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NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH DIVISION

Iran After the Bomb

How Would a Nuclear-Armed Tehran Behave?

Alireza Nader

This research was conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD). NSRD conducts research and analysis on defense and national security topics for the U.S. and allied defense, foreign policy, homeland security, and intelligence communities and foundations and other nongovernmental organizations that support defense and national security analysis.

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Preface

A common concern regarding Iran's potential possession of nuclear weapons is that they would allow it to become more aggressive in challenging U.S. and allied interests. The U.S. policy of imposing sanctions on Iran while pursuing diplomatic engagement may dissuade the Islamic Republic from developing a nuclear weapons capability, but it is not guaranteed to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis. Even a military attack against Iran's nuclear facilities could not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons; it could only delay such development. In light of this possibility, this report seeks to explore how a nuclear-armed Iran would behave, whether 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.[1]

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[1] The author would like to thank James Dobbins, John Limbert, and David Thaler for their careful and very useful reviews of this study.

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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.

Abbreviations

ASCM	anti-ship cruise missile
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
UAE	United Arab Emirates
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

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 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 (Brown, 2013). Therefore, it is prudent to examine Iran's potential policies after it has obtained nuclear weapons. Undertaking such an examination is not an admission that U.S. efforts on the Iranian nuclear program will fail or that United States should prioritize a policy of "containment"[1] over prevention. Rather, this study analyzes whether a nuclear-armed Iran would behave more aggressively and what this would entail for the United States and its main regional allies, including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel. It explores the Islamic Republic's motivations, interests, and historic approach toward important foreign policy issues, including relations with the United States, the GCC, and Israel. In addition, it explores Iran's use of terrorism to achieve its objectives. The study then examines whether attainment of a nuclear weapons capability would alter Iran's traditional objectives, capabilities, and policies. The key question is whether a nuclear-armed Iran would rethink its objectives and recalibrate its policies. Would nuclear weapons make the currently revisionist Islamic Republic into an emboldened and aggressive power?

For analytical purposes, this study assumes that within the next few years, Iran will succeed in assembling and fielding a relatively small arsenal—five to ten nuclear weapons.[2] It also assumes that neither the United States nor Israel attacked Iran before it obtained its nuclear weapons capability.

Chapter Two analyzes the Islamic Republic's ideology, motivations, and national security doctrine. Chapter Three examines a nuclear-armed Iran's potential policies toward Saudi Arabia and the GCC states. Chapter Four discusses a nuclear-armed Iran's potential behavior toward Israel. Chapter Five explores Iran's relations with terrorist groups after it has obtained nuclear weapons. Chapter Six highlights key findings.

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[1] The word *containment* is often used incorrectly in the discourse on Iran's nuclear program. The United States has been pursuing a policy of containment toward Iran in one way or another since the 1979 revolution. Its efforts to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, including stringent sanctions, also weaken the Iranian regime and help contain its domestic and regional ambitions.

[2] It is assumed that Iran's nuclear weapons capability is not ambiguous but is declared or known to the United States and the international community. To fully gauge Iran's potential behavior while armed with nuclear weapons, this analysis does not consider a virtual or ambiguous Iranian nuclear posture (see Ochmanek and Schwartz, 2008).

CHAPTER TWO

The Islamic Republic: A Revisionist Yet Restrained Power

A common concern regarding Iran's possession of nuclear weapons is that they would allow it to become more aggressive in challenging U.S. and allied interests (Donnelly, Pletka, and Zarif, 2011). Moreover, some analysts have speculated that new nuclear-armed states would face an incentive to use nuclear weapons within the first few years of developing the capability (Ochmanek and Schwartz, 2008). Many analysts argue that nuclear arms will cause a shift in Iran's interests and policies (Kroenig, 2012), while others have argued that the United States will not be able to deter and contain a nuclear-armed Iran (Rubin, 2008). But the arguments and evidence presented for these assumptions are unconvincing. The Islamic Republic will remain a revisionist state for the foreseeable future, but its intent and ability to challenge American power in the Middle East will be limited even if it obtains nuclear weapons.

Years of mutual distrust between Iran and the United States may make it difficult to believe that the two were once close allies in the Middle East. Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, viewed the United States as an essential partner not in only maintaining his rule over Iran but also in protecting the Middle East from communism and radical pan-Arabism. The 1979 removal of the Shah by anti-American revolutionaries profoundly reshaped Iran's foreign policy toward America and its regional allies. But although a revolutionary ideology has driven Iran's foreign policies for more than three decades, Iran continues to adhere to some of the same national interests as those pursued by the Shah. Although the Islamic Republic seeks to overturn the American-led regional order, at the same time it is primarily concerned with defending Iran from external aggression while projecting Iranian power beyond its borders. The Islamic Republic may be a revisionist state, but it also pursues national interests that are common to other nations.

The Islamic Republic's primary motivation is survival. The desire to survive is non-ideological in nature; any political system or regime, whether a democracy or theocracy, is motivated by the instinct to survive and prosper. Iranian politicians are as concerned with maintaining and expanding their personal power as they are with achieving Iran's revolutionary principles. The objective of regime survival limits ideological influences on Iranian policies.

However, this does not diminish the fact that the Islamic Republic is anti-American in nature and strives to alter the U.S.-dominated geopolitical order. The Islamic Republic's revisionism is due to certain seemingly unshakeable beliefs held by top government figures (Thaler, Nader, et al., 2010). Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, senior Revolutionary Guards commanders, and much of the clergy believe that the United States is fundamentally opposed to Iran's 1979 revolution, which they see as having freed Iran from its long-time domination by Western powers. The Islamic Republic believes that U.S. hostility toward Iran is institutionalized, systemized, and the result of irreconcilable ideologies (Thaler, Nader, et al., 2010).

In addition to protecting its own revolution, the Islamic Republic sees the "liberation" of oppressed Muslim nations from U.S. "domination" as one of its core missions. According to the Iranian constitution, the Islamic Republic must "eliminate imperialism and foreign influence" from the Middle East and beyond.[1] As long as the current Islamic Republic stands, it will not relinquish its ideological opposition to the United States and its allies, especially Israel and the GCC states. Anti-Americanism is an essential component of the political system's raison d'être.

Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic knows that it must pursue its strategic rivalry with the United States cautiously. Tehran views America as the world's only superpower. Regardless of their consistent demonstration of purported military prowess, Iranian leaders and military planners realize that America's economic and military power dwarfs Iranian capabilities. Therefore, Tehran has been careful to confront the United States indirectly through third parties.[2]

Yet the question of whether nuclear weapons will fundamentally alter the Islamic Republic's interests and behavior remains. Despite persistent anxiety regarding an emboldened nuclear-armed Iran, the evidence suggests that Iranian policy in the Persian Gulf and beyond could be more restrained than is typically assumed.

Possible Motivations for Nuclear Weapons

The Islamic Republic's military doctrine is defensive in nature. Iran is in a volatile and unstable region, regardless of its rivalry with the United States and Israel. Its status as a Shi'a- and Persian-majority nation in a Sunni- and Arab-majority region has made it into an insecure and anxious nation-state. Any Iranian political system, whether imperial, theocratic, or democratic, would perceive a host of regional threats in the same measure.

Iran was particularly scarred by its eight-year war with Iraq. The war, which replayed the mass slaughter of World War I trench warfare, affected the entire Iranian nation, including fervent supporters and opponents of the Islamic Republic. The conflict resulted in hundreds of thousands of Iranian casualties, including many who continue to suffer from Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons. Iran was largely isolated during the war, in part because of the Islamic Republic's anti-Western stance, its holding of U.S. Embassy personnel as hostages, and its attempts to export the Iranian revolution to surrounding countries. Most Western nations and world powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union, supported the Iraqi military (Hiro, 1991).

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[1] Article 3 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran states that the government of the Republic has the duty of directing all its resources to the following goals: (3.5) the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence, (3.6) the elimination of all forms of despotism and autocracy and all attempts to monopolize power, and (3.16) framing the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the *mustazafin* (oppressed) of the world.

[2] Even Operation Praying Mantis, one of the few examples of a direct military clash between Iran and the United States, was precipitated by Iraq's targeting of Iranian shipping in the Persian Gulf. During the Iran-Iraq War, U.S. warships escorted reflagged Kuwaiti ships targeted by Iranian forces in retaliation for attacks against Iranian shipping by Iraqi forces. One of the U.S. escort ships, the USS *Samuel B. Roberts*, struck an Iranian mine, which led to U.S. attacks against naval and oil facilities in the Persian Gulf. Iran has not directly fought U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf since then.

One of the most important lessons for Iran from the war may have been the need for military self-sufficiency. Before the revolution, Iran had relied on the United States to equip and train its military, especially its air and naval forces. The end of the American-Iranian alliance and the West's isolation of Iran led to the development of an indigenous defense industry that would soon produce ballistic missiles, tanks, jet fighters, and mini-submarines.

However, Iraq's sustained chemical and missile attacks against Iranian troops and cities may have led Iranian leaders to consider developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and possibly nuclear weapons. In a 1988 letter to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Mohsen Rezai, the Revolutionary Guards commander in chief at the time, stated that the war with Iraq could be won only through the development of advanced weapons. According to Rezai, "If we become able to organize 350 infantry brigades, purchase 2,500 tanks, 3,000 cannons, and 300 war planes, and be able to manufacture laser and nuclear weapons which are nowadays among the necessities of modern warfare, then, God willing, we can think of offensive war activities" (Nafisi, 2006). Iran's nuclear energy program, which had been started with U.S. and European assistance during the Shah's reign, went on hiatus during the war with Iraq. Iran did not have the resources to continue the program, and Ayatollah Khomeini may also have been truly opposed to the development and/or use of nuclear weapons (Erlich, 2007).

Nevertheless, Iran resumed its nuclear program in the wake of its cease-fire with Iraq. Khomeini's death in 1989 may have led the Islamic Republic to reconsider its "religious" opposition to developing nuclear weapons. Iran's current leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has reportedly issued a religious ruling (fatwa) that forbids the use of nuclear weapons. However, that ruling may not preclude the development or assembly of such weapons. Moreover, Khamenei may have the authority to revise or reinterpret his own ruling in consideration of regime expediency (*maslehat-e nezam*) (Eisenstadt and Khalaji, 2011).

