

IRAN'S NUCLEAR DECISION-MAKING CALCULUS

Nader Entessar

Dr. Entessar is a professor in and chair of the Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice at the University of South Alabama.

Tehran's nuclear program has become the most significant source of friction between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West, especially the United States. President Barack Obama, unlike his predecessor, has offered to negotiate with Iran without preconditions over its nuclear ambitions. Success, or even minimal progress, in this respect requires an understanding of the internal dynamics of Iran's nuclear decision making. This article endeavors to shed some light on this neglected discourse on Iran's nuclear calculus.

Iran's national perspective on its nuclear policy is shaped by a multiplicity of domestic, regional and global variables. Ever since 2002, when Iran's nuclear issue was elevated in the West as a growing threat to regional stability and the non-proliferation regime, the leadership of the Islamic Republic has couched the issue in terms of both its absolute rights under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its right to engage in the research and development of all phases of peaceful nuclear energy. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the main factors that have shaped the evolution of Iran's national thinking on nuclear energy and to

examine contemporary debates inside the country on the logic of its nuclear policy.

The genesis of Iran's nuclear program dates back to 1956, when Mohammad Reza Shah's government initiated a series of talks with the government of the United States, culminating in the 1957 signing of the first agreement between the two countries on the peaceful use of nuclear energy by Iran.¹ In that same year, the Institute of Nuclear Sciences, affiliated with the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), was relocated from Baghdad to Tehran University. The Institute became a training center for Iranian students as well as those from Pakistan and Turkey. Subsequently, the shah ordered the establishment of the first atomic research center in 1959 at Tehran University. The United States provided the center with a five-megawatt research reactor, which became fully operational in 1967, and took a major step in assisting the shah's nuclear program by delivering in September of that same year a package containing 554 kilograms of highly enriched uranium and 112 grams of plutonium.² Furthermore, the shah's government signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with Canada to facilitate the training and research activities of Iranian scientists.³

In 1972, the shah's government completed a major study on Iran's future energy needs. A major finding was that Iran would need alternative energy sources in order to meet its needs in the next two decades. The quadrupling of oil prices in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war allowed the shah to order the construction of twenty 300-megawatt nuclear power plants and to earmark \$60 billion from oil revenues to finance this ambitious project. Although this was to be a government-run effort, the shah used a select number of his trusted associates to spearhead it. Abolfath Mahvi, a Pahlavi confidant and the head of the Mahvi Group of conglomerates, became a key figure in securing the necessary contracts with foreign companies to construct Iran's nuclear power plants.

Due to his previous contacts with Germany's Kraftwerk Union (KWU) and Siemens, Mahvi arranged for these entities to become Iran's leading nuclear-power-plant contractors. Mahvi subsequently established the Iran Nuclear Energy Company (INECO) and the Iran Management Technical Consultations Company (IMTC) to act as an Iranian conduit for the German companies. In the final analysis, Mahvi became the single most important individual in facilitating the implementation of the shah's ambitious nuclear program.⁴ According to Mahvi, it was he who first suggested to the shah the possibility of Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. One opportunity arose during an official trip to the United States during Lyndon Johnson's presidency. On a flight to Chicago, Mahvi requested permission to discuss an issue with the shah. When the monarch asked what was on his mind, Mahvi replied, "Since the U.S. president will not support your request for America to increase its purchase of Iranian oil, which would, in

turn, allow you to purchase more arms, why not consider acquiring nuclear weapons? It will reduce the need to purchase more sophisticated arms and military hardware and will add to Iran's prestige among the international community."⁵ It was not until 1970, when the shah brought up the issue with Mahvi during a trip to Mashhad, that he confided his real intention in ordering a 5-megawatt nuclear research reactor for Tehran University: to allow Iran to develop the means to acquire nuclear weapons.⁶

It is debatable whether the shah wanted to make Iran a nuclear-weapons-capable state, but there were indications that some nations were suspicious of his ultimate motives. For example, when Arya Abbas Amirie, the executive director of the Institute for International Political and Economic Studies (IIPES), a leading Iranian think tank, visited Australia on behalf of the shah's government, the chairman of the Australian Commission on Uranium asked why Iran wanted to build "risky" nuclear power plants when it possessed major oil and natural-gas supplies. Similarly, Georgi Arbatov, the influential director of the Soviet Union's Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies and a top foreign-policy adviser in Moscow, expressed his skepticism about the shah's nuclear intentions when he met with Amirie in October 1978. Arbatov bluntly stated that Soviet intelligence had concluded that the shah planned to make Iran a member of the atomic club and build atomic bombs because he did not wish to be outdone by countries like Israel.⁷ Moreover, Arbatov stated that the shah would not hesitate to use his nuclear status to "blackmail" Iran's neighbors and that, in the event of a major conventional war between the Soviet Union and the West, Washington would use a nuclear

