

Iran: The Least Bad Options for Limiting the Growing Threats

By Patrick Clawson

Statement (corrected) to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
March 2, 2006 Hearing on “Challenges from Iran”

Given the fiasco about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, it is only natural that many Americans are suspicious when the Bush administration warns that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons. And against the background of many exaggerated claims about a direct Iraqi role in terrorism against the United States, it is to be expected that many Americans are skeptical about U.S. claims that Iran is the world’s leading sponsor of terror. The U.S. government has a tough task to convince Americans that Iran is a real threat. Undertaking that task is well worthwhile.

Highlighting What Iran Acknowledges Doing

One way to highlight the Iranian threat is to simply quote Iranian leaders. It is not hard to cite Iranian leaders’ threatening rhetoric. The October 26, 2005, conference where President Ahmadinezhad said, “Israel must be wiped off the map” was actually entitled “The World Without Zionism and America”—and those last two words are not empty rhetoric to a man convinced that his co-thinkers have already brought down one superpower (the USSR). Indeed, Ahmadinezhad really means it when he says, “Islam is not limited to a city or country and every Muslim should have a global insight. If we intend to run the world, we should pave the way for it.” (Iranian Labor News Agency, in Persian, January 6, 2006). Those inclined to dismiss this language would do well to heed German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s warning, “When National Socialism [Nazism] was on the rise, there were many outside Germany who said, ‘It’s only rhetoric, don’t get excited.’ There were times when people could have reacted differently, and in my view, Germany is obliged to do something at the early stages... We must prevent Iran from developing its nuclear program” (quoted in the *Washington Post*, February 4, 2006).

But let us go beyond words to look at actions. I will confine myself to two areas: terrorism and the nuclear program.

Terrorism. There are many troubling indications of Iranian involvement in terrorism, such as the continued acknowledged presence of senior Al-Qaeda leaders in Iran who are supposedly under arrest but who were able to order the May 12, 2003, Riyadh bombings on their phones. However, if the U.S. government emphasizes these links with Al-Qaeda, it risks running into international skepticism, because the information comes from intelligence sources. A much more fruitful approach is to highlight what Iran readily acknowledges.

Top of the list here is Hizbollah in Lebanon. Richard Armitage, then undersecretary of state, warned, “Hizbollah may be the A-team of terrorists and maybe al-Qaeda is actually the B-team” (speech at USIP, September 5, 2002). Iran was responsible for creating Hizbollah and has supported it for twenty years with hundreds of millions of dollars, shipments of advanced

weapons, and training in sophisticated terror techniques. During the period when Israel occupied southern Lebanon, Hizbollah portrayed itself as a movement in resistance to foreign occupation. That was part of its activities, but it was also actively engaged in terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians and Jews, such as blowing up the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Hizbollah's self-portrayal as a resistance movement has worn thin since the 2000 Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. In the first years after the Israeli withdrawal, many around the world were prepared to turn a blind eye to Hizbollah's armed activities. But that has changed as Lebanon has made great advances towards democratic independence, while Hizbollah continues to support Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs and uses its militia to threaten the stability of democratic institutions. Now, there is much scope for pressing the case against Hizbollah and its Iranian sponsors. Indeed, in recent weeks, even the UN complained about a January 31 arms shipment to Hizbollah by way of Syria, in blatant violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 which calls for disarming militias—though the UN was too polite to note that the arms came from Iran.

Another Iranian-sponsored terror group that should be in the U.S. crosshairs is Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Iran has worked hard to insinuate itself into Gaza and the West Bank. Fortunately, its puppet group PIJ has never taken off the way Hizbollah did—that is, PIJ has never sunk roots into the local communities. Precisely because PIJ is rather isolated, it is a good target for attack. The U.S. government would do well to concentrate on criticizing Iran for its support of PIJ. That is much easier to do than to complain about Iran's long-standing courting of Hamas, which it has provided with money, weapons, and training. State Department counter-terrorism coordinator Henry Crumpton warns, "it is clearly an [Iranian] objective" to make Hamas into "another proxy" like Hizbollah "which is "just an extension of the Iranian government" (interview with *Jerusalem Post*, February 22, 2006). However, to date, Hamas has remained rather independent of Iran.