Iran's pursuit of uranium enrichment may also have been motivated by economic concerns. Both the monarchy and the Islamic Republic have been aware of Iran's overdependence on oil. The Shah, who had planned to build as many as 23 nuclear plants with U.S. help, declared in 1974, "Petroleum is a noble material, much too valuable to burn. . . . We envision producing, as soon as possible, 23,000 megawatts of electricity using nuclear plants" ("Critical Mess," 2008).

Nuclear energy could theoretically alleviate some of Iran's dependence and free up more oil and natural gas for export. But the military value of possessing nuclear weapons, or at least having the capability to produce nuclear weapons if and when needed, could not have been lost on the Iranian leadership during the war with Saddam Hussein. From Tehran's perspective, nuclear weapons could serve as the ultimate form of deterrence against all potential adversaries. Otherwise, how could an isolated Iran deter another attack by Saddam's Iraq or another similar adversary? The Iraqi Osiraq nuclear reactor was unsuccessfully targeted by Iran during the war, in September 1980, before it was successfully destroyed by Israel the next year (Beres and Tsiddon-Chatto, 1995; Correll, 2012). Despite the 1988 cease-fire, Saddam and his regime remained dedicated to the development and use of WMD, including nuclear weapons (Brands and Palkki, 2001).

The devastating U.S. defeat of Iraqi forces in 1991 may have only reinforced the Islamic Republic's belief in a nuclear deterrent. The Iraqi army, which Iran had been unable to defeat for eight long years, was devastated by the U.S. Air Force in a matter of days. Although the conflict did not result in Saddam Hussein's overthrow, Washington could have marched to Baghdad with relative ease if it had made the decision to do so. What chance would Iran have

in the face of U.S. power when Iraq could barely make a dent in the American juggernaut? Subsequent U.S. air operations, such as air strikes against Serbian forces in 1995 and 1999, may have also reinforced Iran's military insecurities.

But it was the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein that may have truly increased the perceived value of a nuclear deterrent for the Islamic Republic. In those conflicts, the United States not only used its superior military forces to defeat its adversaries on the battlefield, it effectively achieved regime change in both countries.

American forces surrounded Iran on all sides. Moreover, the George W. Bush administration appeared to adopt a policy of regime change in Iran; Bush's 2002 branding of Iran as a member of the "axis of evil" made Tehran more apprehensive than ever before (Heradstveit and Bonham, 2007).

The Islamic Republic had actually taken a number of steps to ease tensions with the United States after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan. The government of President Mohammad Khatami was especially cooperative in helping the United States establish a new Afghan government under President Hamid Karzai, and it also offered cooperation in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Dobbins, 2007). Moreover, the U.S. 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran indicated that Tehran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003, perhaps due to fear of a U.S. invasion (Albright and Brannan, 2012).

However, the Bush administration's hostile posture toward Iran, including its refusal to "speak with evil" ("Washington Rejected Iranian Concessions," 2007), appears to have soured Khamenei's view of engagement with the United States. The experience may have proven to Khamenei that "resistance" was the best means of dealing with the "great Satan" (Hafezi and Kalantari, 2012; Sadjadpour, 2008). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election as president in 2005 subsequently led to more-hardline and less-flexible policies, especially concerning the nuclear program.

It is not entirely clear how Iran's experience at that time contributed to its nuclear decisionmaking. The U.S. intelligence community judges that the Iranian government has not made the decision to build nuclear weapons (Clapper, 2012). Nevertheless, it appears intent on developing the know-how and the infrastructure for a nuclear weapons capability. Tehran's decision to do so may have been shaped by Khamenei's belief in resisting the United States in the face of persistent pressures.

Moreover, U.S. and Israeli threats to keep the "all options on the table," including military strikes against Iran ("Obama Says Considering All Options," 2011), may have even increased the Iranian government's incentives to seek a potential nuclear weapons capability. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appears to believe that U.S. opposition to the Islamic Republic is enduring and ideologically motivated. Even if Iran desired a diplomatic agreement with the United States, it might be reluctant to completely give up the option of having some kind of nuclear weapons deterrent, especially given the U.S. success in overthrowing Muslim regimes (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya) through military force.

The overthrow of Libyan strongman Mouammar Qadafi and Western opposition to the Syrian regime, Iran's closest ally in region, may have added to Iran's reluctance to compromise on the nuclear program. In his remarks regarding U.S. and NATO operations against Qadafi and the Libyan dictator's decision to give up his nascent nuclear program prior to his overthrow, Ayatollah Khamenei stated, "This gentleman wrapped up all his nuclear facilities,

packed them on a ship and delivered them to the West and said, 'Take them!' Look where we are, and in what position they are now" (Risen, 2012).

From Khamenei's viewpoint, the United States has not abandoned its objective of overthrowing regimes at odds with its interests; the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the drawdown from Afghanistan, while decreasing the risks of a U.S.-driven regime change in Iran through military force, have not changed America's fundamental interests and calculations.

As Bruce Riedel (2013) notes:

> Almost any Iranian national security advisor would probably argue that a nuclear weapons capability is the only guarantor of independence and deterrence. Clearly Iran lives in a dangerous neighborhood, surrounded by many enemies prepared to act against it. So how could Iran prevent them from taking military action? The track record of the past decade is clear. If you have nuclear weapons, you have deterrence. Pakistan has them and, they deter India. Afghanistan and Iraq did not, and America invaded. Libya gave up its nuclear capability and was invaded.

For the Islamic Republic, the nuclear program is not merely a matter of national pride and scientific progress or a means to project power. Rather, it is embedded within the Islamic Republic's historic struggle with the United States and is an important component of the Iranian theocracy's quest to survive in the face of both external and internal challenges.

Nuclear Weapons and Internal Instability

The Islamic Republic may believe that in addition to deterring external attacks, a nuclear deterrent could help maintain internal stability and security. The Islamic Republic has faced persistent internal challenges from the very beginning of its existence. These have included rebellions by repressed ethnic minorities such as the Kurds and the Baluch; attacks by the avowedly anti-regime Mujaheddin Khalq Organization; and, perhaps most importantly, the Green uprising following the 2009 presidential election, which resulted in a continuing crisis of legitimacy for the Islamic Republic.

Ayatollah Khamenei and his supporters believe that the United States has supported the decades-long effort to subvert the Islamic Republic. He has consistently accused the United States of providing material support to groups like the Baluchi Jundullah and the Mujaheddin Khalq Organization ("Iran Mosque Blast," 2009).[3] In addition, Khamenei believes that the United States seeks to overthrow the Islamic Republic through a "velvet" or "soft" revolution. As proof, the Iranian government often cites the "color" revolutions of Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia, which were preceded by U.S. support to civil society and nongovernmental organizations in those countries (Murphy, 2009).

Iranian conservatives such as Khamenei believe that the U.S. threat to Iran is not only military in nature but cultural as well, meaning that the United States seeks to impose its "permissive" values, such as women's rights, on the Islamic Republic and undermine it from within. From Khamenei's perspective, the 2009 Green uprising and the Iranian reformist

[3] Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are also cited by the regime as foreign supporters of the Baluchi insurgents.

movement are examples of U.S. machinations, even if the United States may have had no real role in the internal disputes over the 2009 presidential election.

In addition, the Islamic Republic views the nuclear program as a measure of its legitimacy. Whether Khamenei realizes it or not, Iran's political system has lost much credibility among the Iranian population and even the political and economic elite (Akhlahgi, 2012; Nader, Thaler, and Bohandy, 2011). This is in large part due to Khamenei's authoritarian style of rule; he has marginalized figures and factions he views as posing a threat to his personal authority, whether they are reformists, moderate conservatives, or Ahmadinejad supporters. Khamenei's predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, at least attempted to maintain the semblance of rule by consensus, whereas Khamenei appears uninterested in debate or consensus but wants to have the last word on every major decision.

The Islamic Republic has also lost legitimacy due to its inability to provide for the average Iranian. This is a result of Iran's dysfunctional economic planning, especially under the Ahmadinejad administration. However, the lack of transparency and corruption have also taken their toll on the economy. International and U.S. sanctions have further exacerbated the economic malaise in Iran, which has hurt the average wage earner and factory worker much more than the often wealthy senior members of the clergy and Revolutionary Guards. In the long term, the Islamic Republic's inability to provide for the population will further erode its legitimacy and perhaps weaken its grip on power.

Given these challenges, Khamenei and his supporters have increasingly come to see and depict the nuclear program as a measure of the Islamic Republic's credibility and legitimacy. Khamenei views Iran's scientific achievements, including its nuclear progress, as a sign of victory in the face of U.S. pressures. Given its historic isolation, the Islamic Republic highly values self-sufficiency (*khod kafa-i*). The nuclear issue has become a matter of revolutionary principle in the Islamic Republic's long struggle with the United States (Chubin, 2010). Khamenei's authority among Iranians is ultimately at stake.

Ayatollah Khamenei, who constantly warns of a repeat of the 2009 "sedition," fears that a replay of the 2009 Green uprising could present a grave crisis for his government; therefore, it could be argued that the Islamic Republic may view nuclear weapons as providing internal security by dissuading U.S. support for its opponents.

It is difficult, however, to see how nuclear weapons could fulfill this objective. Iran's unyielding stance on the nuclear program has led to the toughest sanctions Tehran has ever faced and has led to a sharp decline in the economy. It appears that Khamenei's policy of "resistance" on the nuclear program is endangering his government rather protecting it from external threats. Moreover, the possible development of nuclear weapons could lead the United States to become more, rather than less, involved in Iranian affairs.

It is not absolutely clear how the Iranian population sees the nuclear program. Surveys on Iranian public opinion, including one conducted by RAND in 2009, demonstrate popular support for the civilian aspects of the nuclear program. However, opposition to the development of nuclear weapons appears to be widespread. The same RAND survey recorded that 41 percent of respondents strongly oppose the development of nuclear weapons and 5 percent somewhat oppose it (Elson and Nader, 2011). Moreover, it is difficult to believe that ordinary Iranians would continue to support the development of nuclear weapons, or even Iran's enrichment of uranium for ostensibly peaceful reasons, given the high political and economic costs for their country.

The Islamic Republic's ideological attachment to the nuclear program may be misplaced. A nuclear military capability could deter a major attack by an external power, yet nuclear weapons will have only limited value in increasing the Islamic Republic's prestige and strengthening its authority among the Iranian people, most of whom are concerned about bread-and-butter issues of the day, in addition to political and social freedoms. The Islamic Republic's crisis of legitimacy is due not to its stance on the nuclear program or its relationship with the United States, but rather due to a mistrust of its own educated and sophisticated population. The possession of nuclear weapons will not erase the Iranian government's domestic woes, nor will it bring an end to U.S. and international support for democracy and human rights in Iran. Nevertheless, Khamenei's ideological dedication to the nuclear program may increase its perceived value as Iran's internal crisis deepens.

