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Iran's Nuclear Future

Critical U.S. Policy Choices

Lynn E. Davis, Jeffrey Martini, Alireza Nader,
Dalia Dassa Kaye, James T. Quinlivan, Paul Steinberg

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Summary

Influencing Iran

The United States will face critical policy choices as Iran's nuclear program continues to evolve. Using an analytical framework designed for the new strategic environment, we focused on how to influence Iran in its future decisions, judging first that the Iranian leadership acts rationally, assessing costs and benefits in making its foreign policy decisions. Iran's national security interests (survival of the regime, protection of the homeland, and expansion of its regional influence) are unlikely to change, so the challenge for the United States is to affect the calculations of how the Iranian leadership pursues these interests.

Iran's decisions regarding its nuclear program will be shaped primarily by its perception of the external environment (e.g., the U.S. threat) and the value placed on nuclear weapons in serving its national security interests. But different future Iranian nuclear postures are possible, and an internal political debate exists in Iran on the future of the nuclear program.¹ This situation offers the United States a potential lever of influence.

¹ Iran's future nuclear posture could range from *virtual* (having the know-how and infrastructure to develop a nuclear weapon but stopping short of doing so), to *ambiguous* (developing a nuclear weapon but not declaring its existence), to *declared* (demonstrating the existence of a nuclear weapon capability through a test or withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty).

Critical U.S. Policy Choices

This monograph describes the complex considerations underlying future U.S. policy choices in responding to Iran's evolving nuclear program, assesses their potential effectiveness, and uncovers where policy trade-offs will be required.

How Can the United States Dissuade Iran from Nuclear Weaponization?

A dissuasion strategy depends on the ability to influence the calculations of costs and benefits on the part of a party. Such a strategy has two potential components that could be applied singularly or at the same time: raising the potential costs of acting and providing incentives for not acting. While military forces play an important role, a dissuasion strategy would seek to convey more broadly that a party would not profit from a given course of action. Despite a wide range of policies at its disposal (see Table S.1), the United States faces a serious challenge in dissuading Iran from nuclear weaponization, given how Iranian national security interests could be served by nuclear weapons, the hard-line views of the current Iranian regime, and the difficulty of shaping the internal political debate in Iran.²

If Iran Were to Acquire Nuclear Weapons, How Could the United States Deter the Use of Those Weapons?

While Iran's historical behavior, national security interests, and military planning suggest that it is likely to be cautious in undertaking any military actions against U.S. military forces in the region, plausible paths to U.S.-Iran conflict exist. Iran's military doctrines and conventional capabilities provide it with alternatives to using nuclear weapons in a conflict, and given the overwhelming superiority of both U.S. conventional and nuclear forces, any Iranian use of nuclear weapons would hold enormous risks for Iran. Thus, Iran is likely to use nuclear weapons only under a narrow set of circumstances that would revolve around

² For the purposes of this study we chose to define *nuclear weaponization* as the confirmed ability to produce an operational nuclear warhead.

Table S.1
Policy Choices in Dissuading Iran from Nuclear Weaponization

| Dissuasion Strategy | Policy | Choices | Considerations |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Construct system of costs for acting | Pay price: Economic sanctions | Target regime with broad-based economic sanctions | Reinforces costs of nuclear program and buys time over the long run for fundamental political change but could support hard-liners |
| | | Target banks and businesses of Revolutionary Guards | Avoids hurting factions that may be willing to stop nuclear program before nuclear capability is declared but difficult to implement because investments can be shifted |
| | Deny potential gains: Military pressure | Train for conventional attacks against nuclear facilities and expand deployment of regional missile defenses | Raises prospect that investment in nuclear program is highly uncertain but reinforces Iran's vulnerability and could lead to acceleration of nuclear program |
| | | Prepare for nuclear attack | Communicates to regime that developing nuclear weapons could undermine security but also expands threat, giving potential support to hard-liners in internal Iranian debate; is marked departure from U.S. goal of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons |
| Provide benefits for not acting | Offer incentives | Recognize regime's political legitimacy, rescind broad economic sanctions, refine statements on availability of military options | Could lower perception of threat and affect internal Iranian debate but could reward Iran for intransigence and send wrong signal to potential proliferators; political support in United States is unlikely |

Iran viewing itself as vulnerable to U.S. conventional military defeat and threatened as a regime by U.S. conventional military operations.