Also difficult to confront are Iran's activities in Iraq. While U.S. officials have intelligence about Iranian arms shipments reaching insurgents, Iran can plausibly blame smugglers across the rugged border. And most Iranian activities in Iraq fall in a grey zone—troubling yet part of the usual rules of the game by which governments compete for influence. Major aspects of this support entail broad financial backing for Iran's friends in Iraq and an extensive propaganda apparatus, including the slick Al Alam television network.

Nuclear weapons. There is no doubt Iran is building a "nuclear fuel cycle" which will let it dig uranium ore out of the ground and then "convert" it into a gas and "enrich" the uranium, increasing the proportion of the most weapons-usable type. Iran proudly shows nuclear fuel cycle facilities to reporters and to international experts. Rather than emphasizing the justifiable suspicions about Iran's intentions, it may be more productive to take at face value Iran's claim that is only building a fuel cycle. Right now, only a few countries have a nuclear fuel cycle program, and most of them have nuclear weapons. Nuclear fuel cycle programs are so dangerous that President Bush has proposed, "The 40 nations of the Nuclear Suppliers Group should refuse to sell enrichment and reprocessing technologies to any state that does not already possess full-scale, functioning enrichment and reprocessing plants" (speech at National Defense University, February 11, 2004). In a similar vein, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General and Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed El Baradei of Egypt has proposed to "put a five-year hold on additional facilities for uranium enrichment and plutonium separation."

Further, he states that “there is no compelling reason to build more of these facilities” anywhere in the world (op-ed in *Financial Times*, February 2, 2005).

Iran’s declared intentions—to build a nuclear fuel cycle—would give Iran the capability to make the “fissile material,” as specialists call it, which is at the heart of an atom bomb. Making the fissile material is the hard part of making a nuclear weapon. Assembling the actual bomb is not particularly hard for an industrial country like Iran; El Baradei estimates that task would take Iran only “a few months” (*Newsweek*, January 23, 2006). Iran has no particular reason to actually do the bomb work yet; first, it has to complete the nuclear fuel cycle and make the fissile material. So it is possible that Iran has not started to work on how to put together a bomb because there is no need to do so yet.

To be sure, there are disturbing indications Iran is actively designing and researching how to build atom bombs and fit them on its missiles. The January 31, 2006, IAEA report warns about “alleged undeclared studies, known as the Green Salt Project, concerning the conversion of uranium dioxide into UF₄ (“green salt”), as well as tests related to high explosives and the design of a missile re-entry vehicle, all of which could have a military nuclear dimension and which appear to have administrative interconnections.” U.S. intelligence possesses more information in the same vein. Indeed French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy has said, “No civil nuclear program can explain Iran’s nuclear program. So it is a clandestine military nuclear program” (*Financial Times*, February 17, 2006). But that is in the realm of inferring Iran’s intentions from limited evidence, much of it from intelligence sources. Having seen how poor intelligence can be—overestimating the Iraqi weapons programs, underestimating the Libyan and North Korean programs—we should not be surprised if the world is skeptical about claims that are based on necessarily incomplete intelligence; indeed, Iran’s latest response to the IAEA has been to dismiss these intelligence allegations as forgeries (*New York Times*, February 28, 2006). Therefore, Washington would do well to concentrate on what is known, which is that Iran is actively and proudly building a nuclear fuel cycle capability which will enable it to quickly build nuclear weapons if it so decides.

In addition, the U.S. government should emphasize the IAEA Board of Governors’ complaints about “Iran’s many failures and breaches of its obligations to comply with its NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] Safeguards Agreement” (to quote the most recent resolution adopted on February 4, 2006). The IAEA reports lay out in detail how Iran has lied about its nuclear program for eighteen years and how Iran continues to refuse to answer many of the IAEA’s questions about its activities. The point to be driven home is that the NPT is a bargain: countries have the right to peaceful nuclear technology if they live up to the obligation to be open and transparent about their nuclear activities. Iran claims the rights, but it has not fulfilled its obligations. Putting the case that way is the most effective way of refuting Iran’s claim that its rights are being violated.