CHAPTER THREE

Nuclear Iran and the Persian Gulf

A nuclear-armed Iran, secure in its deterrent capability, could arguably pursue its long-time objective of ejecting the United States from the Persian Gulf by weakening the region's pro-American regimes.[1] The Islamic Republic's ideological and geopolitical hostility toward the Gulf Arab monarchies has been long evident. The Iranian-Saudi rivalry, one of the defining characteristics of Middle East politics, has accelerated due to Iran's perceived expansion of power from 2003 to 2009 and the increasingly sectarian nature of the Arab Spring. Tehran's nuclear pursuit has widened the gulf between Iran and its Arab neighbors and has led to acute anxiety in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, among other capitals.

However, Gulf Arab fears of Iran, even if it is armed with nuclear weapons, may be overblown. The Islamic Republic's animosity toward the Arab monarchies is rooted in the historic Persian-Arab rivalry and Tehran's revisionist ideology. But the Islamic Republic is contained by some unavoidable realities: It is not very influential among the Gulf Arab populations, even the Shi'a minorities. Tehran's ability to subvert and undermine the GCC states is limited and has been further weakened by the Arab Spring (Kaye and Wehrey, 2011).

Iran is also tied to its Gulf Arab neighbors economically and for this reason would hesitate to undertake aggressive military action such as "closing" the Strait of Hormuz. Iran may wish to be the dominant power in the Persian Gulf, but its ability to achieve its ambitions is constrained by its economic and conventional-military weaknesses. Even nuclear weapons will not provide Iran with the ability to alter the balance of power in the Persian Gulf, which is primarily shaped by the American-GCC alliance and its overwhelming economic and military superiority over the Islamic Republic.

Revolutionary Animosity and Neighborly Relations

The Islamic Republic holds special contempt for Saudi Arabia and allied Gulf monarchies. This is partially due to the historic rivalry between Iran and the Arabs across the Persian Gulf. The Persian Empire was at one time a superpower before being conquered and defeated by the Muslim Arab armies in the seventh century. Despite its conversion to Islam, Iran's collective psyche may still yearn for a preeminence lost some 1400 years ago.[2]

[1] Iran's development of nuclear weapons could also lead to proliferation among Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia. However, a "nuclear cascade" in the Middle East is not inevitable (see Kahl, Dalton, and Irvine, 2013).

[2] For a more in-depth discussion of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, see Wehrey et al., 2009.

Iran and Saudi Arabia were rivals even during the Shah's reign; although both countries were allies of the United States, each was wary of the other's intentions. The Saudis, in particular, resented the Shah's higher status in the pro-American pecking order. But Iran's 1979 revolution introduced a new dimension to the historic Persian-Arab rivalry.

Iran's Shi'a revolutionaries viewed the Saudi monarchy as a cornerstone of the regional pax-Americana. The Saudi family's control of Mecca and Medina and its espousal of the ultra-conservative Sunni Wahhabi doctrine was a particular affront to the Islamic Republic, which viewed itself as the natural leader of the Islamic world. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, was especially hostile toward the House of Saud.

Khomeini accused the House of Saud of "distorting the Islamic spirit.… The Saudi monarchy has totally turned into an American satellite and Saudi Arabia has been rapidly becoming Americanized in every respect." He also stated, "Mecca is now in the hands of a group of infidels who are grossly unaware of what they should do" (Fürtig, 2009).

His antipathy was reciprocated by Saudi Arabia's rulers, who supported Saddam Hussein financially during his bloody war with the Islamic Republic (Fürtig, 2009).

Nevertheless, Iran and Saudi Arabia have pursued a tense yet rarely militarily confrontational policy of coexistence. The competition between the two has often played out indirectly through "proxy" forces in the region, whether in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or even Afghanistan. However, neither country has been strong enough to marginalize the other completely. And although Iran's policy toward Saudi Arabia is rooted in revolutionary ideology, Tehran's behavior toward Riyadh and other GCC countries has been at times grounded in realism and often-nuanced policies and at times has lurched to self-defeating threats and posturing.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, Khomeini's death in 1989, and the ascension of the more pragmatic Ayatollah Ali Akbar Rafsanjani to the presidency that same year led to a thaw in tensions between the two countries. Rafsanjani's views of Saudi Arabia were less ideological than those of most of the Iranian political elite. The powerful cleric and many of the moderate conservatives loyal to him saw Iran's post-war economic reconstruction as their highest priority (Moslem, 2002). They also realized that the Islamic Republic's attempts to export the revolution were largely unsuccessful, if not counterproductive (Moshaver, 2003). Iran, unable to defeat an Iraq backed by most of the major global and regional powers, was forced to accept a humiliating cease-fire. Iran simply could not be enemies with so many states at the same time. Rafsanjani's policy of détente with Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries was pursued and deepened by his successor as president, Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005).

Khatami's social and political reform agenda was helped by the rapprochement between the Islamic Republic and its traditional adversaries, including Saudi Arabia. Khatami was one of the least radical government figures on foreign policy. His relatively liberal religious and political views contradicted the fundamentalist and ideological worldview of conservative rivals. Moreover, Khatami's lack of association with terrorist and separatist groups made him a relatively suitable interlocutor for Saudi decisionmakers.

Nevertheless, neither Rafsanjani nor Khatami was able to fully to reorient Iran's policy toward Saudi Arabia. This was largely due to the fractious and factionalized Iranian political system. The Islamic Republic's presidents have seldom been in command of the country's foreign policy. The Supreme Leader sets the parameters for the tone and substance of policy and makes the most important decisions. The president's ability to shape foreign policy is also limited by competing factions, power centers, and unofficial institutions (Kamrava, 2007). Both Rafsanjani and Khatami had to navigate and at times skirt opposition from fundamen-

talist pressure groups. In addition, hardliners within Iran's military and security establishment, particularly the Revolutionary Guards, hindered the ability of the executive branch to shape and implement foreign policy (Kamrava, 2007). Thus, Iranian-Saudi relations never reached a level of full rapprochement. And any effort toward achieving a relaxation in those relations was effectively erased by Ahmadinejad's election as president in 2005.

Ahmadinejad's populist politics, bombastic style, and fundamentalist Shi'a religious outlook came to shape Iran's foreign policy from 2005 to the present day.

Ahmadinejad was not officially given a bigger role in foreign policy than his predecessors. Like Rafsanjani and Khatami, his power was circumscribed by Iran's political system. Nevertheless, Khamenei sympathized with Ahmadinejad's policy of "resistance" against the United States and viewed it more favorably than what he saw as Khatami's weakness in the face of U.S. pressures. The Supreme Leader's belief that Ahmadinejad would follow his agenda was one of the reasons Khamenei favored him in the 2005 and 2009 presidential elections (Khalaji, 2012a).

The Saudis and the other Gulf Arabs found Ahmadinejad to be a difficult interlocutor. His populist style, loud opposition to the United States and Israel, forceful backing of the Palestinian cause, and aggressive position on the nuclear program[3] disturbed the deeply conservative Saudi elite.

Regional developments further eroded the limited trust between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic. The empowerment of the Iraqi Shi'a by the United States and the domination of Baghdad by pro-Iranian Shi'a parties once exiled in Tehran deepened Saudi suspicions of Iranian intentions. Hizballah's growing power in Lebanon, its emergence from the 2006 war with Israel as one of the most popular Arab parties, and the 2007 Hamas conquest of Gaza were seen by the Saudis and their allies as signs of Iran's rapid ascendancy (Jones, 2011). Iran's advantageous regional position, Ahmadinejad's radicalism, and Tehran's nuclear progress were perceived as an existential threat to the Saudi monarchy and its Gulf partners (Wehrey et al., 2009).

Limited Ability to Subvert the GCC

The Arab Spring has made Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies more anxious about Iran than ever before. The Saudi elite have been particularly shaken by the Shi'a-led uprising against Bahrain's Al Khalifa ruling family. The Bahraini Shi'a, which form a majority of the island kingdom's population, have long resented the ruling Sunni regime's systematic suppression of their political and economic ties. Bahrain's youthful population, inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, poured into the streets in protest in January 2011, only to be crushed by the Bahraini government and, ultimately, the armed intervention of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Saudi and Bahraini governments both claim that Iran directed the uprising; according to them, the unrest in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Shi'a-majority Eastern Province is not due to the systematic religious, political, and economic discrimination against the Shi'a but is the result of Iranian machinations (Wehrey, 2012).

[3] Ahmadinejad stated that Iran's nuclear pursuit was "a train without brakes" (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2007).

There is very little evidence to substantiate these claims. To be fair, the Islamic Republic has provided support to Saudi and Bahraini Shi'a groups in past years. Iran was connected to a 1981 plot to overthrow the Bahraini monarchy by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (Nikou, 2011). The Islamic Republic also has ties to a number of other Shi'a groups in Saudi Arabia and throughout the Arabian Peninsula, possible including the Houthis in Yemen (Schmitt and Worth, 2012). Yet to claim that Iran is the cause of Arab unrest in the Persian Gulf is far-fetched.

Iranian influence among the Arab Shi'a population in the Gulf is not as great as is often depicted. Most Gulf Shi'a do not consider Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as their source of emulation (*marja-e taghlid*), choosing instead Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Iraq, among other clerics (Ghosh, 2011; Louer, 2009). Sistani may be Iranian-born, but he is not a staunch supporter of the Iranian ideology of *velayat-e faghih* (rule of the supreme jurisprudent).

The UAE has also claimed that Iran seeks to undermine its political system. Iran's relations with the UAE are increasingly strained. The UAE not only fears the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran bent on regional hegemony but also worries about Iranian attempts to undermine its political order. The Emirati government has been deeply unsettled by the Arab Spring and what it views to be the incorrect U.S. response to the Egyptian and Bahraini uprisings. It tends to conflate domestic woes and unhappiness with regional events with the perceived threat from Iran.

