

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES OF
U.S. MILITARY ACTION IN IRAN

Statement before the
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs

Ilan Berman
Vice President for Policy
American Foreign Policy Council

November 14, 2007

Chairman Tierney, Congressman Shays, distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to address the current crisis with Iran, and the potential of military action against the Iranian regime.

Today, the United States and its allies are fast approaching a fateful choice. After years of intensive work, the Islamic Republic's nuclear program is mature—and approaching operational capability. According to recent European estimates, as well as the assertions of regime officials themselves, Iran is now operating some 3,000 uranium enrichment centrifuges, placing it just one year away from producing enough fissile material for one nuclear weapon.¹ Soon, therefore, Washington will need to choose, as French President Nicolas Sarkozy has put it, between “Iran with the bomb or the bombing of Iran.”²

And yet, almost no serious analyst believes that military action against the Islamic Republic would be simple, or cost-free. To the contrary, the use of force against Iran holds very real risks for the U.S., for its allies in the Middle East, and for the health of the global economy.

The first set of variables that require consideration relates to intelligence. There currently is still a great deal that the United States does not know about the Islamic Republic's nuclear effort. Over the past two decades, the Iranian regime has put a premium upon separating, hiding and fortifying its nuclear facilities. The result is a massive, resilient national nuclear endeavor about which the United States has considerable—but not complete—actionable information. These knowledge gaps greatly complicate military planning, and significantly reduce the chances that it will



be possible to deliver a permanent (or even a decisive) blow to Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

The second has to do with retaliatory capabilities. With more than 150,000 U.S. military personnel stationed within its immediate operational proximity—eastern Iraq and western Afghanistan—Iran has considerable ability to act against American interests in the event of a conflict. And while there is substantial evidence to suggest that Iran is already doing so, expanding the sophistication and the lethality of the insurgency in neighboring Iraq, there can be little doubt that it could foment far greater instability both there and in Afghanistan. Iran could also empower a range of radical groups to step up their attacks on the United States and American interests, either in the Middle East or even closer to home. And, because of its strategic position atop the Strait of Hormuz, the Islamic Republic has the ability to dramatically impact the safety and stability of world oil supplies—something that Iranian officials have expressly threatened to do should hostilities erupt.³

Arguably the most important drawback to military action, however, has to do with the internal dynamics within the Islamic Republic itself. By all accounts, the Iranian regime's atomic effort is a popular affair, supported by a broad cross-section of the country's population. This is surprising since, after more than two-and-a-half decades of clerical rule, Iran's young, vibrant population is uniformly and visibly disillusioned with the Islamic Revolution. Yet, over the past several years, Iran's ayatollahs have deftly managed to repackage what is in effect an effort to acquire a "clerical bomb" into something that is a source of nationalistic and cultural pride for ordinary Iranians. The results have been dramatic; according to recent polls of public opinion within the Islamic Republic, the vast majority of Iranians now support their regime's nuclear efforts, seeing them as both a tool for regional preeminence and a historic and cultural right.⁴ As a result, external military action against the Iranian nuclear program could prove to be distinctly counterproductive, generating a "rally around the flag" effect that strengthens—rather than weakens—the current regime's grip on power.

For these reasons, military action should properly be seen for what it is: an option of last resort. But it an option that *must* remain a key component of American strategy, for a number of reasons:

Diplomacy

Administration officials have repeatedly stressed that no option can be taken "off the table" in dealing with Iran's nuclear program. Far from representing a rush to war, as some have contended, this assertion reflects an understanding that a credible military threat is needed to buttress other aspects of American strategy. Simply put, in order



for the economic and diplomatic pressures now being applied by the Bush administration to stand *any* chance of success, Iran's leaders must know that the United States is aware of their strategic intentions, and is prepared to use force to stop them should all other options fail. Without such a coercive component, the Iranian regime will quickly understand that there effectively are no consequences to its failure to comply with international demands.

Deterrence

Some experts and analysts have responded to the deepening crisis over Iran's nuclear program by suggesting that it would be possible for the United States to deter a nuclear-armed Iran.⁵ In making this assertion, they have relied on the experience of the Cold War, during which the threat of mutual nuclear annihilation created a stable "balance of terror" between Moscow and Washington. There are, however, deep flaws in the logic behind these assumptions. Most scholars now agree that Cold War deterrence functioned successfully because a series of conditions (good communication, rational decisionmaking, well-informed strategic planning, and, most importantly, a shared assumption that war should be avoided) were presumed to exist between the United States and the Soviet Union. Critically, none of these conditions are present in America's current relationship with Iran, indicating that the risk of miscalculation by either Tehran or Washington is simply far too great to comfortably assume it will be possible to establish functional bilateral deterrence relationship.⁶

Further complicating these calculations is the deepening radicalization taking place within the Iranian regime. Since taking office in the Fall of 2005, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has introduced a new, messianic discourse into Iranian politics. Ahmadinejad sees himself as a self-styled religious missionary, responsible for facilitating the return of the 12th Imam of Shi'a theology, and as a key player in what he has termed "a historic war between the oppressor [generally, the West] and the world of Islam" now taking place in the Middle East.⁷ This apocalyptic worldview strongly suggests that at least one segment of the Iranian leadership may not be deterred by the prospect of a nuclear confrontation. To the contrary, it is likely to welcome it, for both theological and ideological reasons.