Table S.2 describes the approaches available to the United States to deter an Iranian attack with nuclear weapons against U.S. military forces and regional partners (e.g., Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] states, Israel).³ The choice of an approach will depend largely on views of what motivates Iranian behavior: Would the threat of nuclear retaliation against Iran be credible, or will other ways need to be found, such as managing escalation in a conventional conflict or pursuing a capability to defeat an Iranian use of nuclear weapons militarily? Each of these approaches involves uncertainties and challenges, but these choices need to be considered in advance of Iran's potential acquisition of nuclear weapons.

How Can the United States Reassure Its Partners of the Credibility of Approaches to Deterring Iranian Nuclear Attacks?

Given that the United States would have available a menu of potential reassurance policies that could involve both political and military commitments, what might its partners (e.g., GCC states, Israel) seek and when?

U.S. partners will be interested in U.S. policies to provide and potentially expand U.S. conventional forces for their defense. But they are unlikely to request other reassurance policies until two additional developments occur: (1) Iran assembles nuclear weapons and declares itself to be a nuclear power, and (2) Iran acquires an intercontinental ballistic missile to deliver its nuclear weapons. At this point, the calculus of U.S. partners would be expected to change, since the first development would remove any ambiguity about Iran's nuclear capability and the second could seriously undermine the credibility of the United States in using its nuclear weapons on behalf of its partners, given that Iran would be capable of threatening to respond with its

³ The United States has an interest in deterring Iran's use of nuclear weapons against U.S. partners in the region. Our analysis found that a U.S. approach to deterring Iran's use of nuclear weapons against U.S. military forces in the region, if viewed as credible by Iran, would extend to the GCC states and Israel.

Table S.2
Alternative U.S. Approaches to Deterring an Iranian Attack Against U.S. Military Forces in the Middle East

| Approach | U.S. Force Posture | Rationale | Changes in U.S. Military Planning |
|---|--|---|---|
| Raise costs of using nuclear weapons by threat of retaliation | Projected U.S. conventional and nuclear forces sufficient | Hard to find plausible paths to major conventional conflict U.S. conventional systems can inflict devastation without resorting to nuclear weapons Crossing nuclear threshold risks regime's survival | None |
| | Need to reinforce retaliatory threat by displaying nuclear capabilities in the region | Current U.S. nuclear posture lacks credibility, given its deployment at sea and in the United States | Exercise nuclear-capable bombers in region and possibly deploy them there temporarily Commit specific U.S. nuclear-capable systems for planning purposes to respond to Iran's use of nuclear weapons |
| Deny benefits of using nuclear weapons | Need to focus conventional military planning and operations on ability to defeat nuclear attack, even though feasibility uncertain | U.S. threat of nuclear retaliation lacks credibility, given likely asymmetries of interests between the United States and Iran in conventional conflict | Seek capabilities to locate, track, and destroy Iran's nuclear weapons and their delivery means before they are launched Deploy robust missile defenses to intercept nuclear weapons after they are launched |
| Manage escalation in a conflict | Projected U.S. conventional forces sufficient | Need to keep Iran from viewing its use of nuclear weapons as "least bad option" | Pursue measured military operations and forgo large-scale conventional invasion and intensive air campaigns aimed at crippling the regime's leadership |

nuclear weapons against the U.S. homeland.⁴ The reticence on the part of the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia, arises from likely domestic political opposition, their expected continuing interest in keeping open some cooperation with Iran, and their potential concerns that such a military expansion may only embolden rather than deter Iranian aggression and make them potential military targets. Relying too heavily on U.S. nuclear capabilities, in Israel's view, could erode its own nuclear deterrent.

To the extent that U.S. partners are reassured, this decreases their interest in seeking alternative security partners or developing their own nuclear weapons. In the case of Israel, a credible U.S. deterrent could also reduce the potential to pursue unilateral military actions or openly declare its nuclear posture.

How Should the United States Seek to Influence Iran?