The UAE may be relatively wealthy, but it has some significant socio-political vulnerabilities. Only about 10 percent of the UAE's 8 million inhabitants are Emirati citizens (CIA World Factbook, n.d.; UAE Yearbook, 2010). The rest are Western, Middle Eastern, or Asian white-collar or low-wage laborers. Non-Western laborers are often treated poorly. Up to half a million Iranians also live in the UAE, mostly in Dubai, along with a small non-Persian Shi'a population. The UAE's Iranian population, an important component of its economic success, is viewed with suspicion by the Emirati government, which is increasingly dominated by the oil-wealthy and more conservative emirate of Abu Dhabi.[4]

Much like the Saudi monarchy, the UAE depicts outsiders, particularly Iran, as the source of its domestic problems. The Islamic Republic does indeed pose a challenge to the UAE. Iranian leaders tend to view the Emirates the same way as they perceive the Saudi monarchy—unpopular and illegitimate "proxies" for U.S. interests in the Muslim Middle East.

Iranian-Emirati relations, tense since Iran's revolution, have deteriorated sharply over Iran's perceived regional ambitions, its nuclear progress, and the increasingly acrimonious dispute over the Abu Musa and Tunb islands. The UAE's compliance with international, and particularly U.S., sanctions has also led to a sharp decline in relations.

However, one would be hard pressed to find examples of aggressive Iranian behavior toward the UAE in recent years. Iranian officials made provocative visits to the disputed island of Abu Musa in 2012 (Mehr News Agency, 2012), but Iran has not taken any military action against Emirati interests. Nor has Iran, thus far, resorted to the use of terrorism.

[4] In addition, the UAE's rulers worry about the large number of Egyptians and Lebanese Arabs with assumed ties to "subversive" groups such as Hizballah and the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE's own indigenous Islamist opposition group, al-Islah, is a growing source of unease for Emirati rulers, who have reacted to minor displays of political dissent with mass arrests and expulsions of not only Emirati citizens but also Western organizations such as the Konrad Adenaur Foundation and the National Democratic Institute.

Except by acts of terrorism, Tehran cannot do much to undermine or damage the Emirati political system. The UAE's Iranian population resides there in order to escape the Islamic Republic's oppressive social, economic, and political policies. The Islamic Republic may maintain significant intelligence assets in the Emirates, but most Iranians in Dubai and Abu Dhabi are unlikely to follow commands from Tehran to "undermine" their host country.

The UAE's domestic unrest is attributable to its own government policies. Although economically developed, the UAE is an authoritarian system that provides very limited political rights to its citizens (Davidson, 2012). Non-native Emirati inhabitants, including other Arabs, Iranians, and Pakistanis, have even less rights. Moreover, the UAE does not tolerate any political opposition and has adopted policies similar to those of other Arab autocratic regimes, including attempts to limit freedom of thought and speech (Ulrichsen, 2013). The UAE's excessive fears and blaming of Iran will hardly reduce its problems at home. A nuclear-armed Iran will not be the reason for domestic instability in the UAE; rather, the UAE's internal socio-political conditions and its rulers' reaction to them will determine its future stability.

It can be argued that Kuwait, which has a sizable Shi'a minority, may be susceptible to Iranian intervention. However, there is not much evidence to suggest that the Kuwaiti Shi'a, most of whom are Arabs, look to Iran as a model or master. Kuwait is currently undergoing its biggest domestic political crisis in decades, but this has nothing to with the Islamic Republic (Ulrichsen, 2012). Iran could potentially conduct sabotage and terrorist attacks in Kuwait, especially if Tehran came under attack by the United States and/or Israel. However, Iran would be unable to effectively undermine, overthrow, or replace the Kuwaiti monarchy.

Iran's ability to undermine Qatar is also limited. The two countries enjoy cooperative, although at times tense, relations. Qatar, with a population of nearly 2 million, most of whom are expatriates, does not have a sizable Shi'a or Iranian population and is not vulnerable to Iranian manipulation.

Iran has also demonstrated no intent or ability to undermine Oman, which, more than any other GCC state, enjoys warm diplomatic, economic, and even security ties with the Islamic Republic. Oman, a close American ally, is dominated by the Ibadi, rather than Sunni or Shi'a sects, and shares control of the Strait of Hormuz with Iran. Muscat appears to be less concerned with a nuclear-armed Iran than a military conflict that could disrupt regional peace. Oman also fears Saudi domination of the Arabian Peninsula (Cordesman and Shelala, 2013).

Iranian influence is on the wane, not only in the Persian Gulf but throughout the Arab world. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has claimed that the Arab Spring is in fact an Islamic Awakening inspired by Iran's 1979 revolution. Khamenei appears to believe that the American-led regional order is on the verge of collapse, especially given the overthrow of pro-American regimes in in Tunisia, Yemen, and, most importantly, Egypt. Khamenei also may believe that the Islamic Awakening could infect the Gulf Arab monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and even the UAE. From Tehran's perspective, the Bahraini uprising may be a harbinger of changes in the other Gulf monarchies.

It is difficult to determine whether Khamenei truly believes his own rhetoric. Regardless, any potential unrest in the GCC is hardly a recipe for Persian domination of the Gulf region. Even if the Saudi, Emirati, or Kuwaiti monarchies were somehow overthrown, the succeeding regimes would not be pro-Iranian by any stretch of the imagination. The Islamic Republic, even if armed with nuclear weapons, is unlikely to gain the upper hand in its relations with the Gulf Arab states.

The Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC should not be completely dismissed, of course. Despite its limited influence, Iran appears to maintain a network of supporters that could be activated to conduct sabotage against GCC civilian and military facilities, especially during a military conflict with United States ("Kuwait Busts Alleged Iran Spy Cell," 2010). However, the Islamic Republic will not be able to undermine the Saudi/GCC political order; the Islamic Republic has lost much of its credibility in the Arab world due to its violent reaction to the 2009 Green uprising and its continued support of the brutal Syrian regime (Chubin, 2012). Why would Arabs who chafe under their own repressive regimes, such as the Saudi state, turn to yet another corrupt and authoritarian system such as the Islamic Republic? A Shi'a Arab's sectarian affiliation does not translate into Iranian political or religious influence over him or her.

Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is unlikely to change the equation. Nuclear weapons could enhance Iran's prestige in the Persian Gulf; Muslim Arabs, whether Sunni or Shi'a, may view Iran as the first Muslim Middle Eastern nuclear power (Pakistan not being part of the Middle East). The Saudi elite may even feel a particular sense of shame given Iran's ability to create an "indigenous"[5] nuclear weapons capability in contrast to Saudi Arabia's continued dependence on the United States as a military provider and security guarantor. But Iran's enhanced prestige may not have a deep and long-lasting effect on the geopolitical order in the Persian Gulf region. The foremost threat to the political status quo in Saudi Arabia and the GCC states is not the Islamic Republic and its outdated ideology, but socio-economic and political trends in Arab countries that have sent shock waves across the Middle East.

Regardless, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons does present a security threat to the GCC states. A military conflict between Iran on one hand and Israel and/or the United States on the other could easily spread into the Persian Gulf and impact the Arab states. Iran's use of nuclear weapons in the Gulf region, even if they are not directed at GCC targets, could have a devastating effect on the region's ecology and economy. Hence, it is worth examining how Iran's possession of nuclear weapons could play out in a conventional and/or asymmetric military conflict.

Iran's Military Strategy and Capabilities in the Persian Gulf

Iran's military posture and strategy in the Persian Gulf are defensive in nature; its primary security objective is to deter a military attack by the United States and/or Israel. Iran views its ability to impede shipping in the Persian Gulf as deterrence against such an attack. Therefore, military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities could result in a strong Iranian reaction in the Persian Gulf, even if the initial conflict with Iran did not start in that region.

The Islamic Republic does not have the desire or the military capability to invade and occupy Gulf Arab territory. Iran's territorial disputes with Iraq over the Shat al-Arab waterway and with the UAE over Abu Musa and Tunb islands could conceivably lead to a future military conflict. However, Baghdad has friendly relations with Tehran, and Iran is in possession of the

[5] In reality, Iran's nuclear program has been developed with Pakistani, Chinese, and Russian aid.

Persian Gulf islands in dispute with the UAE. An Iranian-initiated military conflict over these issues is unlikely.[6]

Iran maintains significant conventional naval and air forces in the Persian Gulf region. These include three Kilo-class submarines, four Yono-class submarines, one Nahang-class submarine, several vintage corvettes and frigates, and a large number of smaller attack and patrol vessels (Office of Naval Intelligence, 2009). Nevertheless, Iranian conventional forces in the Persian Gulf are no match for the combined U.S. and GCC sea and air power. The Iranian Air Force is antiquated by U.S., Israeli, and GCC standards. Among Iran's best jet fighters are F14s acquired from the United States prior to the 1979 revolution. Iran is the only country that currently operates F14s.

In addition to the U.S. Fifth Fleet (and United Kingdom and French forces in the Persian Gulf), Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the other, smaller GCC states maintain military assets that could effectively counter or defeat Iran's conventional forces. According to General David Petraeus, "The Emirati Air Force itself could take out the entire Iranian Air Force, I believe, given that it's got . . . somewhere around 70 Block 60 F-16 fighters, which are better than the U.S. F-16 fighters" (Rogin, 2009).

Iran's ground forces, numbering approximately 500,000 troops, may be large, but they are ineffective against a more sophisticated and technologically superior Western-equipped adversary. In addition, Iranian ground forces, including the regular army, the Artesh, and the Revolutionary Guards, are unable to sustain operations beyond Iran's immediate border regions (Cordesman, 2010). Iran possesses marine forces that could project limited power into the Persian Gulf, but they may not have the capability, including amphibious assault vehicles, to launch a significant invasion of GCC territories (Cordesman, 2010).

However, Iran has developed other military capabilities that may mitigate its conventional-military inferiority. These include hundreds of ballistic missiles that can hit U.S. and GCC facilities. Missiles have a special place in Iran's military psyche and doctrine. It was Iraq's extensive use of missiles against Iranian cities that contributed to the Iranian population's war fatigue and increased pressure on Tehran to accept a UN-brokered cease-fire. Ballistic missiles have also been easier to develop than other weapon systems such as jet fighters—Iran has received vital help from friendly countries such as China, Russia, and North Korea.

Iranian missiles are not currently accurate enough to serve as effective tactical weapons in a conflict (Elleman, 2010). For example, Iran may not be able to physically stop U.S. air operations by lobbing missiles at U.S. air bases in the GCC and beyond. According to Michael Elleman, a missile expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies and a former UN weapons inspector, "the successful destruction of a single fixed military target, for example, would probably require Iran to use a significant percentage of its missile inventory. Against large military targets, such as an airfield or seaport, Iran could conduct harassment attacks aimed at disrupting operations or damaging fuel-storage depots. But the missiles would probably be unable to shut down critical military activities" (Elleman, 2010).

