel’s military doctrine of pre-emption and maintaining qualitative superiority in the region indicates that action must be taken eventually if all else fails. Its infamous air force is the only one in history to have destroyed two different nations’ nuclear programs. The 1981 Osirak surgical strike that neutralized Saddam Hussein’s nuclear reactor received international condemnation. However, in retrospect even the United States acknowledged that the First Gulf War would never have been successful had Hussein been allowed to acquire atomic weapons. What was perceived to have been a risky, suicidal mission turned into the most effective surgical strike in military history, causing minimal casualties and achieving its objective. The 2007 strike of a Syrian nuclear facility, exposing explicit North Korean involvement, further reinforces Israel’s regional concerns with respect to nuclear proliferation. Iran has learned from history and has spread its nuclear program across its enormous country (roughly the size of Alaska), constructing strongly fortified sites deep underground which would render any military strike

exponentially more difficult than eliminating a single structure situated above ground, as was the case with Iraq and Syria. Therefore many experts believe that an Israeli strike could only temporarily delay Iran’s nuclear program, if the strikes are conducted effectively. Clearly, Israel would prefer that the United States take the lead in a potential military confrontation in a coordinated strike, a unilateral endeavour, or a campaign involving NATO. Israel’s doctrine of self-reliance suggests that it must avoid depending on the credibility of American extended deterrence vis-à-vis a regime that repeatedly expresses its willingness to “wipe [Israel] off the map.”



CONCLUSION

Even though the Obama administration has repeatedly conveyed that their goal with respect to Iran’s nuclear ambitions is prevention and not containment, significant differences between Israel and the United States persist. The fact that Israel’s shorter timetable differs vastly from the U.S., implies that the United States is in no rush to act militarily against Iran. Furthermore, Israel’s specific and concrete demands – stop all enrichment of nuclear material, remove all materials enriched to date from Iran and dismantle its underground enrichment plant at Qom – are significantly more resolute than American conditions presented thus far.⁸ The most fundamental disagreement deals with both countries’ respective red lines, with the U.S. believing that Iranian possession of actual nuclear weapons is unacceptable, whereas Israel views that allowing Iran to achieve the capability to eventually embark on the construction of nuclear weapons in a short period is intolerable.

Many observers have concluded that Israel and the U.S. (with or without NATO backing) are faced with two bad options: striking Iran’s nuclear facilities in an effort to significantly impede

their program or accept an Iran with nuclear capabilities and attempt to effectively engage in a containment strategy. Either scenario has the potential for devastating repercussions. Which option represents a lesser threat to stability? The Obama administration has essentially avoided this choice by relying on intelligence assessments that Iran has not embarked on the final political decision to develop nuclear weapons. Diplomatic overtures and harsh sanctions may eventually have the ability to force the Islamic Republic to reverse course. However, the military option must be conveyed as legitimate last resort in order to enhance the credibility of more preferred methods. Numerous attempts of engaging the regime in constructive dialogue has resulted in failure. The most recent set of negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the P5+1 (U.S. Russia, France, United Kingdom, China and Germany) were no exception. It is clear, however, that the extent of which potential negotiations are successful will depend directly on the effects of comprehensive economic sanctions and the credibility of military action in altering the regime's cost-benefit analysis in their quest for nuclear weapons capabilities.

The U.S. must continue to make it clear that a nuclear armed Iran is unacceptable by intensifying diplomatic pressure and concrete actions that keep the Islamic Republic's expansive efforts in check. Western nations should have a significant role in emboldening Iran's opposition groups and civil society actors in order to intensify the internal rift within the regime. By instilling confidence in the population, the regime's efforts could be effectively threatened from within while the international community ensures that the Iranian people will not be abandoned. Military action is truly the last resort and may only achieve a partial setback in the nuclear program, depending on how it is executed. Therefore a protracted campaign to facilitate an orderly regime change should be the main priority and ultimate goal. If the ruthless and militarized Imperial Japan formerly bent on global domination from the days of World War II can evolve into the peaceful, liberal democracy it is today, then Iran surely has the potential to undergo a similar transition through a combination of appropriate external and domestic pressure that leads to the emergence of a moderate regime. It is clear that Iran currently constitutes the most significant security challenge to regional and international stability. If Iran's recent threats and hostile actions have been raising unprecedented alarms, how much more or less belligerent would the Islamic Republic become once they attain the bomb? Would they become more reserved in context of joining the club of other nuclear nations with a whole new set of international responsibilities? Or could the new confidence associated with nuclear status propel Iran to pursue their ambitions more aggressively and enhance their international terror operations under the guise of a protective nuclear umbrella? Regardless, the ideal solution is to deter Iran from achieving these capabilities. The question is how?

Endnotes:

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