Iran to tie down a large sector of the Soviet army on the Iranian border in order to delay its deployment to the European theater. The shah's purported desire to turn Iran into a nuclear-weapons state may have had its genesis in the monarch's fear of the destabilizing impact of the Soviet-supported states in the region: "According to the shah, Iran did not fear an attack from the Soviet Union, but rather from Afghanistan and Iraq acting as proxies for Soviet aggression. To counter this threat, the shah told [President] Eisenhower that Iran needed a 'crash program' to obtain highly mobile forces with *atomic weapons* [emphasis added]."⁸

Of course, the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 shelved the shah's nuclear programs, and the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 led to the destruction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant that had been in its rudimentary stages of construction by the German firms. However, support for Iran's current nuclear program has remained astoundingly strong among many of the high-level officials of the Pahlavi monarchy. For example, Akabar Etemad, the first and only director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran under the shah, and Ardeshir Zahedi, the Iranian foreign minister who signed the NPT as the shah's representative, have expressed strong support for Iran's right to engage in nuclear research and have access to the most advanced nuclear technology, even under a regime they detest.⁹ Ironically, newly declassified U.S. documents reveal a remarkable continuity between the shah's nuclear logic and that of the Islamic Republic.¹⁰ In light of the history of Iran's nuclear ambitions, it is unlikely that a different type of government would abandon the country's desire to develop a robust nuclear industry.

THE CHALLENGE

Is the Islamic Republic of Iran seeking to counter its weakness in conventional weapons by developing a nuclear deterrent capability? Are nuclear weapons useful for enhancing Iran's ability to deter a potential threat from a regional adversary like Israel? We cannot answer these and similar questions with any degree of certainty. However, we can get a better picture of why Iran seeks to maintain its current nuclear posture in the face of enormous pressure from the West by examining its perception of the threat and its factional decision making and the impact this has on the nuclear debate.

Although the United States and Israel have long accused Iran of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, ambiguities abound in terms of both Iran's intentions and its capabilities as a potential nuclear-armed state. In its numerous reports on Iran, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has yet to conclude that Iran's nuclear programs have violated the country's obligations under the NPT.¹¹ Although it is true that the IAEA has reported that it cannot categorically state that Iran does not intend to develop nuclear weapons, such assertions are not unique to Iran. First, the IAEA has inserted similar statements in its reports on 46 other NPT signatories. Second, it is logically impossible to prove a negative. Neither Iran nor any other state can be expected to *prove* what it does *not* intend to do.

Furthermore, Iran is surrounded by unstable, hostile or nuclear-weapons-armed states and has been the victim of regional aggression with catastrophic consequences for its people and its security. It continues to be threatened by instability and a high degree of volatility on its eastern and western borders, and the spillover effects of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have cre-

ated major security challenges. Shahram Chubin, a veteran analyst of Iran's defense and foreign policy, has argued that "Iran's regional relations are otherwise unremarkable, posing no threat to Iran, even if they are not characterized by uniform warmth and close cooperation."¹² However, the Iranian leadership assesses regional challenges as posing serious threats to the country's national security and territorial integrity that need to be addressed in a variety of ways.

Israel has become a major concern for Iran's top-level decision makers. Notwithstanding President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's provocative rhetoric against Israel, primarily designed to garner support among the Arab masses and bolster his radical base, Israel presents a singularly unique challenge to Iran's security. Given the fact that Israel is a nuclear-weapons state and is not a signatory to treaties dealing with the proliferation and use of nuclear weapons, and given Israel's continuing threat to strike militarily against targets inside Iran, the Islamic Republic theoretically has good reason to develop a nuclear deterrent against a nuclear-armed Israel. Any discussion of Iran's nuclear ambitions/intentions without taking into account the Israeli factor is futile and even counterproductive.

Notwithstanding popular rhetoric about Israel's inability to threaten Iran, the Islamic Republic's strategic decisionmakers are keenly aware of Israel's significant military potential and its ability to wreak havoc in Iran. For example, the Iranian political and military elite are aware that Israel has an assortment of delivery vehicles to launch its nuclear warheads against any regional opponent. Israel's F-16 squadrons are probably "the most likely warplanes to carry nuclear warheads, and

a small group of pilots has been trained for nuclear strikes; Israel's F-4s [and] F-15s are also nuclear-capable."¹³ In addition, Israel's Jericho I and Jericho II missiles, and Shavit ground-to-air missiles can be fitted with nuclear warheads. Jericho I and Jericho II have a range of 500 km and 1,500 kilometers, respectively, while Shavit is an intercontinental ballistic missile with a range of 8,000 km. Israel has also developed submarine-based atomic capability with the acquisition of its Dolphin-class diesel submarines. It is the development of Israel's sea-based nuclear arm that gives the country a "triad of land-, sea-, and air-based nuclear weapons for the first time" in its history.¹⁴ In addition, Israel's antimissile system, including the Arrow-2 missiles (a joint U.S.-Israeli project), can deter existing "missile threats" from Iran.