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[6] Much has been made of Iran's alleged ambition to annex Bahrain. It is true that some Iranians have staked a historical claim to the island, among them influential figures such as former parliamentary speaker Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri and the editor of the influential *Kayhan* newspaper, Hossein Shariatmadari. However, these individuals do not represent Iran's official policy toward Bahrain. The Islamic Republic may wish for a Shi'a-dominated Bahrain, especially if it sympathizes with Tehran's objectives. However, this does not mean that Iran wants to rule or annex Bahrain, as it does not want to annex or rule over Shi'a-dominated and Arab-majority southern Iraq. The Islamic Republic has struggled with its own repressed Arab-minority population in Khuzestan; it does not need to throw hundreds of thousands more Arabs into the mix.

Moreover, many of Iran's missiles would likely be intercepted by advanced American and GCC-operated anti-ballistic-missile defense systems such as the Patriot system and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense.[7]

Nevertheless, Iranian missiles could inflict enough economic and psychological damage and/or pressure on GCC countries to make them reconsider hosting U.S. military forces. This could make it difficult for the United States to operate against Iran in the face of GCC pressure, as it is quite reliant on military bases in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait.

Iran has also developed significant asymmetric naval capabilities. The Revolutionary Guards Navy operates hundreds of small, fast boats, some armed with advanced anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) (Office of Naval Intelligence, 2009). These boats may be theoretically able to swarm larger U.S. ships and overpower their defenses. In addition, Iran operates many ASCMs from its coastline and can deploy thousands of mines in Gulf waters and the Strait of Hormuz.

Would a Nuclear Iran Close the Strait of Hormuz?

Iran's naval build-up in the Persian Gulf is commonly characterized as aggressive in nature (Rue, 2011). This is understandable given the state of hostility between Iran and the United States and the GCC states. Furthermore, Iran's asymmetric forces in the Persian Gulf are designed not only to counter larger U.S. warships but specifically to impede shipping by targeting oil tankers. This is often referred to as Iran's ability to "close" the Strait of Hormuz.[8] However, the Iranian naval forces are meant to provide deterrence, rather than to control the Persian Gulf or "close" the Strait in an unprovoked manner. If Iran's deterrence were to fail, Tehran could be expected to use its capabilities to raise the "costs" for the attacker. American political and military officials worry that any strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities could result in Iranian attacks on shipping and the energy infrastructure in the Persian Gulf. Iran would not be able to defeat America's naval forces, but its actions could lead to a considerable spike in oil prices and result in major damage to the American and global economy (Talmadge, 2008). From Tehran's perspective, such a scenario could not only prevent a U.S. attack but could lead to U.S. (and international) pressure on Israel to desist from attacking Iran.

However, the Iranian leadership is also aware that any aggressive move on its part could backfire and hurt Iran more than the United States and its allies. Iran is highly dependent on the Strait for its energy exports and for most of its imports as well. Indeed, Iran appears to be more dependent on the Strait than some of the other major oil-producing nations such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of which have built pipelines that bypass the strategic waterway (Singh, 2012; "UAE Opens Pipeline," 2012).

It is true that Iran has threatened to "close" the Strait in the past. However, Tehran is unlikely to take such a step unless it is attacked first. The Iranian leadership has explicitly warned of its presumed ability to impede shipping when Iran has felt threatened by the United States or has needed to exert pressure to deter the United States from taking certain actions.

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[7] Better Iranian missile capabilities, including more-precise missiles, could affect U.S. operations during conflict. However, Iran's missile capabilities are still significantly limited compared with those of more-advanced militaries.

[8] For more detail on Iran's ability to "close" the Strait, see Talmadge, 2008.

Iran made threatening gestures in the Persian Gulf in December 2012 to dissuade the United States from enacting very tough sanctions against its Central Bank and also to dissuade the European Union from boycotting Iranian oil. Iran may have also hoped that its threats would greatly raise oil prices (Gladstone, 2011). Iran did not follow through on any of the threats; it did not even take other potential actions that would have fallen below the threshold of "closing" the Strait.[9]

Furthermore, although Iran is increasingly isolated from the GCC, it is still economically reliant on Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. Iran is one of the biggest oil producers within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), but its influence is outweighed by Saudi Arabia, the largest producer. U.S. and international sanctions against Iran have dramatically reduced its oil exports and have weakened its position within OPEC; in 2012, Iran lost its position to OPEC's second-largest oil exporter, neighboring Iraq (Razzouk, 2012). Saudi Arabia's increased oil exports and its setting of OPEC's oil quotas have played an important role in making U.S. sanctions effective; much of Iran's oil has been taken off the international market without a corresponding rise in oil prices, which could have mitigated Iran's loss of oil revenue ("The New Grease," 2012).

Iran's antagonism of Saudi Arabia, including aggressive military posturing in the Persian Gulf, could backfire by hurting Tehran's relations with Riyadh and further weakening its position within OPEC. Iran's relations with other GCC states would also induce a sense of caution even if Iran possessed nuclear weapons.

Iran shares the South Pars gas field with Qatar, which hosts the U.S. Combined Air and Space Operations Center. Qatar, unlike Iran, has been able to exploit its portion of the gas field because of its access to Western technology ("Factbox," 2010).[10] Gas and oil exports have allowed Qatar to become quite wealthy and to assume a bigger geopolitical role in the Middle East, at times in opposition to Iranian interests ("Factbox," 2010). For example, Qatar is an important supporter of the Sunni-dominated opposition to the Syrian regime ("$100M Qatar Aid," 2013). But the necessity of sharing South Pars has induced a sense of caution in Iranian-Qatari relations. Moreover, Qatar seeks to prevent Saudi domination of the GCC and perhaps an overdependence on Western powers (Cafiero, 2012). Hence, Iranian-Qatari economic cooperation makes Iranian military aggression toward Qatar less likely, even if Iran acquired nuclear weapons.

The UAE is, in many ways, Iran's economic gateway to the world. Despite sanctions, a large amount of the goods imported by Iran still flow through Dubai ("UAE Exports," 2012). Additionally, Iran has been very reliant on the Emirati banking system. The UAE's compliance with sanctions, particularly concerning banking, has resulted in a substantial decline of the Iranian economy. Iran was particularly reliant on the Emirati Noor Islamic Bank for its oil transactions. That bank's compliance with U.S. sanctions contributed to the sharp reduction of Iranian oil exports in 2012 (Fuchs, 2012).

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[9] For example, in 2007, Iranian naval forces captured 15 British Marines, claiming that they had crossed into Iranian waters. But this happened during heightened tensions between Iran and the United States over the nuclear program and Iran's support of insurgent groups fighting U.S. forces in Iraq. The taking of the British Marines may have been unplanned or not directed from Tehran; nevertheless, it may have also demonstrated Iran's ability to cause instability in the Persian Gulf and as a deterrent against more-aggressive U.S. behavior.

[10] Qatar calls its share of the field North Field ("Factbox," 2010).

The U.S.-Emirati cooperation concerning Iran may have made the Islamic Republic even more hostile toward the UAE. Yet Tehran has not retaliated against it in any visible manner. This could be due to the Iranian government's realization that any further aggravation in relations would hurt Iran more than the UAE.

Much like Iran's relations with other GCC states, the realities and necessities of Emirati-Iranian relations will shape Tehran's approach toward Abu Dhabi, even if Iran acquires nuclear weapons. A total cutoff in trade relations could deal a further blow to the Iranian economy. In addition, elements of the Iranian government, including the Revolutionary Guards, have invested heavily in the Emirati economy (Sadjadpour, 2011). Tehran's economic ties with the UAE, along with the Islamic Republic's consideration of the large numbers of Iranians in the UAE, will constrain a nuclear-armed Iran's willingness and ability to take military action in the Persian Gulf. Nuclear weapons could conceivably provide Iran with the confidence to take such action against the UAE or to try to undermine its government, but to what end? The UAE enjoys U.S. military protection and has developed a respectable conventional military. And any Iranian action to undermine the UAE government could further isolate Iran from a key economic partner.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nuclear Iran and Israel

Israel perceives a nuclear-armed Iran to be among the greatest threats to its national security and to the very existence of the Jewish state. The Islamic Republic, after all, is the most hostile and active opponent of Israeli interests in the Middle East. Ayatollah Khamenei has stated that "the Zionist regime is a true cancer[ous] tumor on this region that should be cut off" (Erdbrink, 2012). President Ahmadinejad has been a particularly vocal critic of the Jewish state; his statements on Israel have garnered him and his country considerable negative attention.

The rising tensions between Israel and the Islamic Republic have created a dangerous dynamic. The possibility of nuclear weapons use in a potential conflict involving Iran and Israel should not be dismissed.

However, the primary purpose of Iran's nuclear weapons would be to deter an American and/or Israeli attack against Iran, not to destroy Israel. Some Israeli political and military leaders worry that an "irrational" Iran would use nuclear weapons to destroy the country (Halevi and Oren, 2007). Many, however, may not believe that a nuclear-armed Iran poses an existential threat ("Barak: Iran Poses," 2010), but are more concerned about the unintended use of Iranian nuclear weapons against Israel during a conventional or asymmetrical conflict (Evron, 2008). Israeli planners also worry that Iran would extend its nuclear deterrence over anti-Israeli groups such as Hizballah and Hamas, which could diminish Israel's military superiority and constrain its freedom of action. Iran could also transfer nuclear weapons and technology to "proxy" groups; in sum, a nuclear-armed Iran could be emboldened in its support of terrorism, not only against Israel but also against the United States and other regional actors.

Fears of an unintended nuclear exchange between Israel and Iran are warranted, especially given the absence of communication between Tel Aviv and Tehran. Moreover, the Iranian government's ideological views of Israel and Tel Aviv's consistent military threats against Iran make a future Israeli-Iranian conflagration more likely, and potentially more dangerous, than a one-sided U.S.-Iranian confrontation.

However, the conventional wisdom that a nuclear-armed Iran would increase its support of terrorism is open to question, as is Iran's willingness to extend its nuclear deterrence to "proxy" terrorist groups. The concept of an Iranian proxy is problematic. Hamas and even Hizballah have unique interests and priorities that might contradict Tehran's ambitions. The Arab Spring, in particular, has revealed the divide between the Islamic Republic and some of its so-called proxies. The Islamic Republic is unlikely to extend nuclear deterrence to other parties. Moreover, Iran's leaders are unlikely to provide nuclear weapons to non-Iranian groups.