The Threat Posed by Iranian Actions

Iran’s activities pose many threats to U.S. interests. For instance, there is a serious risk Iran could undermine the stabilization of Iraq. Michael Rubin has warned, “Step-by-step, Iranian authorities are replicating in Iraq the strategy which allowed Hizbollah to take over southern Lebanon in the 1980s... As in southern Lebanon, what cannot be won through bribery is imposed through intimidation” (*Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2006).

But let me concentrate on the threat from the Iranian nuclear program. Here again, the

U.S. government would do well to understate the case, given skepticism based on the Iraq experience. It is useful to begin by acknowledging that Iran lives in a dangerous neighborhood and that nuclear weapons are sometimes a logical response to security threats. That would put Washington in a better position to argue that nuclear weapons make no sense for Iran's legitimate security concerns. Nuclear weapons are appropriate as a doomsday weapon, and so they are a logical weapon for a small country facing larger neighbors who threaten to obliterate it—think Israel or Pakistan. But now that Saddam Hussein is gone from the scene, Iran is surrounded by weak and fragile states which have no interest in invading it. Iran's real security concerns are from state failure, such as drug-smuggling from Afghanistan and ethnic separatist violence from Iraq and Pakistan. Iran's only problems with powerful states are because of the fights which Iran has chosen to pick with the United States and Israel—countries which would be happy to live in peace with Iran if it stopped its sponsorship of terrorism and opposition to the Middle East peace process. In short, the U.S. government should emphasize that Iran has security problems, but that nuclear weapons are not the answer to those problems.

Furthermore, regardless of Iran's motivations for establishing its nuclear program, nuclear advances would inevitably make Iran a bigger player on the regional scene. That is a matter of concern because Iran is not a status quo power. The theme of my recent history of Iran, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (co-authored with Michael Rubin; Palgrave Press, 2005), is that Iranians are proud nationalists, intensely aware of their ancient glories; they remember that a mere two hundred years ago, Iran was twice its present size.

To understand how Iran would use its nuclear program to throw its weight around, consider what Iran would be able to do regarding Israel. A nuclear-ready Iran might argue that it has the right to be consulted on what constitutes an acceptable settlement between Israel and its Arab neighbors, claiming that the entire Muslim world is affected by the future of the holy places in Jerusalem. That would be bad enough—Iranian meddling would reinforce Palestinian radicals and complicate any effort to normalize relations between Israel and Middle Eastern countries. But a nuclear-ready Iran might take greater risks in its support of anti-Israel Palestinians, for instance, transferring to Hamas the same long-range rockets Iran has stationed in Lebanon (so far, those rockets remain under Iranian control, rather than being released for independent use by Hizbollah). And there is always the possibility—however faint it may be—that in a crisis, Iran might threaten the use of nuclear weapons, which it would undoubtedly present as a defensive measure designed to prevent Israeli aggression against helpless Arabs.

Even if Iran did not directly threaten Israel, it is likely that a nuclear-ready Iran would set off a regional arms race, making the Middle East a more dangerous place with serious consequences for world peace. Iran's neighbors are not going to sit still if Iran starts throwing its weight around. The grave risk is that they will respond by activating their own nuclear programs. It would be very bad news if Egypt decided that it needed to have the same nuclear fuel cycle capability Iran is pursuing. And there are rumors that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have a secret deal that if Iran becomes nuclear-ready, Pakistan will ship to Saudi Arabia some nuclear warheads to put on the long-range Chinese missiles Saudi Arabia bought some years ago (missiles the Chinese use to carry nuclear warheads). Ostensibly, the Pakistanis would retain control of the warheads, allowing Saudi Arabia to claim that it was not violating the NPT.

U.S. Responses

Let me confine my remarks to how to respond to the nuclear threat. Too much of the discussion

about responses to Iran's nuclear program is concentrated on the extreme solutions: either attack or appease. There is a wide range of intermediate policy options which hold much more promise.