In contrast to Israel's nuclear capability, Iran does not even possess nuclear weapons. Accusations are based on Tehran's presumed nuclear *intentions*. That is the reason Iran's leaders have consistently argued that it is not the Islamic Republic that is a nuclear threat to the region; rather it is Israeli nuclear weapons that pose the gravest danger to the security and stability of the Middle East. But does Iran need to develop a nuclear-weapons capability as a deterrent to aggression by Israel, or even as a counterweight against possible U.S. tactical or conventional attacks against Iranian targets? The debate on this issue is intense in the ruling circles and among strategic-decision makers in Iran, although it is not reflected in public debates. General Yahya Rahim Safavi, the former commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), made the earliest and most significant endorsement of the need for Iran to develop a nuclear capability in

a closed-door speech in April 1998 to a group of IRGC officers.¹⁵ No other Iranian official, however, endorsed Safavi's views, and every Iranian official, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has repeated that nuclear weapons have no place in Iran's strategic doctrine.

The nuclearization of the Indian subcontinent has also added a new twist to Iran's security concerns. In particular, Pakistan's support for the viscerally anti-Shia Taliban movement in Afghanistan has strained Tehran-Islamabad relations. As I have stated elsewhere, notwithstanding the demise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's ostensible transformation as a frontline state against this movement, Tehran remains suspicious of Islamabad's long-term goals in the region.¹⁶ Furthermore, recent attacks by al-Qaeda-supported Baluchi terrorists of Jond al-Islam, who have used Pakistan as a sanctuary to carry out attacks inside Iran, have caused tension between the two countries. Pakistan's former president, Pervez Musharraf, added to Iran's apprehension about Islamabad's regional goals when he criticized Iran's nuclear-enrichment program as a threat to the Arab countries of the Gulf that needed to be stopped. This prompted a number of influential Iranians to question the country's foreign minister for his silence in the face of "provocative statements" by Musharraf. For example, Seyyed Ahmad Khatami, who led the weekly Friday prayer on March 2, 2007, warned that Pakistan must be held responsible for its threatening words against Iran.¹⁷ Similarly, *baztab*, a website that reflected the views of Mohsen Rezai, the former commander of the IRGC and the current secretary of the influential Expediency Council, warned against the dangers of the nuclear-armed "coup-installed Pakistani dictator" to Iran's

security.¹⁸ But, despite occasional tension between Iran and Pakistan, the two countries remain partners in a number of international endeavors, and Iran does not envision a scenario in which it would have to counter Pakistan's nuclear weapons with a nuclear capability of its own.

Iran's current nuclear posture was developed to achieve a number of immediate goals and many long-term objectives. These goals and objectives were formulated by the Center for Strategic Research of the Expediency Council and were used as a guideline to steer Iran's negotiations with the so-called EU-3 during 2003. Although the Iran-EU-3 negotiations collapsed in 2005, the specifics of Iran's objectives can give us a clue as to what can be expected in any future negotiations with Iran over its nuclear policy. These goals have been:

- Keeping Iran's nuclear file within the confines of the IAEA and preventing it from going to the UN Security Council (Iran failed to achieve this goal but has endeavored to return its nuclear file to the IAEA.)
- Controlling the international and domestic repercussions of escalating nuclear tensions with the West
- Explaining to the world why Iran needs to develop a peaceful but independent nuclear capability
- Demonstrating to the world that the United States is not worried as much about Iran's developing nuclear weapons as about preventing Iran from technological progress
- Demonstrating that the Iraqi, North Korean and Libyan models are not the only ones that can be pursued to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons while maintaining Iran's treaty rights

- Demonstrating Iran's political maturity and diplomatic skills in dealing with the West
- Weakening America's unilateralism and demonstrating the benefit of multilateral negotiations to Europeans and the rest of the world
- Demonstrating that only negotiations within a framework of equality and mutual respect can result in meaningful and enduring agreements
- Laying the groundwork for the gradual removal of economic sanctions and obstacles that have prevented Iran from developing a more robust economy
- Demonstrating to the region the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program
- Demonstrating that the suspension of the full nuclear cycle can only be discussed within a political framework and not with threats and intimidation
- Demonstrating Iran's good intentions by agreeing to sign the Additional Protocol and undertaking additional voluntary confidence-building measures
- Completely adhering to all agreements Iran has signed, irrespective of the nature of outside threats
- Increasing European investments in Iran and thus weakening American sanctions against the Islamic Republic
- Laying the groundwork for the creation of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East
- Integrating European security with that of Iran and the Middle East.¹⁹

