

Engagement, Diplomacy, and Iran's Nuclear Program

Brandon Friedman

Iran's nuclear program is a grave concern to Israel, but also to the Arab Middle East and the international community, including the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China.

Iran's Arab neighbors are concerned that a nuclear Iran will use its status as a nuclear power to establish regional hegemony and continue to interfere in their domestic politics. The international community fears that a nuclear Iran would prompt a regional arms race and lead to nuclear proliferation throughout the Gulf region. Even China, which has pursued a more moderate line with respect to Iran's nuclear program, has acknowledged that nuclear proliferation in the Gulf region poses a threat to its energy security.

Israel's security concerns regarding a potential nuclear Iran are more immediate and nuanced than is often articulated in the popular media. Iran currently provides cash, arms, military training, and other forms of critical support to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, whom Israel has fought in serious military engagements in 2006 (Lebanon) and late 2008 (Gaza). The threat of Iran transferring nuclear materials or technology to Hezbollah, Hamas, or other militant groups on Israel's borders is a serious security concern for Israel.

Further, since 2005, Iran's current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has used inflammatory political rhetoric to repeatedly delegitimize and threaten Israel's existence. It would seem that President Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, in the spirit of Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology, believe that a just solution for the Palestinians is the elimination of the Jewish State of Israel. This is the view of many officials in the Islamic Republic who believe that Zionism is part of Western imperialist designs against Islam, which are supported by an unjust, American-led international system.

On October 26, 2005, in Tehran, Ahmadinejad gave a speech at a student conference in which he called for the elimination of Israel for the first time (literally: "this Jerusalem occupying regime must vanish from the pages of time"). This language was not new in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the Iranian daily newspaper *Kayhan* and

advisor to the Supreme Leader, stated, "The honorable President has said nothing new about Israel that would justify all this political commotion . . . We declare explicitly that we will not be satisfied with anything less than the complete obliteration of the Zionist regime from the political map of the world."

It is argued that Ahmadinejad uses such foreign policy bombast instrumentally to (1) solidify domestic political support from his base of hard-line religious figures; (2) outmaneuver domestic political opponents by publicly dictating the tone and direction of Iran's foreign policy; (3) create a leadership role for Iran in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which provides Iran with regional prestige and geopolitical leverage vis-à-vis negotiations with the West; and (4) generate popularity for the Islamic Republic among the populations of the Arab states whose leaders are supported by the West, therefore creating domestic pressure on Arab leaders to act more aggressively on the Palestinian-Israeli issue. These arguments, despite their pragmatic rationale, fuel Israeli concerns that Iran would use its nuclear leverage to further undermine Israeli security in pursuit of its own regional gains.

Perhaps the most apocalyptic scenario for Israel was articulated in December 2001, when former Iranian president Rafsanjani, while leading a Friday prayer service in Tehran, threatened Israel with nuclear destruction and said "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. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality." Rafsanjani's ambiguous remarks alluded to the regime's perception that Israel is the West's imperial bridgehead in the region, which could be eliminated by using a nuclear weapon against it. Iran's undisclosed uranium enrichment facility at Natanz was exposed in 2002, and since then, Iran's steady march toward nuclear capability has been thoroughly documented but not deterred by the United Nations (U.N.) and the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) diplomatic initiatives.

In 1978, Joseph Nye who chaired the U.S. National Security Council Group on

Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons argued that a "confrontation versus cooperation" dichotomy mischaracterizes the nuclear proliferation challenge as adversarial, when, "in fact, nonproliferation policy is much more like a large construction project than an adversary contest." He went on to claim that it may "never follow the precise blueprints of its architects, which will always need a degree of improvisation and adjustment. But it is to be judged by whether it is in fact advancing toward the kind of result laid out as its long-term goal." There has been little progress since March 2009 despite the international community's repeated attempts to engage Iran and find a compromise to the diplomatic impasse.

The most serious glimmer of progress emerged during talks that took place in Geneva and Vienna in October 2009. It appeared that Iran had accepted a deal outlined during meetings with representatives of the IAEA and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council: U.S., France, Great Britain, Russia, and China—plus Germany) to ship most (approximately 80 percent) or 2,600 pounds of its 3.5 percent low-enriched uranium to Russia, where it would be enriched to approximately 20 percent and shipped back to Iran in the form of metal rods to be used to manufacture medical isotopes. This process of enriching Iran's low-enriched uranium in Russia was to take approximately one year during which the international community would have the time to work with Iran to craft a more permanent arrangement to safeguard and monitor Iran's nuclear fuel. It would also provide the international community with the peace of mind that in the interim, Iran would not be secretly enriching its uranium for other purposes. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was also reported to have backed this deal, despite Israel's opposition, in principle, to Iran's domestic uranium enrichment activities. Iranian president Ahmadinejad also indicated his support for this deal during a late October speech he delivered in Mashad. He said, "We welcome exchange of fuel, technical cooperation and construction of power plants and reactors. We are ready for cooperation." However, in the two months following the preliminary agreements outlined in Geneva and Vienna in October 2009, Iran reneged

on the deal and instead requested revised and more explicitly favorable terms, calling into question its intentions and good faith.

Diplomacy must achieve a result, or advance toward a clear, well-defined long-term goal. If there is no time-delineated forward progress then diplomacy is failing and this too should not be ignored. Henry Kissinger, in his book *A World Restored*, described the circumstances that characterize a situation in which diplomacy may not be an effective way to resolve a dispute: "In the absence of an agreement on what constitutes a reasonable demand, diplomatic conferences are occupied with sterile repetitions of basic positions and accusations of bad faith, or allegations of unreasonableness and subversion." It may be fair to say that the P5+1's Geneva and Vienna negotiations with Iran in late 2009 fell apart precisely due to the absence of an agreement on what constituted a reasonable demand.

