CHAPTER VI:

IRAN’S DILEMMA

Iran and September 11

It is often stated that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, forever changed America. In an even more dramatic fashion, al-Qaeda’s nefarious plot also changed the Middle East. The region’s pathologies, its ideology of wrath, and a political culture that too often condoned suicide bombing could no longer be concealed by its oil wealth. Perhaps more than any other regional actor, the Iranian mullahs appreciated that a certain epoch had ended and that previous arrangements were no longer tenable. As we have seen, President Muhammad Khatami had gradually pressed the clerical oligarchs toward a substantial revision of Iran’s foreign policy along pragmatic lines. The issue of normalization of relations with the United States, though, had persistently eluded him. With the arrival of the American imperium in the Middle East, the recalcitrant hard-liners became convinced that it was time to set aside their long-standing antagonisms toward the United States. For a brief, fleeting moment, a consensus evolved among the clerics on the need to have a more rational relationship with America. However, in a pattern that has so often bedeviled U.S.-Iranian relations, just when one party was ready for accommodation, the other was moving in the opposite direction. The Bush administration had arrived in the Middle East not to reconcile with old foes but to foster a new order.
The tragedies of September 11 led the Washington establishment to reevaluate the traditional concepts of statecraft. Containment and deterrence were now viewed as dangerously naïve in the era of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. America no longer sought merely to contain rogue regimes and to press for their disarmament through negotiations, but to actively alter the political culture of the region by ushering in a democratic dawn. Regime change, preemptive war, and coerced democratization were the new currencies of American policy. As the administration of President George W. Bush gazed across the Middle East, it perceived a unique opportunity to reformulate the dysfunctional political topography of the region and finally ensure the stability that all empires crave. In this context, Iran was no longer a problem to manage, but a radical, unsavory regime to topple. As the fractious theocracy came close to accepting the need for a changed approach to America, Washington proved not only indifferent but hostile. The brief interlude between the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in October 2001 and President Bush’s State of the Union address in January 2002 represented a unique opportunity to fundamentally alter relations between the two states. And once more that opportunity was squandered. A year later, as America became entangled in the Iraq quagmire, a more consolidated conservative government in Iran was no longer eager to normalize relations with the United States. The power of ideologues in both Washington and Tehran essentially precluded an imaginative revision of U.S.-Iranian relations.

As the American empire arrived in the Middle East brandishing its new doctrine of preemption, the most critical debate within the Islamic Republic was how to approach its new neighbor. As we have seen, the reactionary elements within the Iranian state had long objected to any normalization of ties with the “Great Satan,” reasoning that the benefits garnered by such militancy outweighed its costs. The American colossus was too distant, its leaders too fickle, and its struggles against terrorism more symbolic than real. However, the Bush
administration’s expansive vision for the Middle East confronted the Iranian Right with realities that it could no longer ignore and responsibilities that it could no longer evade. More than any other international event, America’s response to the September 11 attacks exposed the fault lines among Iranian conservatives. As with most political movements in contemporary Iran, the conservative bloc is riddled with its own factions and contradictions, chiefly over foreign policy. For the ideologues among Iran’s hard-liners, the Islamic template remains a model worthy of export, and the necessity of resisting America and its regional surrogates has never been greater. Moreover, a confrontational foreign policy has the advantage of reinvigorating a revolution whose popularity has long waned. By contrast, Iran’s pragmatic conservatives stress that given the proximity of the American presence, Iran has to tread carefully and cultivate cooperative relations with its neighbors. They also argue that given Iran’s economic pressures, dogmatism does not serve the cause of attracting foreign investment. Such debates were once more polarizing Iran’s clerical rulers as competing factions of ideologues and realists battled each other over national security issues.