The outline of Iran's objectives in negotiating with the EU-3 can be used as a model for future negotiations with either the EU-3 or other interested parties, if there is a will to resolve Iran's nuclear crisis through diplomacy and arduous negotiations. Although there are certainly

some fixed positions on Iran's demands, there is also a gray zone (zone of negotiation) that allows Iranian negotiators to be flexible. Compromises can be made within this zone. However, for negotiations to proceed, neither side can impose rigid preconditions. For example, asking Iran to give up its principal card (full fuel-cycle suspension) before negotiations begin is unrealistic and flies in the face of the most elementary rules of bargaining.

NUCLEAR DECISION MAKING

It has often been said that all strategic decisions in Iran are either made or approved by Ayatollah Khamenei. In a broad sense, this statement may be correct. But it sheds little light on the pattern of decision making in Iran and does not tell us about the countervailing forces and key decision makers that affect the final outcome of such decisions. With respect to the nuclear issue, there are three overlapping circles that affect the final outcome of decisions. The first circle of decision-makers is composed of Ayatollah Khamenei (the supreme leader), Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (head of the Expediency Council), Mohammad Najjar (defense minister), Ali Shamkhani (former defense minister and current head of the Center for Strategic Research), Mohammad Ali Jafari (head of the IRGC), and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (president). Hassan Rohani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator during 2003, is occasionally invited to join this top decision-making circle because of his long service as the head of the Supreme National Security Council and his intimate knowledge of the country's nuclear issues.

The second circle of decision makers consists of Mohsen Ejei (minister of intelligence), Gholamreza Aghazadeh (director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran,

or AEOI), Ali Akbar Velayati (supreme leader's chief foreign-policy adviser), Manochehr Mottaki (minister of foreign affairs) and Saeed Jalili (secretary of the supreme national security council and current chief nuclear negotiator). The third circle of decision makers consists of the appropriate representatives from the *majlis* (parliament) and various technical experts, such as the country's representative to the IAEA and deputies in the AEOI. Ali Larijani (the speaker of the Iranian parliament) and Alaeddin Borujerdi (the chair of the parliament's defense and foreign-affairs committee) play crucial roles as members of the third circle; they are ultimately responsible for harmonizing the decisions of the executive and legislative branches on the nuclear issue. It is important to note that Larijani's influence on nuclear issues is greater than that of the previous parliamentary speakers because he had served as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. In fact, Larijani may supplant Jalili as the *de facto* negotiator because of the latter's inexperience in dealing with the EU. In a bid to increase the influence of the *majlis* over the direction of the country's nuclear negotiation, speaker Larijani stated that Iran's parliament would henceforth increase its supervisory role over the country's nuclear negotiations and would "only authorize talks which will be within the legislative-bodies framework."²⁰

The views held by these individuals certainly vary, and sometimes they criticize each other in public. For example, when President Ahmadinejad recently engaged in a game of nuclear chicken by stating that Iran's nuclear program is like a train without brakes, he was rebuked by an "expert" (most probably Rafsanjani) for jeopardizing Iran's negotiating leverage.²¹ Similarly, Rafsanjani has on numerous

occasions warned about extremist statements, a veiled reference to Ahmadinejad's utterances, which undermine the country's security.²² In an interview with Mehr News Agency, former Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani criticized Ahmadinejad's "diversionary" tactics as detrimental to Iran's global standing and security. Specifically, Shamkhani took issue with holding the Holocaust conference because it would weaken "our grand strategy."²³

Societal and political groups that have now become more vocal in expressing their views on the country's nuclear stalemate with the West also affect the aforementioned decision-making circles. Although almost all factions inside Iran support the country's right to peaceful nuclear energy, they differ in their assessments of the current posture taken by the Iranian government. On the ultraconservative side, the *Kayhan* newspaper and its influential editor, Hossein Shariatmadari, advocate a more confrontational stance with the West than has been followed by the government negotiators so far. They consider the United States as being trapped in a quagmire in Iraq and elsewhere. In other words, they view the crisis as America's problem, not Iran's.²⁴ Similarly, Hossein Allahkaram, the Ansar-e Hezbollah's theoretician, opined that the best strategy for Iran to follow is to ignore the "[illegal] UN Security Council Resolution 1737 and the other resolutions that may be adopted against Iran" because it will take more than a year before the United States can entertain serious military attacks against Iran. However, Allahkaram argues, if Iran continues on its current path, it will have passed the nuclear threshold, and the United States cannot attack a country that has nuclear deterrent capabilities without suffering unacceptable consequences.²⁵