To achieve U.S. nuclear dissuasion and deterrence goals, our analysis suggests that three approaches are available, each based on a different assumption about Iran and how to influence its calculations of costs and benefits:

- Iran only responds to pressures and threats; thus, the first approach seeks to influence Iran by raising the costs.
- Iran only responds to the prospect of the loss of any gains, not threats; thus, the second approach seeks to influence Iran by denying the regime the benefits of actions that the United States seeks to dissuade or deter.
- Iran's sense of vulnerability is what motivates its behavior; thus, the third approach seeks to influence Iran by reducing the external threat facing it and the survival of its regime.

For our assessment of these approaches, see Table S.3.

⁴ According to the U.S. Department of Defense, "With sufficient foreign assistance, Iran could probably develop and test an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the United States by 2015" (U.S. Department of Defense, *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran*, Washington, D.C., April 2010c, p. 11).

Table S.3
Assessment of U.S. Overall, Integrated Approaches to Influencing Iran

| Approach | What Are Implementing Military Activities? | How Will It Affect Internal Debate in Iran on Weaponization? | Will U.S. Partners Support It? | How Effective Will It Be? |
|-----------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Raise costs to Iran | Expanded conventional offensive and defensive (and possibly nuclear) | Undermines factions that could oppose development of nuclear weapons | Unlikely until Iran is a declared nuclear power | Undermined by lack of international support for robust military measures |
| Deny benefits to Iran | Conventional, focused on offensive strikes and missile defenses | Uncertainty about whether it makes any difference | Likely | Undermined by lack of military capabilities and uncertainty of success |
| Reduce threat to Iran | Conventional, focused on managing escalation, with nuclear relegated to background | Supports factions that could oppose development of nuclear weapons | Very unlikely | Undermined by uncertain support from American public |

What is clear is that the United States will not be able to avoid future policy choices or trade-offs among its nuclear dissuasion, deterrence, and reassurance policies. Adopting an overall, integrated approach with a clear purpose and rationale for U.S. policies would have these additional benefits. It would enhance the ability to signal clearly to Iran what the United States intends in terms of its goals. Such an approach should make it easier to gain support from the international community and could help in demonstrating U.S. commitments to its regional partners. Finally, an overall, integrated approach would likely improve the chances of winning support at home from Congress and the American people.

The U.S. Air Force: Preparing for the Future

While there is uncertainty about which policies decisionmakers will choose, what is clear is that the Air Force, in support of combatant commanders, will play a key role in whatever military tasks are required. Our analysis suggests some ways that the Air Force can prepare for whichever policies decisionmakers choose (see Table S.4).

The Way Ahead

In brief, our study has set the stage for identifying situations in the future that will call for U.S. policy choices and potential trade-offs in dealing with Iran's nuclear program, not for making recommendations on any one policy or approach. The study's value is in grounding future policy choices in a critical regional analysis, in describing the complex considerations underlying the various policy choices therein, and in uncovering where in these policies tensions will arise and trade-offs will be required. This monograph underscores the Air Force's contributions and provides considerations for its future planning. Finally, the analyses presented here provide decisionmakers with an analytical framework that can help them plan for achieving future U.S. nuclear dissuasion and deterrence goals vis-à-vis Iran and for reassuring U.S. partners in the Middle East.

Table S.4
Air Force Preparations

| How Should Air Force Prepare? | Steps Air Force Could Take |
|--|--|
| Understand purposes and timelines for military tasks | Military tasks for nuclear dissuasion will not necessarily be the same for nuclear deterrence and reassurance; timelines for military tasks will depend on what happens in Iran's nuclear program. |
| Design exercises and war games to support different policy choices | Exercise objectives for bombers could aim not only to demonstrate to Iran that investment in nuclear capabilities could possibly be destroyed but also to influence the internal Iranian debate over nuclear weaponization. War games could investigate the ways in which a conflict between the United States and Iran might arise and escalate to use of nuclear weapons; they could also be used to test deterrence approaches with and without nuclear weapons. |
| Ensure that it can operate under nuclear threat | Survey U.S. Air Force facilities in region for vulnerability to nuclear effects and identify material improvements for hardening facilities and introducing alternate and more resilient procedures. |
| Provide ways to manage escalation in conflict with Iran | Investigate concepts of operations to manage escalation in U.S.-Iran conflict, e.g., reinforce political communication that signals limited U.S. objectives; focus on immediate threat by directly targeting Iran's regime-supporting paramilitary forces; and withhold targeting of Iran's political leadership. |