Iran’s hard-line ideologues view themselves as the most ardent disciples of Ayatollah Khomeini and his revolutionary mission. These stalwarts of the revolution, such as Ayatollah Jannati and Ayatollah Shahroudi, control powerful institutions such as the Guardian Council and the judiciary, and they command key coercive instruments such as the Revolutionary Guards and Ansar-e Hezbollah. Their world view is framed by a vision of the Islamic Republic as more than a rebellion against an iniquitous monarch but rather an uprising against a host of forces – the imperial West, Zionist encroachment, and Arab despots, to name a few—that have sustained America’s presence. As such, their hostility to the United States is immutable and a function of their “revolution without borders.” As Ayatollah Shahroudi, the judiciary chief, exclaimed in 2001, “Our national interests lie with antagonizing the Great Satan.” ¹ For the ideologues, international
isolation, ostracism, and sanctions are necessary sacrifices on the path of revolutionary affirmation. Khomeini’s more pragmatic partisans may share the ideologues’ disdain for popular sovereignty, but they recognize that the survival of the regime is contingent on a more judicious international course. Even at the height of its revolutionary fervor, the Islamic Republic never renounced the imperatives of the international economy and has always remained a participant in the global financial order. For the first time, the conservative wall of solidarity against America was fractured. In an important move, former president Rafsanjani, in his new role as the head of the powerful Expediency Council responsible for resolving disputes within the state, led the chorus by stressing, “We have lost opportunities in the past. We have made inappropriate measures or never made any measures. Our ideology is flexible and we can choose expediency on the basis of Islam.” Another stalwart of the revolution, Bahzad Nabavi, a prominent member of the parliament, similarly noted, “Normalizing ties with the U.S. does not contradict our values—the conditions today require different policies.” The realities of the post-September 11 international system were also starkly noted by Ayatollah Muhammad Emami-Kashani, a Friday prayer leader when he stressed, “In the absence of a rival superpower, America is relying on guns and its economic power to play with the fate of the world. Unfortunately, some European countries are going along with it.” Iran’s conservative clerics did not suddenly alter their perception of America as an iniquitous state, but given the changing realities they perceived a limited utility in continuing the conflict.

It is important to stress that it was not just the projection of American power that was pressing Iran’s pragmatists toward a readjustment of their policy toward the United States. The persistent domestic deadlock and the inability of the state to formulate a cohesive economic plan had effectively obstructed much-needed reforms. This paralysis was coming at a time when the regime was failing to meet half the unemployment needs of 700,000 new job seekers every year or to
generate $70 billion needed over the next decade to refurbish the country’s
dilapidated oil industry. Double-digit unemployment and inflation rates, falling
standards of living and a bloated bureaucracy were eroding the prospects of a
massive younger generation demanding material wealth. Daunting economic
challenges and the demographic bulge were finally leading some within the
clerical class to focus on the best means of alleviating a potentially explosive
political problem. Given their reluctance to enact structural economic reforms,
which at least in the initial stages would lead to a degree of dislocation and thus
popular anger, the theocracy opted for foreign investment to rescue it from its
predicament. Khatami captured Iran’s dilemma by noting, “The government
cannot come up with the money needed to create a million jobs a year. We need
private and foreign investments.” 5 It would be difficult for Iran to generate the
necessary level of external investments while still embracing a militant defiance of
the international community.

The compelling economic realities reinforce security arguments for a more
normalized relationship with the United States. Rafsanjani once more
acknowledged, “Iran has never banned economic, technological, and scientific
relations with America.” 6 Khatami has also weighed in, stipulating, “From our
point of view there are no obstacles preventing economic cooperation with the
U.S.” 7 Iranian conservatives similarly endorsed such commercial relations.
Muhammad Javad Larijani, an adviser to Ayatollah Khamenei, emphasized, “We
and the U.S. have many differences. But this does not mean that we cannot adopt
a regular policy in view of our national interests.” 8 Economic imperatives were
finally leading Iran to subordinate its revolutionary zeal to pragmatic
considerations, and deal with a state that it has long demonized. The first test of
Iran’s new policy came in Afghanistan. In October 2001, after fruitless
negotiations with the Afghan leadership, the United States launched a military
invasion designed to topple the Taliban and apprehend Osama bin Laden. For
Iran, which had had bitter and acrimonious relations with the militant Sunni regime of the Taliban and its Wahhabi terrorist allies, this was an ideal opportunity. During much of the 1990s, as the international community remained indifferent to developments in Afghanistan, Iran actively assisted opposition groups such as the Northern Alliance and sought to draw attention to the peculiarities of the Taliban regime and its problematic guests. Once U.S. military operations commenced, subtle signs were soon sent to Washington. Foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi publicly declared, “We have some common points with the U.S. over Afghanistan.” 9 The head of the parliamentary commission overseeing the war, Hadi Salam, reinforced this message, stressing that dialogue with the United States was critical “due to the crisis prevailing in the region and safeguarding our national interests.” 10