On the reformist side, voices of dissent have risen against the current nuclear posture taken by the government of Iran. One of the strongest criticisms came from the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution. The organization's statement read in part: "Our world is not a just one, and not everybody gets its [sic] rightful share. What is important for our country is to make a cost-benefit analysis of our decisions and decide the best course of action that is doable and does not expose us to harm and destruction.... President Khatami's approach to the nuclear issue reflected both his realism and his skilled defense of our rights."²⁶ Similar sentiments have also been expressed by Mohammad Atrianfar, a Rafsanjani ally and a theoretician of the "reformist" camp, in a spirited public debate with Amir Mohebian, an influential pragmatic conservative commentator.²⁷ In general, a critical mass of those in the "reformist" camp believe that, given the current international atmosphere, it may be in Iran's national interest to temporarily suspend its nuclear program. As expressed by Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, a former outspoken female reformist parliamentarian:

[Iran's] insistence on the [nuclear enrichment] program will create international reactions that in the long run will result in distrust by the international community and endanger the foundations of the regime and undermine its legitimacy. . . . Rather, the government should base its legitimacy on the people's vote and make every effort to gain the trust of the international community. [The reformists] further believe that the best deterrent strategy serving the Iranian national interest is the increased trust between the state and the people and the strengthening of civil and democratic institutions.²⁸

The sentiments of the reformists, however, may not be in congruence with those of the public at large. According to a poll conducted by World Public Opinion in partnership with Search for Common Ground, most Iranians "want their country to have the capacity to enrich uranium for energy, but a majority also agree that Iran should comply with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which forbids signatories from developing nuclear weapons."²⁹ Perhaps the most important finding of this survey was that "nine out of ten Iranians say it is important for Iran to have the capacity to enrich uranium. Majorities cite as key reasons the need to secure their country's energy demand, to enhance its technical competence and to enhance its great-power status."³⁰ Given the overwhelming public support for developing a peaceful nuclear capability, Iran's nuclear decision makers cannot totally dismiss public opinion in formulating the country's nuclear program. Also, arguments that some Western scholars and policy makers have made against the economics of nuclear energy independence for Iran³¹ do not seem to have mattered for the country's nuclear decision makers. The single most important driving force in Iran's nuclear calculus is its threat perception or, as Tehran University political scientist Nasser Hadian has put it, its "strategic loneliness."³²

CHALLENGES FOR OBAMA

Iran's strategic loneliness has been a byproduct of its tortuous relationship with the West since the victory of the Islamic revolution in 1979. The sense of encirclement that exists among the country's leadership was formed during the early years of the revolution, especially during the Iran-Iraq War, when Iran had to defend

its very existence against what appeared to be overwhelming odds. In more recent years, Iran's experience with European negotiators has eroded the leadership's confidence in the sincerity of the West. Throughout the myriad negotiating rounds with the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Britain (the so-called EU-3) and later between EU foreign-policy chief Javier Solana and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, the West has sought to convince Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment and related programs in exchange for a package of economic incentives. The underlying assumption is that a proper "carrot and stick" approach can finally convince Iran to permanently renounce its rights under the NPT to enrichment-related activities. This argument, which is based on Iran's presumed political and economic vulnerabilities, explains the initial EU offer to Iran — the "generous package" of rewards — which was essentially an indirect offer by the United States to sell Iran some spare parts for its aging civilian airliners and not to oppose Tehran's application for membership to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Rather than being a carrot, the offer was viewed by Iran as an insult, further eroding the Islamic Republic's confidence in the sincerity of the European negotiators.

Since the failure of the first incentive package, three UN Security Council resolutions have been passed that strengthened economic sanctions against Iran. The West has shifted its attention from the carrot to the stick. So far, however, threats and sanctions have not resulted in any changes in Iran's nuclear position. On the contrary, they have strengthened the leadership's resolve to accelerate enrichment plans. Furthermore, Russia's incessant delays in completing the Bushehr nuclear power plant and Moscow's hardball tactics to ex-

tract more money from Iran have strengthened the arguments of those who contend that Iran cannot mortgage its energy future to unpredictable foreign suppliers. In other words, Iran can only guarantee uninterrupted access to nuclear fuel if it can control its production. Enrichment on Iranian soil by means of a multilateral control mechanism is one solution that has been proffered by Iranian negotiators in the past, and it is still a viable alternative to the absolute and unconditional termination of all enrichment activities on Iranian soil. As Martin Jakobsen and Nicholas Bowen have observed, offering a meaningful nuclear fuel guarantee to Iran might involve a treaty between Iran and the EU-3 to construct a multilateral enrichment facility in Iran with the governments of the countries involved serving as shareholders. Other governments can also be invited to join this commercial partnership as shareholders at a later date. Iran will be obligated to undertake enrichment and reprocessing activities only through this partnership.³³