To influence Iran, the United States needs instruments of persuasion and dissuasion. Most of the persuasion instruments proposed by Europe have been economic agreements which smell like disguised bribes. Since Iran is flush with oil income that has swelled its foreign exchange reserves to over \$30 billion, Tehran has dismissed these offers. A better approach is to concentrate on security measures, to counter the argument that Iran needs nuclear weapons because it has real security needs. There are many confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) and arms control measures which would provide gains for both Iran and the West. Examples of CSBMs would be an exchange of observers for military exercises in and near Iran, or an incidents-at-sea (INCSEA) agreement to prevent unintended naval confrontations. The point of making such offers would be first and foremost to impress world opinion with how reasonable the United States is being. After all, if NATO and the Warsaw Pact could agree on CSBMs at the height of the Cold War, then Iran would look stubborn and uncompromising if it refuses such measures when offered by Washington. Whether Iran accepts these offers is not the main point; we are primarily in a battle for hearts and minds—mostly the hearts and minds of Europeans, Russians, and Chinese (though, of course, the hearts and minds of Americans and Iranians as well). The more the great powers take a unified stance blaming Iran for causing a crisis, the more pressure Iran will feel to concede.

As for instruments of dissuasion, there has been too much attention paid to comprehensive economic sanctions, which could damage Western economies if imposed while oil markets are so tight. Much more useful would be measures to emphasize Iran's isolation over the nuclear issue. In particular, Iran has suspended IAEA inspections which were authorized under the "Additional Protocol," adopted by the IAEA in 1997 drawing on the lessons of how Iraq and North Korea misled IAEA inspectors. (Iran, which has never ratified the Additional Protocol, agreed to follow its provisions as part of the November 2004 "Paris Protocol" with the British, French, and Germans). Furthermore, Iran has refused IAEA requests to interview key scientists in its nuclear program. It would be entirely appropriate for the Security Council to first call on Iran to cooperate with the IAEA and then, if Iran refused, to order Iran to cooperate, using the Security Council's authority under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which compels countries to follow Security Council orders. A Chapter VII resolution would be a huge step, because if Iran fails to comply, then the Security Council would presumably consider enforcement action, such as sanctions or ultimately military force (any consideration of sanctions now would be highly premature: Iran has yet to refuse to comply with a Security Council order).

If the Security Council issued an order to Iran, Tehran might well decide to comply. After all, when faced with a united U.S.-European stance in October 2003, Iran did agree to suspend its enrichment activities—an action which very few Iran-watchers anticipated. Not only that, but after Iran backed out of the suspension, it again climbed down, agreeing in November 2004 to an even more comprehensive suspension. This track record, in which diplomatic pressure persuaded Iran to suspend the key part of its nuclear program, gives reason for optimism about the current diplomatic process.

If in fact Iran refused to obey the Security Council orders, then the Council should sanction Iran. The aim of those sanctions should be to politically and diplomatically isolate Iran—which might not impress Ahmadinezhad, but would worry many in Iran's ruling circles (bearing in mind that the Iranian president is not the key decision maker on foreign and security policy;

that power rests with the revolutionary clerics, especially Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei). In several cases recently, the Security Council has imposed targeted sanctions, such as banning travel by key individuals, to drive home the high political price of unacceptable actions. In both Serbia and South Africa, the sanction felt most keenly by the public was the ban on international sporting competition. If young Iranians learn that their country's participation in the June 2006 soccer World Cup is dependent on resolving the nuclear issue, there will be a dramatic increase in the interest they take in how the negotiations are going.

At the same time that the Security Council process is unfolding, a parallel track would be to adopt defensive security measures. These measures could increase the likelihood that Iran will back down, because they would show Iran that its security will be worse off due to its hard-line stance on nuclear matters. Furthermore, deterrence and containment measures, similar to those of the Cold War, would have the further advantage of putting the West in a better position to use military force if the need were to arise. One step in this direction would be to sell Arab states in the Persian Gulf more advanced anti-missile systems and air defense systems. Raising doubts in the minds of Iranian decision makers about the country's ability to reliably deliver its nuclear weapons could make their use prohibitively risky for Tehran in all but the direst of circumstances. Another step would be to assist Israel to deploy more Arrow counter-missile batteries and to develop more sophisticated follow-on versions of the Arrow.