Iran's use of terrorism is not irrational but is shaped by strategic and geopolitical calculations. Factors other than possession of nuclear weapons are likely to have a greater role in shaping Iran's support for terrorism.

An Ideological, But Not Self-Destructive, Hatred of Israel

The Islamic Republic views Israel in ideological, but not irrational, terms. The Iranian leadership, whether hailing from the conservative right or the reformist left, believes Israel to be a base of Western colonialism and a pillar of American imperialism in the Middle East. In addition, Tehran believes that the perceived U.S. hostility toward the Islamic Republic is in part driven by the "Zionist" influence in Washington, D.C. According to this perspective, Israel, allied to the Shah prior to the revolution, is fundamentally opposed to an independent and strong Iran ruled by an Islamist government (Kaye, Nader, and Roshan, 2011).

Iran has used its opposition to Israel to gain influence among Arab populations and decrease its isolation in a Sunni-majority Middle East. But the Islamic Republic's hostility toward Israel is due more to a sense of revolutionary mission than to mere geopolitical calculations. In this sense, Iran's rivalry is different from its competition with the Arab states of the GCC. Although Iran and Saudi Arabia may compete ideologically, their contest is for the leadership of the Muslim world; despite the Islamic Republic's distaste for the Saudi monarchy, Saudi Arabia is still a Muslim, and therefore brotherly, country. However, from the Islamic Republic's perspective, Israel is an alien entity; its people are not part of the regional fabric but are Western colonialists who have conquered Palestine and Jerusalem, one of Islam's holiest sites. Ayatollah Khamenei, who is keen to emphasize his opposition toward specific rulers or governments rather than their people, even considers Israeli noncombatant civilians as Iran's enemies (Mostaghim and Daragahi, 2008). From the Islamic Republic's viewpoint, Israel is not a legitimate state (unlike Saudi Arabia or even the United States) to be engaged or tolerated, but a passing phenomenon that must be opposed out of religious and revolutionary obligation.

The Islamic Republic's aversion toward Israel does not mean that it wants to destroy it physically, however. Rhetoric aside, the Iranian government appears to recognize Israel as a powerful military and political actor (Kahl, Dalton, and Irvine, 2012). Israel's conventional and nuclear military capabilities far outweigh Iranian capabilities. Iran has developed ballistic missiles that can be launched at Israel, but the regime is unlikely to attack Israel unless it has been attacked first. Iran would also be very hesitant to use nuclear weapons, as Israel's nuclear retaliation could wipe out the entire Iranian leadership, if not much of the country (Kaye, Nader, and Roshan, 2011).

Ayatollah Rafsanjani's past comments regarding Israel and nuclear weapons may reveal some of the Islamic Republic's thinking on nuclear use. In his September 2012 speech to the UN General Assembly, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu claimed that Rafsanjani's words illustrate Iran's supposed willingness to use nuclear weapons against Israel ("Full Text," 2012). However, a close reading of Rafsanjani's speech may indicate the opposite. In his December 14, 2001, Friday prayer speech, Rafsanjani stated, "If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world" (Hashemi-Rafsanjani, 2001). This specific quote is used by analysts and policymakers, including Netanyahu, to argue that Iran is willing to use nuclear weapons against Israel, since it believes it can "absorb" Israel's retaliation which would only "harm the Islamic world." However, what Rafsanjani may have meant is that the use of nuclear weapons against Israel would also harm Iran. Hence, a nuclear exchange between Israel and the Islamic world (perhaps meaning Iran) would be detrimental to both sides (Sahimi,

2012). This may indicate an understanding of mutual deterrence rather than suicidal behavior, which would be unbecoming of the cunning and calculating Rafsanjani.

Irrationality, Command and Control, and Rogue Actions

Some analysts and commentators have argued that Iran's current leadership, which has sidelined more-pragmatic figures such as Rafsanjani, is messianic and therefore irrational (Rubin, 2008; Etzioni, 2010). It is true that millenarian or apocalyptic beliefs have become more prominent within Iranian politics in recent years, especially under the Ahmadinejad presidency (Khalaji, 2008). The Twelver Shi'a sect, to which most Iranians belong, maintains that the twelfth and last Imam went into occultation in 874 AD and will return during a time of chaos and disorder. Some Mahdists believe that violent acts would facilitate the reemergence of the Mahdi and bring about mankind's salvation (Ahdiyyih, 2008). However, to link this belief system to the possible use of nuclear weapons by Iran is simplistic.

Ahmadinejad and his followers may be Mahdists, but this does not mean that they would like to destroy the world in order to realize their religious objectives. Men like Ahmadinejad do not strive for Armageddon; their main political objective is to gain and maintain power and to obtain a larger share of the economic pie they believe has been gobbled up by establishment figures such as Rafsanjani. Much of Ahmadinejad's apocalyptical rhetoric has roots in his domestic political ambitions—he may fervently believe in millenarianism, but he has also used it to gain power at the expense of Iran's clergy, including Ayatollah Khamenei.

And it is Khamenei who will have the final say on the nuclear program, not Iran's president.[1] If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it is reasonable to expect that Khamenei, along with a handful of senior Revolutionary Guards commanders, will maintain strict control over them. During his reign, Khamenei has demonstrated a tendency to keep control of sensitive state matters in his own hands. Ahmadinejad's public challenging of his authority has turned much of the Iranian political establishment, including the Revolutionary Guards, against the upstart president and led to the political marginalization of Ahmadinejad and his allies. Khamenei, who is not a fervent Mahdist, is unlikely to allow millenarians such as Ahmadinejad to assume political power in Iran, much less assume command and control over Iran's nuclear arsenal (Khalaji, 2008).

No one can predict the structure of Iran's nuclear command and control with absolute certainty. However, it is likely to resemble or replicate its conventional-military command and control, with the Supreme Leader at the very top. Would it be possible for rogue actors to obtain command of nuclear weapons and attack Israel, for example? This possibility cannot be summarily dismissed, especially given the level of internal discord within the Iranian political system (Clawson and Eisenstadt, 2007).

However, there is very little evidence to indicate that rogue command and use of nuclear weapons is a high probability. Even if the Islamic Republic were to collapse, there would not be a lack of central authority as has been witnessed in post-revolutionary states such as Libya. Iran has a long history as a centralized nation-state; the overthrow of the Shah, while chaotic, was followed by the assumption of power by a new political system, rather than total anarchy.

[1] Ahmadinejad's term as president ends in August 2013. He is constitutionally not allowed to serve more than two consecutive terms.

There have been instances of independent and perhaps unauthorized action by individual Revolutionary Guards commanders. In addition, the Guards, fearing decapitating U.S. strikes against Iran's command and control, has created 32 separate commands throughout Iran, representing Tehran and all of Iran's provinces (Chubin, 2013). The Guards has also emphasized individual initiative and decisionmaking in its ranks. All of this is part of a "mosaic defense" strategy that would ensure the Islamic Republic's survivability in the face of an overwhelming U.S. attack (Connell, 2010; Cordesman and Kleiber, 2007).

The Islamic Republic is also deeply obsessed with dissent from within its own ranks. Ayatollah Khamenei has appointed personal representatives to the Guards and other security forces in order to closely monitor them and enforce his political will and ideology (Nader, Thaler, and Bohandy, 2011). In addition, the Guards' decisionmaking is not autonomous in all regards. Mosaic defense is meant to ensure survivability in the face of a massive external assault, but the central purpose of decentralizing command and control may be to protect the Islamic Republic from internal uprisings. It does not mean that individual Guards commanders will have control of or access to nuclear weapons.

There is not much reason to expect Iranian nuclear decisionmaking to be fundamentally different from that of other nuclear powers. Khamenei, or whoever rules Iran, will want to make sure that knowledge of and access to nuclear weapons is compartmentalized and tightly controlled, especially considering the role nuclear weapons could play in regime survival.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nuclear Iran and Terrorism

A nuclear-armed Iran is unlikely to adopt a first-strike policy toward Israel—that is, Iran would be unlikely to target Israel with nuclear weapons in the absence of an attack from Israel. However, an unintended or accidental nuclear confrontation between the two Middle Eastern powers is a possibility. This may especially be the case in the unlikely event that Iran extends its nuclear deterrence to terrorist groups that are directly engaged in armed conflict with Israel, such as Hizballah and Hamas.

Terrorism holds a special place in the Iranian government's military doctrine. What is perceived by the United States and much of the broader world as terrorism is considered by the Iranian government to be a legitimate means of defending itself and the Muslim Middle East from American and Israeli "domination." Iranian support for terrorism is closely tied to state goals and objectives, including deterring and containing regional rivals, and is the product of cost and benefit calculations, rather than of an irrational ideology.

It can be argued that a nuclear-armed Iran could be emboldened to increase its support of terrorist and insurgent groups, with the expectation that its nuclear capability would ward off a strong reaction. Mark Dubowitz, Executive Director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, has argued that "at a minimum, a nuclear-armed Iran will be emboldened to accelerate its aggressive activities in the region and act against its neighbors with little fear of retribution" (Dubowitz, 2013). But it is not clear if the possession of nuclear weapons will have a major effect on how Iran views and exploits terrorist groups. Rather, the intensity and tempo of Iran's support for terrorists is based on a number of factors that may not be affected by a nuclear capability.

Iran's Motives for Supporting Terrorism

The Islamic Republic has supported terrorist and insurgent groups from the beginning of its existence. This was initially done for ideological reasons. Many of the Islamic Republic's founders empathized with groups fighting what they perceived to be U.S. and Israeli imperialism. Some of Iran's future clerical and military leaders were even trained in Palestinian fighter camps in Lebanon and elsewhere (Brandenburg, 2010). They viewed Iranian support for liberation groups as a continuation of Iran's revolution.

Iran's support for terrorism produced some early successes. For example, Iran competed with several nations, including the United States, Israel, France, and even Syria, for power and influence in Lebanon in the 1980s. Iranian influence in Lebanon was insignificant in comparison with that of other powers. Yet Iran managed to become a major player in Lebanese politics,

not only through its mentorship and support of Hizballah but also through the successful use of terrorism against American, French, and Israeli interests. The simultaneous 1983 bombings of the U.S. Marine barracks and a French barracks carried out by Hizballah, with Iranian support, helped bring about the U.S. and Western withdrawal from Lebanon the next year. Israel maintained a presence in southern Lebanon for much longer, but Hizballah's persistent asymmetric attacks and rising Israeli casualties led to Israel's 2000 withdrawal. In the following years, Iran's material support for Hizballah allowed the Lebanese Shi'a group and its patrons in Tehran to become the dominant players in Lebanese politics.