Although the details of such a joint partnership will have to be worked out during negotiations among the countries involved, this plan has the best chance of being accepted by Iran's nuclear decision makers. It will also go a long way toward addressing the West's concern about the possible diversion of nuclear fuel to a weapons program in the future. Also, this appears to be the right step towards establishing confidence-building measures between Iran and the West. Finally, according to Jakobsen and Bowen, for this plan to succeed,

[The United States] must be included in any multilateral negotiations. This is even more important when one

recognizes the concern the Iranian government has for its security. Certainly negative security assurances from the United States would go some way to lessening the perceived threat in Tehran.³⁴

In short, there are contrasting national and international perspectives that can shape the ultimate course of Iran's nuclear strategy. The nuclear dilemma that Iran faces is complex and does not lend itself to simplistic solutions. Outside political and military threats will most likely strengthen the intransigent forces in the country. What is needed is a realistic bargaining formula that rejects the prevailing zero-sum-game mentality.

President Barack Obama has undertaken some measures that may foster confidence building between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States and, thus, reverse some of the ill will generated during George W. Bush's presidency. Candidate Obama had distinguished himself from both his main Democratic challenger, Hillary Clinton, and his Republican opponent, John McCain, during the 2008 campaign by calling for direct and unconditional negotiations with Iran. As president, Obama has reiterated this position on numerous occasions; however, engaging Iran will be his most demanding foreign-policy challenge. On January 27, 2009, Obama gave his first full interview, to the pan-Arab television network Al-Arabiya, after taking office. In this interview, the president used measured and respectful language in addressing the Arab and the Muslim world. Answering the interviewer's question about Iran, Obama stated:

Now, the Iranian people are a great people, and Persian civilization is a great civilization. Iran has acted in

ways that are not conducive to peace and prosperity in the region: their threats against Israel; their pursuit of a nuclear weapon which could potentially set off an arms race in the region would make everybody less safe. . . . But I do think that it is important for us to be willing to talk to Iran, to express very clearly where our differences are, but where there are potential avenues for progress. And we will over the next several months be laying out our general framework and approach. And as I said during my inauguration speech, if countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us.³⁵

These sentiments were echoed once again during President Obama's television address to Iran on the occasion of the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) in March 2009.

According to some Western press reports, officials of the Obama administration have drafted a letter to Iran from the president aimed at "unfreezing U.S.-Iran relations and opening the way for face-to-face talks."³⁶ Similarly, Yari News, an Iranian website affiliated with former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, has reported that secret talks between President Ahmadinejad's senior adviser Motjtaba Samareh Hashemi and former U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry, representing Obama, will soon take place in a European capital. Hamid Mowlana, a long-time American University professor who recently retired and moved to Iran, where he serves, among other things, as a key foreign-policy adviser to Ahmadinejad, will purportedly accompany Hashemi, as he is thoroughly familiar with American politics and culture.³⁷ Both Iran and the United States have denied these reports.

Nonetheless, *Foreign Policy* magazine's blog, "The Cable," has confirmed that "the informal dialogue between senior Americans and the Iranians was much more robust in recent months than has been previously reported."³⁸ These high-level meetings have been held in various European cities under the auspices of the Pugwash group. Ali Asghar Soltanieh, the Islamic Republic's permanent representative to the IAEA, was among the Iranian officials who took part. These reports are now being leaked to the Iranian media by "jockeying Iranian political power players trying to maneuver for advantage amid a shifting Washington-Tehran dynamic and their own upcoming elections in June."³⁹

Notwithstanding the aforementioned developments, the history of U.S.-Iran relations since 1979 teaches us that the path to normalization is fraught with risks on both sides. For example, the appointment of Dennis Ross, whose ties to hawkish U.S. think-tanks and anti-Iran views are well established, to be the State Department's special adviser for the Gulf and Southwest Asia (read Iran) will hinder the much-needed confidence-building measures between the two antagonists. Ross's approach to Iran has grown "increasingly belligerent over time.... During the run-up to the 2008 presidential elections, Ross participated in two study groups aimed at influencing the next president's policies towards Iran, both of which proposed extremely aggressive approaches."⁴⁰ Ross has also been a strong advocate of strengthening U.S.-Israeli cooperation on confronting Iran's nuclear program. Both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and, to a lesser extent, UN Ambassador Susan Rice have occasionally promoted an aggressive approach towards Iran, although both have relaxed their hawkish posture somewhat

since joining the Obama administration. Secretary Clinton, in particular, has become an advocate of negotiating with Iran and has called for direct U.S. participation in future multilateral nuclear talks with Tehran. During the 2008 presidential campaign, she had bluntly stated that, were she elected president and Iran attacked Israel, she would "totally annihilate Iran."⁴¹ In a sharp retort to his main Democratic opponent, Senator Obama chided Clinton for using language "that's reflective of George Bush" and emphasized the need to move away from the policy of "bluster and saber-rattling and tough talk."⁴² Similarly, when John McCain, Obama's Republican opponent, alluded to his approach to Iran by crassly singing "bomb, bomb, Iran" to a partisan South Carolina crowd, Obama lashed out at his reckless behavior.⁴³

