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NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH DIVISION

Iran After the Bomb

How Would a Nuclear-Armed Tehran Behave?

Alireza Nader

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Summary

Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is not a foregone conclusion. The U.S. policy of imposing sanctions on Iran while pursuing diplomatic engagement may still dissuade the Islamic Republic from developing a nuclear weapons capability. However, that policy is not guaranteed to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis. Even an Israeli and/or U.S. military attack against Iran's nuclear facilities could not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons; it could only delay such development. Therefore, it is prudent to examine Iran's potential foreign policy, military doctrine, and support for terrorism after it has obtained nuclear weapons. This report seeks to explore how a nuclear-armed Iran would behave, if it would act aggressively, and what this would entail for the United States and its main regional allies, including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel.

The key findings of the study are the following:

- The Islamic Republic is a revisionist state that seeks to undermine what it perceives to be the American-dominated order in the Middle East. However, it does not have territorial ambitions and does not seek to invade, conquer, or occupy other nations. Its chief military aim is to deter a U.S. and/or Israeli military attack while it undermines American allies in the Middle East.
- Nuclear arms are unlikely to change Iran's fundamental interests and strategies. Rather, nuclear weapons would probably reinforce Iran's traditional national security objectives, including deterring a U.S. and/or Israeli military attack.
- Iran may feel more confident and gain a sense of prestige from a nuclear capability, but other factors, such as the regional geopolitical environment and Iran's political, military, and economic capabilities, will have a greater bearing on Iranian calculations.
- Iran's possession of nuclear weapons will lead to greater tension between the Shi'a theocracy and the conservative Sunni monarchies. However, Iran is unlikely to use nuclear weapons against other Muslim countries. Moreover, Iran's ability to undermine the GCC is quite limited, especially given Tehran's diminishing influence resulting from the Arab Spring and Iranian support for the Syrian government.
- Nuclear weapons may provide Iran with the ultimate deterrent, but they are unlikely to be useful in coercing the GCC states, particularly in view of Iran's deteriorating economy.
- The Islamic Republic views Israel in ideological terms. However, it is very unlikely that Iran would use nuclear weapons against Israel, given the latter's overwhelming conventional and nuclear military superiority.

- The Iranian government does not use terrorism for ideological reasons. Instead, Iran's support for terrorism is motivated by cost and benefit calculations, with the aims of maintaining deterrence and preserving or expanding its influence in the Middle East.
- A nuclear-armed Iran is unlikely to extend its nuclear deterrent to groups such as Hizballah or Hamas. So-called Iranian "proxy" groups have divergent interests from those of Tehran, especially Sunni Arab groups such as Hamas. Tehran is also unlikely to provide nuclear weapons or nuclear technology to non-Iranian groups.
- Iran's possession of nuclear weapons will create greater instability in the Middle East. An inadvertent or accidental nuclear exchange between Israel and Iran is a dangerous possibility. However, there is not much evidence to suggest that rogue elements could have easy access to Iranian nuclear weapons, even if the Islamic Republic were to collapse. Elements of the political elite, including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, may be fervent Mahdists or millenarians, but their beliefs are not directly related to nuclear weapons and will not shape Iran's nuclear decisionmaking.