The Islamic Republic's attempts to spread Iran's revolution across the broader Middle East met with limited success, however. With the exception of Hizballah in Lebanon, no other significant Arab or Muslim groups saw the Iranian revolution and its unique system of *velayat-e faghih* as serving their own particular interests. Iran's revolution made limited inroads among the Shi'a-majority populations of Iraq and Bahrain. The Iraqi Shi'a, in fact, served as Saddam Hussein's foot soldiers in the brutal war against the Islamic Republic (Nasr, 2006). Partially due to these failures, Iran's support for terrorist and insurgent groups came to serve more-realistic goals than exporting the revolution. Over time, Iran's support for terrorism waxed and waned according to the Islamic Republic's needs and policy priorities.

For example, Iran actively supported a number of anti-Saudi groups right after the 1979 revolution and incited the 1987 protests in Mecca. The Iranian government's chief aim at that time was to overturn the pro-American Saudi monarchy and the regional status quo. But Iran's more-active support for groups such as Saudi Hizballah (Hizballah al-Hejaz) began to wane in the 1980s, due to Iran's inability to export the revolution and undermine Arab governments effectively, in addition to its attempt to lessen its isolation under Rafsanjani and Khatami.

Iran did not cease all support for terrorism in the Arabian Peninsula, however; it was tied to the 1996 attack on Khobar Towers, in which its security forces appeared to have used Arab terrorist groups (Khobar Indictment, 2001). In addition, according to recent reports, Iran has provided material support, including weapons, financing, and possibly military training, to Yemeni Houthi rebels fighting the Yemeni government and Saudi security forces (Schmitt and Worth, 2012). More alarmingly, the Iranian government was implicated in a 2011 plan to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador in Washington, D.C.

The assassination plot was outlandish and seemingly reckless. One would expect a sense of caution and restraint on Tehran's part, especially given the intense pressures faced by Iran in recent years. The plot, however, harmed Iranian interests by increasing Iran's international isolation and perhaps strengthening the Saudi-American alliance (Ignatius, 2011). It is difficult to imagine that Iran's typically deliberative leadership, including Ayatollah Khamenei and the much renowned chief of the elite Revolutionary Guards Qods Force, General Qassem Soleimani, would have authorized such a reckless endeavor (Clapper, 2012). The plot confirmed some observers' anxieties regarding the Islamic Republic and its quest for a potential nuclear weapons capability, i.e., that it is an irrational and unpredictable entity that could not be deterred or contained, especially if it obtained nuclear weapons (Cohen, 2011).

However, the assassination plot should be viewed in the context of the nuclear crisis. Before the Saudi plot, Iran had experienced unprecedented sanctions, in addition to the sabotage of its nuclear program through the Stuxnet attack on the Natanz uranium enrichment facility. The success of U.S. sanctions in squeezing the Iranian economy has been due, in part, to Saudi Arabia's increased oil exports to traditional Iranian energy customers such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea (Blas, 2012). The additional Saudi export of oil has allowed the

United States to essentially take much of Iran's oil exports off the global market without significantly raising oil prices. Iran has also accused Saudi Arabia of aiding efforts to undermine its nuclear program. For example, Tehran suspects a Saudi role in the defection of Iranian nuclear scientist Shahram Amiri (Iran claims he was kidnapped) ("Timeline," 2010). Iranian officials have also accused Saudi Arabia of aiding anti-Iranian insurgent and terrorist groups such as the Mujaheddin Khalq Organization and Sunni Baluchi groups such as Jundullah (Nader and Laha, 2011).

One has to consider that the Islamic Republic faced intense pressures and may have been frustrated by its inability to ward off persistent attacks against its nuclear personnel and infrastructure. The plot and possible assassination of the Saudi Ambassador was Iran's way of not only retaliating against Saudi Arabia but also enhancing Iranian deterrence in the face of the Iranian government's most powerful Islamic rival.

The Islamic Republic also perceives terrorism as successful policy in containing and deterring Israel. Although Iran views the United States as the primary threat to its security, it perceives Israel as driving and directing U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic (Kaye, Nader, and Roshan, 2011). Hence, Iran's support of anti-Israeli groups serves as a brake on Israeli actions and, ultimately, U.S. behavior. Iran's rationale for supporting anti-Israeli groups has been reinforced by the rising tensions over its nuclear program and consistent U.S. and Israeli military threats.

Iran's use of terrorism against Israel, therefore, is motivated by specific political and military calculations rather than ideological instinct or pure hatred, as some analysts and policymakers, including Netanyahu, claim (Netanyahu, 2010). This has an important bearing on Iran's behavior toward Israel if it obtains nuclear weapons.

For example, it can be argued that Iranian-sponsored attacks against the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and the Argentine Israel Mutual Association were tied to specific Israeli actions, including Israel's assassination of Hizballah chief Abbas al-Musawi in 1992 ("Group," 1992). Similarly, Iranian and Hizballah attacks in 2012 against Israeli targets in Thailand, India, Georgia, and Kenya and the killing of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria should be considered in the context of the struggle between Iran and Israel over the Iranian nuclear program. The Iranian government has been under tremendous pressure because of its nuclear program; four Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated since 2010, and Iranian nuclear and military facilities have been subjected to cyber warfare and sabotage. The Iranian government has blamed Israel and the United States for these attacks (Burleigh, 2012). Its subsequent use of terrorism against Israel abroad is tied to these actions and may be an attempt to establish Iran's deterrence vis-à-vis Israel and the United States.

Recent U.S., Israeli, and Saudi actions aimed at stopping Iran's nuclear progress have resulted in an increase in Iran's use and support of terrorism. It would hardly be correct, however, to state that Iran has been merely emboldened to support terrorism, especially by progress on its nuclear program, and that a nuclear-armed Iran would be even further emboldened to step up terrorist attacks. Iranian views toward terrorism are shaped by factors independent of a nuclear weapons capability.

Extended Nuclear Deterrence

Similarly, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons does not automatically translate into an extended nuclear deterrence to groups such as Hizballah and Hamas. As previously mentioned, neither Hizballah, Hamas, nor most other Muslim groups with ties to Tehran can be considered true "proxies." Rather, Iran and partner Arab groups have mutual interests that are subject to change, depending on circumstances.

Hizabllah is closer to the Islamic Republic than any other Arab group. It was formed with Iranian guidance and has been sustained throughout the years by Iran's generous financial and military support. Top-ranking Hizballah leaders, many of whom are Shi'a clerics, share a close affinity and affection for the Islamic Republic. Hizballah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, has praised Khamenei and Iran's system of *velayat-e faghih* (Nasrallah's Speech, 2011). There has also been speculation that Hizballah would come to Iran's defense in the event of an Israeli military strike.

Iranian leaders tend to view Hizballah as a natural outgrowth of Iran's 1979 revolution. Hence, they would be more willing to come to its defense than to that of other groups. And it would not be far-fetched to imagine Iran brandishing its nuclear weapons capability to deter an Israeli attack against Hizballah. However, this does not mean that a nuclear-armed Iran would push Hizballah to attack Israel. Nor does it mean that Iran would initiate a nuclear exchange with Israel in retaliation for an Israeli attack on Hizballah.

Since the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war, both Hizballah and its patrons in Tehran have been careful to avoid an overt confrontation with the Jewish state. Despite withstanding the Israeli military campaign, a notable feat for an Arab force and the basis of its claim of victory, Hizballah suffered heavy military casualties. Southern Lebanon and the Shi'a-inhabited sections of Beirut, both Hizballah strongholds, also suffered the devastation of Israeli air strikes. Since 2006, Israeli leaders have repeatedly warned of massive retaliation against Lebanon's infrastructure (in Christian, Sunni, and Shi'a areas) if Hizballah were to strike Israel with its longer-range ballistic missiles (Filkins, 2013). This could be an effective deterrent against an emboldened Hizballah and Iran.

Moreover, Hizballah's military capabilities also serve as a deterrent to Israeli attacks against Iran. Tel Aviv may hesitate to strike Iran if it would mean opening up a new front with Hizballah. But if Hizballah were to fight Israel and be soundly defeated before Israel strikes Iran, then Iran's deterrence against Israel could be subsequently weakened.

In addition, Hizballah's leaders are anxious to avoid appearing as Iranian pawns. Hizballah is Lebanon's most powerful political, military, and economic actor. It has achieved this in part by portraying itself not only as a Shi'a sectarian group but as a nationalist Lebanese Arab party. Hizballah may be largely viewed as an Iranian "proxy" within the United States and among its allies, but it works hard to ensure that this is not the view of the average Arab citizen. Its perceived independence, along with its policy of resistance against Israel, has gained it a certain amount of street credibility. Nasrallah was at one time considered to be among the most popular Arab leaders, especially after the 2006 conflict with Israel (Murphy, 2006).

However, the Arab Spring and the widening sectarian schism in the Middle East have made Hizballah vulnerable. Hizballah's alliance with the Syrian regime has particularly weakened its credentials among the region's Arab publics (Hendawi, 2012). It appears that Hizballah is no longer viewed as a source of Arab pride; rather, it is seen as a Shi'a sectarian group and a Syrian and Iranian "proxy." The Arab Spring and the potential fall of the Syrian regime could

leave Hizballah even more exposed. Hence, Hizballah's leadership may be wary of appearing to be Iran's proxy in the region and may become more cautious in taking action that could be viewed by Arabs as serving Iranian interests, including attacking Israel if Israel decides to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities ("Tehran Won't Order," 2012).

This is not to suggest that Iran and Hizballah will grow distant; regional trends may even enhance cooperation between the two, as witnessed by Hizballah's alleged role in the bombing of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria. Furthermore, a nuclear-armed Iran may be tempted to provide more-advanced weaponry to Hizballah's armed forces. Thus far, Iran has not given Hizballah its best weaponry. Although Hizballah is known to operate Iranian-supplied ballistic missiles that can reach any point in Israel (Khoury, 2012), the Iranian government has not provided the organization with chemical or biological weapons, which it is capable of producing. It can be argued that a nuclear-armed Iran could be emboldened to provide Hizballah with deadlier weapons, including nuclear weapons or technology; however, other factors are likely to shape Iran's decisions on this matter.