By the same token, there are elements on the Iranian side that are ideologically opposed to the United States and can, and most likely will, undermine attempts at normalizing Tehran's relations with Washington. That said, the Iranian political scene, as Peter Jones, a former Canadian official with long experience dealing with Tehran, has observed, is an "extraordinarily diffuse beast.... [It is] highly fluid, with coalitions continuously forming and reforming."⁴⁴ Notwithstanding the fluidity of Iranian politics and shifting alliances, "a key point for Westerners to bear in mind is that all factions in 'mainstream' Iranian politics support the idea that Iran should have the fuel cycle and a nuclear 'option'."⁴⁵ Of course, what constitutes an option is viewed differently by various factions and may indeed be a subject for negotiation between Washington and Tehran. For negotiations to have any chance of success, however, they cannot be conducted in an atmosphere of threats

and intimidation. As François Nicollaud, France's ambassador to Iran from 2001 to 2005 and a seasoned observer of Iranian politics has aptly noted, a favorite delusion in the West is that Iran will "surrender" if pressure on Tehran is steadily increased: "Anyone familiar with Iran knows that this provokes a defiant response."⁴⁶ In his March 2009 official visit to Serbia, Foreign Minister Mottaki gave an interview to *Politika*, Belgrade's largest and oldest newspaper, in which he stated that any

future U.S.-Iran negotiation will not resemble American football; rather it will be akin to a chess match.⁴⁷ American football is a violent game that combines complex strategy, size and speed with brute force. Chess, on the other hand, requires deliberate and often slow but methodical moves and countermoves. Iran knows well that it will lose badly if it allows Washington to turn U.S.-Iran negotiations into football. The question is: Will the United States have enough patience for chess?

¹ For an insider's account of the shah's nuclear program, see Gholam Reza Afkhami, ed., *Barnameye Enerjiy-e Atomy-e Iran: Talashha va Taneshha, Mosahebe ba Akbar Etemad, Nokhosteen Raiis-e Sazman-e Enerjiy-e Atomiye Iran [Iran's Atomic Energy Program: Efforts and Tensions]* (Bethesda, MD: Foundation for Iranian Studies, 1997).

² Deputy head of international relations research, Center for Strategic Studies, *Diplomasiy-e Hasteii: 678 Rooz Modiriyat-e Bohran [Nuclear Diplomacy: 678 Days of Crisis Management]* (Tehran: Center for Strategic Studies, 2006), p. 304.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For details, see Abolfath Mahvi, "Majeraye Shegeft Angiz-e Enerjiy-e Atomy-e Iran: Shah, Doktor Etemad va Man [The Strange Story of Iran's Atomic Energy: The Shah, Dr. Etemad and I], *Nimrooz*, July 15, 2005 [<http://www.nimrooz.com/html/842/memory.htm#s155919>].

⁵ Quoted in Abolfath Mahvi, "40-Year-Old Dream: How Iran's Nuclear Program Was Born," Iranian.com [<http://www.iranian.com/main/print/52448>].

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See, Arya Abbas Amirie, *Unparalleled Journey: From Raising Lambs to Advising World Leaders* (Academy Press of America, 2007), pp. 168-170.

⁸ Quoted in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, Vol. XIII, *Near East Region; Iraq; Iran; Arabian Peninsula* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), fn 2, p. 659.

⁹ Ardeshir Zahedi's interview with Radio France International, May 1, 2006.

¹⁰ For a collection of the declassified documents on U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations in the 1970s, see the National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 268 [<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevult/ebb268/index.htm>]. For a succinct analysis of the history of U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations during the shah's era, see William Burr, "A Brief History of U.S.-Iranian Nuclear Negotiations," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 65, No. 1, January/February 2009, pp. 21-34.

¹¹ See the Iran section in the IAEA's website, <http://www.iaea.org>, for all of the agency's reports on Iran.

¹² Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), p. 15.

¹³ For a succinct analysis of Israel's nuclear-weapons capabilities, see Natural Resources Defense Council's Nuclear Notebook, "Israeli Nuclear Forces, 2002," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 58, No. 5, September/October 2002, pp. 73-75.

¹⁴ Walter Pincus, "Israel Has Sub-Based Atomic Arms Capability," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2002.