In addition, the West should act now to forestall Iranian threats to global energy supplies. Iranian hotheads regularly threaten to disrupt shipping in the Strait of Hormuz if the West escalates pressure on Iran about the nuclear question; to quote Iran's leading newspaper, "the arrogance [the United States] must receive the signal that a boycott of Iranian oil or in case of a bigger folly in connection with the military threat, it must give up the entire oil of the Persian Gulf" (Touhid Ahmadi, "Death Boomerang," *Keyhan*, February 22, 2006). A multilateral exercise to protect the Strait of Hormuz with minesweepers and other naval vessels, if conducted in the near future, would be a useful way to signal Iran that the West is serious and united in its willingness to use force to protect its vital interest in the Gulf. At the same time, such an exercise would be entirely defensive and in no way suggesting that the West is preparing an attack on Iran.

But all these measures to press Iran and to deter it are stalling tactics. So long as Iran has an Islamic Republic, it will have a nuclear weapons program, at least clandestinely. The key issue therefore is: how long will the present Iranian regime last? Analysts have had a poor record at predicting when fundamental changes will take place. Who among us expected that when President Reagan said in Berlin, "tear down this wall," it would indeed fall within three years? So too it is not possible to tell when change will come to Iran, though it is quite clear that the Iranian people detest the present system. At the same time that it concentrates on the nuclear issue, the United States has an important interest—both strategic and moral—in supporting Iran's pro-democratic forces. It would be a grave setback to Washington's reform agenda in the region if the United States were perceived to have abandoned Iran's beleaguered pro-democratic forces by making a deal with hard-line autocrats to secure U.S. geostrategic interests. On top of which, the reigning mullahs would almost certainly cheat on any such a deal, as they did during the Iran-contra affair when they released some hostages only to take others. The only sure route is the best moral route: supporting Iranian democrats with what modest aid Washington can provide, such as increased television, radio, and internet broadcasts.

A word about the international diplomatic efforts. There is much good news here,

especially the strong European-U.S. unity about Iran policy in contrast to the profound differences in the 1990s. Still there is a real risk that Iran is stalling for time. Despite limited successes of diplomats, Iran's program keeps moving forward, even if slowly. The pessimistic reading of Iranian actions over the last three years is that Iran has agreed to freeze in its nuclear activities whenever it has encountered technical problems which require more research to resolve; when Tehran is ready to make the next step forward, it unfreezes and moves ahead until it bumps up against the next technical constraint. This reading would suggest that diplomacy may be doing little more than providing legitimacy for Iran without effectively limiting its nuclear program. In other words, there is a serious risk in continuously compromising in order to preserve international unity: unless we stand firm on certain basic points, diplomacy could become Iran's enabler.

Some day, it may become necessary to take more direct action against the Iranian nuclear program. To quote IAEA director El Baradei, "Diplomacy has to be backed up by pressure and, in extreme case, by force. We have rules. We have to do everything possible to uphold the rules through conviction. If not, then use impose them. Of course, this has to be the last resort, but sometimes you have to do it" (*Newsweek*, January 23, 2006). If force were to be necessary, the options are much broader than an air raid like that which Israel mounted in 1981 against Iraq's Osiraq reactor. For instance, Israel put a stop to Egypt's missile program in the early 1960s by arranging the sudden premature death of German scientists working on those missiles in Egypt. Iran's nuclear program is a series of sophisticated, large industrial plants which could encounter industrial accidents.

The bottom line is that Iran's nuclear program is an unacceptable risk to world peace; one way or another, it must be stopped.

Patrick Clawson is the Deputy Director for Research at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the co-author with Michael Rubin of *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (Palgrave, 2005).