The regional environment, the status of the Syrian regime, international pressures, the state of the Israel-Iran rivalry, and most importantly, U.S. and Israeli policy toward Iran could have a bigger role in determining Iran's policy toward Hizballah than Iran's nuclear weapons capability. For example, Iran may consider increasing its military aid to Hizballah if it faces additional assassinations and sabotages conducted by Israel. It does not need nuclear weapons to make that decision.

Given current circumstances, increased military and terrorist cooperation between Iran and Hizballah is likely. But it is one thing for Tehran to cooperate with Hizballah clandestinely and another to extend its nuclear deterrence to Hizballah. The Islamic Republic's primary objective is its own survival in the face of tremendous pressures. It may view Hizballah as a close ally, but it would not risk its core interests in order to protect it, especially if that exposed Iran to devastating Israeli and/or U.S. retaliation. Iran might threaten, probably rather vaguely, to employ its nuclear weapons in defense of Hizballah, but it would be unlikely to actually carry through on such a threat given the almost certain regime-ending consequences of initiating a nuclear exchange with Israel, let alone the United States. Tehran will carefully consider the consequences and the risks of its actions to the Islamic Republic's interests above all else. Hizballah is unlikely to feel emboldened by Iran's nuclear capability if it does not have explicit assurance from Tehran. Unfortunately, this may not reduce possible miscalculation in a conflict between Israel and Hizballah, since the Israeli leadership could find it difficult to interpret a nuclear-armed Iran's intentions and red lines regarding Hizballah.

Iran's relationship with other Arab groups, particularly Hamas, is even more problematic for the Islamic Republic. In the past decade, the Iranian government has become one of the biggest Hamas supporters. The Islamic Republic's funding of the Palestinian group has reportedly amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars, and Hamas has received military training and advanced weapons from the elite Qods Force. In recent months, Tehran, which traditionally denied military links with Hamas, has publicly acknowledged its role in supporting the anti-Israeli group. In November 2012, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards, admitted that Iran had provided Hamas with the "know-how" to produce the Farjr 5 rocket launched against Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in the November 2012 Gaza conflict (Dehghan, 2012).

However, Iranian-Hamas relations have been complicated by the Arab Spring, which Hamas has viewed as a great opportunity. The overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt

has led to the ascension of the Muslim Brotherhood; Hamas, the Palestinian offshoot of the Brotherhood, no longer faces the containment imposed by the pro-American Mubarak regime. Moreover, despite warming ties between a Brotherhood-dominated Egypt and Iran, the Egyptian leadership is unlikely to join the Islamic Republic's "axis of resistance" against Israel and the United States (Khalaji, 2012b). Rather, the new Egyptian regime will attempt to stake out an independent and influential role for itself in a changing Middle East.

Not only has Hamas embraced the new Egyptian leadership, it has distanced itself from the Syrian regime. The top Hamas leader, Khaled Mashaal, has relocated to Qatar from Damascus and has criticized the Assad regime's brutal reaction to the Sunni-led opposition ("Syrian State Media," 2012). Moreover, he has praised Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a "leader of the Islamic world" ("Khaled Mashaal," 2012). This is in effect a snub to the Islamic Republic, which is locked in a growing competition with Turkey over influence in the Middle East.

Hamas and Iran continue to cooperate militarily, and neither has cut off ties with the other. But the Hamas-Iranian relationship is one of convenience. Hamas will seek Iranian support as long as it suits its own interests; it is currently unable to receive military support from other Arab nations, most of which are allied to the United States. And Tehran will support Hamas in order to deter an Israeli military attack on its nuclear facilities. But the Sunni and Brotherhood-affiliated Hamas is not an Iranian "proxy." Tehran is aware of this and is highly unlikely to place nuclear technology and/or weapons in its hands. Furthermore, it is quite unlikely that a nuclear-armed Iran would extend its nuclear deterrence to Hamas or any other Palestinian group.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion and Findings

Nuclear arms will not change Iran's fundamental interests and strategies, nor will they provide Iran with the ability to reshape the Middle East's geopolitical order. Nuclear weapons will reinforce Iran's deterrent capabilities, but beyond additional deterrence, they will not provide Iran with much greater influence and power in the region.

The Islamic Republic is a revisionist state that seeks to undermine what it perceives to be the American-dominated order in the Middle East. It views itself as a natural power in the region and resents what it perceives to be the "imperial" U.S. presence, particularly in the Persian Gulf. However, the Islamic Republic does not have territorial ambitions and does not seek to invade, conquer, or occupy other nations. Regime survival, the weakening of U.S. power, the removal of American forces from the region, and the ascension of pro-Iranian groups are the Islamic Republic's leading objectives.

Iran's ambition to diminish U.S. power in the Middle East has translated into hostile policies toward Washington's closest allies in the region, including the GCC states and Israel. The Islamic Republic views the Gulf Arab monarchies as being American "proxies." Saudi Arabia, in particular, is one of Iran's greatest regional competitors. The Iranian government has supported a number of terrorist and insurgent groups in order to undermine its Arab neighbors. At the same time, Tehran has pursued nuanced and pragmatic policies toward Saudi Arabia and the GCC. Iran's possession of nuclear weapons may lead to greater tension between the Shi'a theocracy and the conservative Sunni monarchies.

The Islamic Republic is also deeply hostile toward the state of Israel, Washington's closest ally in the Middle East. Not only is Tehran opposed to Israel's existence as a Jewish state, it has provided material support, including weapons, funding, and military training, to groups such as Hizballah and Hamas, both of which have waged armed conflict with Israel. In addition to fearing a direct nuclear attack, the Israeli leadership fears that a nuclear-armed Iran would be emboldened to increase material support to these groups. From Tel Aviv's perspective, an Iranian nuclear capability could negate Israel's overwhelming military superiority over Hizballah, Hamas, and other potential adversaries. An Iranian nuclear weapons capability that would serve as an "umbrella" for its allies could significantly hamper Israel's military operations in the Palestinian territories, the Levant, and the wider Middle East.

However, nuclear weapons will not automatically make Iran more aggressive toward the GCC, or even Israel. Iran is unlikely to use nuclear weapons against other Muslim countries, especially Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam's two holiest sites. Moreover, Iran's ability to undermine the GCC regimes is constrained, especially given the Islamic Republic's decreasing regional influence resulting from its support for the Syrian regime.

Possession of nuclear weapons will not increase Iran's ability to undermine the GCC. Iran's influence among the Shi'a populations in the Persian Gulf is limited and will not change with the acquisition of nuclear weapons. As the Bahraini uprising has demonstrated, Gulf Arab populations are motivated by their own parochial interests and do not view themselves as conduits for Persian influence. The Arab Spring has also weakened Iranian influence in the Arab world by imperiling Iran's position in the Levant and widening the gulf between a Shi'a Iran and its Sunni Arab neighbors.

In addition, Iran maintains important economic relations with Saudi Arabia and the other GCC nations. Aggressive behavior toward the GCC would be likely to jeopardize Iran's own interests. Iranian attempts to impede shipping in the Gulf or "close" the Strait of Hormuz are also likely to backfire. Iran is highly dependent on the freedom of navigation in the Gulf; any action that interferes with that could hurt Iran more than the United States and its GCC allies.

Moreover, Iran's military capabilities would still be greatly outweighed by the combined strength of U.S.-GCC forces in the Persian Gulf. A nuclear-armed Iran could also be effectively deterred by potential U.S. extended deterrence to the GCC. Possession of nuclear weapons is likely to reinforce Iranian deterrence in the Persian Gulf, but Iran is more likely to take military action there if its critical interests, including the survival of the Islamic Republic, are under severe threat.

The Islamic Republic also recognizes Israel's conventional and nuclear military superiority. Tehran would not use nuclear weapons against Israel directly, as that would lead to Iran's destruction. The Iranian government has historically preferred to confront Israel through Arab partners such as Hizballah and Hamas, and nuclear weapons are unlikely to change this policy. However, many analysts argue that Iran could be emboldened to increase its support of groups such as Hizballah and even encourage them to be less risk-averse in their confrontations with the Jewish state. Iran, these analysts argue, could also extend its nuclear deterrence over such groups, minimizing Israel's ability to attack them conventionally. For example, Hizballah might become more confident about confronting Israel if it knows it has Iranian nuclear weapons to support its endeavors. It is reasonable to assume that Hizballah will take into account such weapons in shaping its future military doctrine, especially given the extent of past military cooperation with Iran, including jointly planned terrorist operations.

However, close cooperation between Hizballah and Iran on issues of mutual interest such as attacking Israeli targets does not automatically translate into an Iranian nuclear umbrella under which Hizballah can operate with full confidence. Tehran's relations with so-called "proxies" such as Hizballah complicate its ability to extend a nuclear umbrella over them. First, the term proxy is highly problematic. Neither Hizballah nor Hamas, the most capable of the anti-Israeli groups, can be considered as Iranian proxies. Each has its own set of unique political, economic, and ideological interests. Of all pro-Iranian groups in the Middle East, Hizballah, an Arab and Lebanese actor, feels the greatest sense of religious and ideological kinship with the Islamic Republic. But even Hizballah has unique interests that diverge from Tehran's ambitions. Non-Shi'a Arab groups such as Hamas are even more independent of Tehran's dictates. The Arab Spring has in particular weakened Iran's hold on many anti-Israeli and anti-American Arab groups by diminishing Iran's narrative of "resistance." Syria and Hizballah, Iran's closest allies, are also under tremendous pressure, and there is very little evidence to suggest that the Islamic Republic would risk its own security and existence for them. This indicates that Iran is unlikely to extend a nuclear umbrella over any of these actors. For the

same reasons, Tehran is unlikely to transfer actual nuclear weapons or nuclear technology to these groups.

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 Iran's 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 views are not relevant to nuclear weapons and are unlikely to have a large role in Iran's nuclear decisionmaking.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that Iran would not be greatly emboldened by a nuclear weapons capability. Nevertheless, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons will create greater instability in the Middle East. An accidental or inadvertent nuclear exchange between Iran and Israel would be a dangerous possibility. Moreover, quite aside from how Iran might behave, its possession of nuclear weapons could arguably set off a cascade effect, encouraging other regional rivals to move in the same direction. This potential effect falls outside the scope of this study but is worth careful consideration, as the capabilities and incentives for each candidate—for example, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Turkey—need to be examined individually.

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