¹⁵ Nader Entessar, "Iran's Security Challenges," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 94, No. 4, October 2004, p. 543.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 544.

¹⁷ Fars News Agency, March 2, 2007.

¹⁸ <http://www.baztab.ir>, March 22, 2007.

¹⁹ *Diplomasiye Hasteii: 678 Rooz Modiriyat-e Bohran*, pp. 12-18. Also, see Mohammad Ali Basri and Mostafa Ghasemi, "Barresiye Mavaze-e Etehadiyeh Oroopa va Amrika dar Qebal-e Parvandehe Hasteii Iran [A

Study of the EU and American Positions on Iran's Nuclear File], *Journal of Defense Policy* (Tehran), Vol. 14, No. 2, Spring 2006, pp. 25-64, and Seyyed Hamid Mowlana and Manouchehr Mohammadi, *Siyast-e Khareji Jomhoori-e Eslami Iran dar Dolat-e Ahmadinejad* [Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran During Ahmadinejad's Administration] (Tehran: Dadgostar Publisher, 2008), pp. 194-200.

²⁰ Press TV, April 12, 2009, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=91207>.

²¹ Baztab, February 25, 2007 [<http://www.baztab.ir/news/61576.php>].

²² See, for example, *Iran Times*, February 2, 2007, pp. 1 and 10.

²³ Mehr News Agency, March 3, 2007 [<http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=455662>].

²⁴ See, for example, Hossein Shariatmadari, "There Is Crisis, but on Which Side?" *Kayhan*, February 19, 2007 [<http://www.kayhannews.ir/851130/2.htm>].

²⁵ See Allahkaram's article posted on <http://www.ansarnews.com/?usr=news/detail&nid=602> [nd].

²⁶ For the full text of the statement, see <http://mojahedin-enghelab.org/ShowItem.aspx?ID=353&p=1>.

²⁷ *Kargozaran*, February 25, 2007.

²⁸ Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, "Factional Positions on the Nuclear Issue in the Context of Iranian Domestic Politics," *Iran Analysis Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1, January-March 2006, pp. 1-2.

²⁹ "Iranians Want Capacity to Enrich Uranium But Accept NPT Rules against Developing Nuclear Weapons," January 24, 2007, http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/311.php?nid=&id=&pnt=311&lb=hmpg1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See, for example, Thomas W. Wood, Matthew D. Milazzo, Barbara A. Reichmuth, and Jeffrey Bedell, "The Economics of Energy Independence for Iran," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1, March 2007, pp. 89-112.

³² Nasser Hadian, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Contexts and Debates," in Geoffrey Kemp, ed., *Iran's Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives* (The Nixon Center, 2004), p. 55.

³³ Martin F. Jakobsen and Nicholas Bowen, "Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Review of Policies and Proposals 2006," Danish Institute for International Studies, April 2007, pp. 1-5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁵ For the full text of President Obama's interview with Al-Arabiya, see http://www.alarabiya.net/save_print.php?print=1&cont_id=65087&lang=en.

³⁶ Robert Tait and Ewen MacAskill, "Revealed: The Letter Obama Team Hope Will Heal Iran Rift," *Guardian*, January 29, 2009 [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/28/barack-obama-letter-to-iran>].

³⁷ Yari News, January 27, 2009 [<http://www.yaarinews.com/default.aspx/n/3265>].

³⁸ Laura Rozen, "Revealed: Recent U.S.-Iran Nuclear Talks Involved Key Officials," *Foreign Policy (The Cable)*, January 29, 2009, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/01/29/americas_secret_back_channel_diplomacy_with_iran].

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Quoted in Political Research Associates, *The Right Web* [<http://rightweb.ironline.org/profile/4786.html>]. Also, see Dennis Ross, "Talk Tough with Tehran," *Newsweek*, December 8, 2008, p. 40.

⁴¹ Hillary Clinton first made her "totally obliterate Iran" comment on ABC television's "Good Morning America" program on April 29, 2008, and defended her comments in subsequent television appearances.

⁴² Ed Pilkington, "Obama Accuses Clinton of Using the Language of Bush on Iran," *Guardian*, May 5, 2008, [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/may/05/barackobama.hillaryclinton>].

⁴³ National Public Radio's "Day to Day" program, April, 20, 2007.

⁴⁴ Peter Jones, "How to Negotiate with Iran," *Foreign Policy* [Web Exclusive], April 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4801&print=1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Francois Nicollaud, "Use Reason, Not Emotion, to Deal with Iran," *Straits Times*, April 9, 2009, <http://www.nst.com.my/Thursday/Columns/2526885/Article/index.html>.

⁴⁷ See Mehr News Agency, March 8, 2009, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsPrint.aspx?News ID=845719>.

Copyright of *Middle East Policy* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.