Assurance

In late 2002, on the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom, there was just one declared nuclear aspirant in the Persian Gulf: Iran itself. Today, no fewer than ten nations—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Jordan and Turkey—have embarked upon national or regional nuclear programs. The timing is not coincidental; countries in the Middle East are deeply apprehensive over the emerging "Iranian bomb," and are actively seeking strategic counterweights to it. The ability of the United States to control, or at least to manage, these trends hinges directly upon the credibility of its military option, as well as the



perceived political will to use it. Simply put, without confidence in America's ability and willingness to protect them, Iran's neighbors will be forced to make other plans. The likely result will be not one new nuclear power in the Middle East, but many.

Counterterrorism

Finally, the importance of a U.S. military option extends to the realm of counterterrorism. Today, there are substantial differences between America's terrorist adversaries. As a result of their ideology and objectives, Sunni terrorist groups can boast no state sponsors or official protection. Shi'ite groups such as Hezbollah, on the other hand, enjoy the overt backing of a wealthy, nearly nuclear patron. Iran's support is financial; U.S. officials now estimate that Tehran "has a nine-digit line item in its budget for support to terrorist organizations."⁸ It is also operational, with the Iranian regime providing a military bulwark against external aggression. Should it be allowed to acquire a nuclear capability, Iran will, *de facto*, be able to provide its terrorist proxies with a nuclear umbrella, thereby affording them far greater freedom of action than ever before.

Let us be clear. There are no easy answers to the current conflict with Iran, only hard choices. A compelling case can be made that, at least for the moment, Iran's nuclear ambitions can be curbed, contained and even derailed through non-military measures such as a robust, coordinated economic warfare strategy.⁹ The time for such "non-kinetic" approaches, however, is rapidly running out. As Iran draws closer to the nuclear threshold, the use of force—unpalatable as it is—will loom ever larger on the horizon. This is only logical. For, as Senator John McCain succinctly explained last year, "there's only one thing worse than the United States exercising the military option; that is a nuclear-armed Iran."¹⁰

NOTES:

¹ "French Officials: Iran Set to Run Nearly 3,000 Uranium-Enriching Centrifuges by Late October," Associated Press, October 3, 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/10/03/europe/EU-GEN-France-Iran-Nuclear.php>; Ali Akbar Dareini, "Iran: 3,000 Centrifuges Fully Working," Associated Press, November 7, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=3830478>.

² As cited in Editorial, "Sarko Steps Up," *Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 2007, A14.

³ See, for example, "Tehran Warns of Fuel Disruptions," BBC (London), June 4, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5045604.stm.



⁴ See, for example, “Poll of the Iranian Public,” worldpublicopinion.org, January 16, 2007, http://www.usip.org/iran/iran_presentation.pdf. That survey, carried out jointly by the Center on Policy Attitudes and the University of Maryland’s Center for International and Security Studies, found that 89 percent of 1000 Iranian respondents deemed the development of a nuclear program to be “very important” for their country. At the same time, 61 percent of those polled believed the enhancement of Iran’s “great power status” to be the most important reason behind the acquisition of such a capability.

⁵ See, for example, Barry R. Posen, “We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/27/opinion/27posen.html>.

⁶ For an excellent analysis of the inapplicability of deterrence to the current crisis with Iran, see James S. Robbins, “The Dangers of Deterrence,” in Ilan Berman, ed., *Taking on Tehran: Strategies for Confronting the Islamic Republic* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield—AFPC, 2007), 17-30.

⁷ On Ahmadinejad’s messianism, see Scott Peterson, “Waiting for the Rapture in Iran,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 21, 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1221/p01s04-wome.html>; On Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy views, see “Ahmadinejad: Wipe Israel Off Map,” *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), October 26, 2005, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/15E6BF77-6F91-46EE-A4B5-A3CE0E9957EA.htm>.

⁸ Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey, Remarks before the 5th Annual Conference on Trade, Treasury and Cash Management in the Middle East, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, March 7, 2007, http://uae.usembassy.gov/remarks_of_stuart_levey.html.

⁹ For a comprehensive overview of Iran’s economic vulnerabilities, see Ilan Berman, “Iran Sanctions and International Security,” statement before the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, October 23, 2007, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/ber102307.htm>.

¹⁰ “Senators: Military Last Option on Iran,” *cnn.com*, January 16, 2006, <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/US/01/15/iran.congress/index.html>.