Since the failed October 2009 deal, the international community has been unable to engage or induce Iran in serious diplomacy and has instead focused on implementing coercive measures such as sanctions to prod Iran into a compromise. Iran's domestic political opposition, known as the Green Movement, has further complicated the West's diplomatic calculus, generating a debate regarding the best way to sanction the Iranian regime without affecting the evolution of Iran's domestic political opposition. Meanwhile, there appear to be serious differences regarding the severity of sanctions Russia and China are prepared to go along with and the type of stiff financial and economic sanctions that the U.S. and European Union believe are necessary to change Iran's behavior. Russia and China appear skeptical that *any* level of sanctions is likely to alter Iran's nuclear progress.

One of the virtues of the international community's sustained attempt at engagement and vigorous diplomacy during the past twelve months is that it seems to have debunked the idea that Iran is interested in serious and sustained engagement with the international community. In addition, the failed attempts at engagement call into question whether diplomacy alone is the most effective means for achieving a settlement with Iran on its nuclear program.

The range of policy choices discussed by analysts and scholars regarding Iran's nuclear program typically encompasses four primary options: (1) engagement; (2) sanctions; (3) deterrence; and (4) military strikes.

The Obama administration began with

a strong attempt at engagement and inducement, but since October 2009 and the collapse of the Vienna agreement it has shifted toward a program of narrowly targeted sanctions directed at the regime and the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* (Iran's Revolutionary Guards), while at the same time publicly declaring that it has not precluded a return to engagement.

In Israel, deterrence is considered a highly unattractive policy option. Israel believes that in addition to the uncertainty regarding whether Iran can or can not be deterred, is the equally troubling concern that Iran would transfer nuclear technology to radical groups on Israel's borders that Israel believes unequivocally cannot be deterred. Further, deterrence would not eliminate legitimate concerns that Iran would use its nuclear capability as a coercive weapon against its regional neighbors, particularly the moderate Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

In Israel, the public policy debate regarding Iran is somewhat narrower than in U.S. and Europe. The Netanyahu coalition has expressed its doubt that engagement and inducement would prevent Iran from

obtaining a nuclear capability. In Israel the debate has typically been between sanctions and a military operation. Most recently, there has been strong advocacy for harsh sanctions that would cripple the Iranian economy. Israel's current preference for crippling sanctions should be taken as a sign of Israeli consensus that Iran's nuclear program is an international challenge, and not Israel's alone.

In the academy, Israeli scholars have expressed a wide range of opinions on what to do about Iran and its nuclear program. In July 2008, Ben Gurion University's Benny Morris, writing in *The New York Times* declared that "Israel will almost surely attack Iran's nuclear sites in the next four to seven months," and seemed to conclude that an Israeli military strike is inevitable and necessary. At the other end of the spectrum, Hebrew University's Martin Van Creveld, writing in the *The Forward* in September 2007, seemed to suggest that the world can live with a nuclear Iran. The fact is that the majority of Israeli scholars fall somewhere in between Morris and Van Creveld.

Professor David Menashri, the director of the Center for Iranian Studies (CIS) at

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Tel Aviv University, has consistently argued that Iran's nuclear program is a global concern that requires an international—rather than Israeli—resolution. Menashri initiated a public opinion survey in May 2009 that indicated that Israelis across the political spectrum perceive a nuclear Iran as a threat and do not buy the argument that Iran is developing its nuclear program strictly for civilian energy needs. Nevertheless, nearly half of the Israelis surveyed (49 percent) indicated that Israel should allow the U.S. a chance to find a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear program.

Nuclear proliferation experts Ephraim Asculai and Emily Landau of the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS) have been critical of the Obama administration's lack of a clear Iran policy, and have advocated for more forceful pressure through harsh sanctions as the best way to pressure Iran. In a May–June 2010 article published in the *Military Review*, a journal of the U.S. Army, American-based Israeli scholar Amitai Etzioni proposed military strikes on Iran's *non-nuclear* military installations as a coercive method to limit collateral damage but increase pressure on the regime in Iran to compromise on its nuclear program. Ze'ev

Maghen, a scholar of Iran at Bar-Ilan University, debunked the common claim that Iran's leaders are influenced by apocalyptic beliefs. In an article published *Middle East Journal* in the Spring of 2008, Maghen noted:

The fact that (as we have tried to show) genuine chiliastic messianism or mahdism has never been a potent force within Shi'ism, and therefore is not today, and will probably at no time in the future be, a genuine factor in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, does not mean, in the eyes of this author, that international pressure on Iran to halt its dangerous nuclear program should be ceased; it means that it should be increased. Were the members of the Iranian leadership truly convinced that the Eschaton was around the corner, no amount of economic sanctions or even threats of military action would be effective. Since, as we have argued, that leadership is not in the least bit convinced of this, such measures—if pursued with resolution, wisdom, and consistency (unlike the current state of affairs)—are likely to produce significant results.

It remains to be seen how the current nuclear impasse with Iran will be dealt with by the international community, but it is perhaps something of an understatement to say that Israel views the issue as an urgent, time-sensitive strategic priority. As long as the international community's strategic goal remains to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, then any disharmony between Israel and the international community will most likely involve the timing and urgency of any future tactical initiatives. In the meantime, while the international community appears to be bogged down by trying to find a diplomatic consensus on the right coercive strategy, Iran's nuclear enrichment efforts continue.

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