Such Iranian gestures were soon given tangible expression. The underreported story of the first episode of America’s war on terrorism is that it could not have succeeded as easily as it did without Iranian support. The fact remains that by 2001, America’s links with the Northern Alliance were fragmentary, and its long years of neglect had led many Afghan opposition groups to be suspicious of the United States. Tehran’s mediation proved essential as Iran actively pressed the Northern Alliance and other opposition groups to cooperate with American forces. Iran also provided intelligence to the Northern Alliance, agreed to rescue American pilots in distress, and allowed some 165,000 tons of U.S. food aid to traverse its territory into Afghanistan. The speedy collapse of the Taliban acclaimed by the Bush administration had in fact enjoyed substantial Iranian assistance. The pattern of cooperation persisted after the military campaign ceased and Washington focused on reconstruction and stabilization of a war-torn Afghanistan. Iran was instrumental in crafting the interim Afghan government at the Bonn Conference in December 2001, pressing its ally and longtime leader of the Northern Alliance, Burhanuddin Rabbani, to relinquish his claims to power in
favor of the American candidate, Hamid Karzai. At the January 2002, Tokyo Conference, Iran pledged $530 million for Afghan reconstruction. To be sure, Iran was concerned about the possibility of a permanent American military establishment next door and was hoping for a quick withdrawal of U.S. forces. Iran was also active in attempting to assert its influence particularly in western Afghanistan. Although, in all such cases, Iran’s policy was motivated by critical national security considerations, rather than the export of an Islamic revolution. The paradox of the Afghan war was the extent that the American and Iranian interests actually coincided.

On the surface, Tehran’s decision to assist the United States could be seen as a clever attempt to dislodge the Taliban government it had almost gone to war with in 1998. If the United States insisted on removing a regime hostile to Iran, why not be helpful? Such calculations certainly provided Iran with incentives to be cooperative. However, it does appear that Tehran’s objectives transcended the immediate issue of deposing the Taliban, since the theocracy genuinely hoped to reach out to the United States. Khatami eagerly noted that “Afghanistan provides the two regimes with a perfect opportunity to improve relations.” The exigencies of September 11 and Iran’s debilitating economic condition seemed to have finally shattered old taboos and engendered a new consensus within the theocracy behind a foreign policy of “New Thinking.” A powerful coalition of reformers and pragmatic conservatives now coalesced around the understanding that in the altered regional landscape, Iran must come to terms with the United States on issues of common concern. As we have seen, the period between 1997 and 1998 was the first occasion when U.S.-Iranian relations could have been reconciled. The second such time was the period between September 11, 2001, and January 29, 2002. Once President Bush addressed the joint session of Congress for his momentous State of the Union speech, the opportunity all but vanished. It is to American calculations during this period that we must now turn.
New Condition

When the Bush administration first assumed power, it appeared to follow the cautious realism that had essentially characterized much of America’s post-World War II foreign policy. On the issue of Iran, the new national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, captured the tone of the administration by stressing in the pages of Foreign Affairs, “All in all changes in U.S. policy toward Iran would require changes in Iranian behavior.” Such a statement could have been uttered by officials of both Republican and Democratic administrations that had wrestled with the Iranian conundrum for a quarter of a century. Missile defense, preoccupations with a rising China, and transatlantic relations seemed to define the new administration’s international priorities. The fact that the reform movement in Iran had failed to usher in a democratic breakthrough diminished any incentive that Washington may have had in devising an imaginative policy toward Iran. The Islamic Republic had essentially receded from the scene, left to indulge its grievances and sense of self-importance.

The September 11 tragedies fundamentally altered the Bush administration’s international perspective, as it sought to revise, if not discard, the traditional American reliance on diplomacy and deterrence to deal with threats. Curiously, President Bush now stated: “After September 11, the doctrine of containment just doesn’t hold water.” Traditional conservatives such as Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld perceived that the credibility of American power was contingent on its demonstration in the Middle East. By October 2002, the administration went so far as to enunciate a new national security doctrine that flamboyantly pledged the preemptive use of force as a tool of counter proliferation and regime change as a means of ensuring disarmament. Beyond such provocative assertions, it became increasingly clear
that the character of the regime—as opposed to its actual conduct—would determine the degree of American antagonism. Rice best captured this sentiment in 2005: Our experience of this new world leads us to conclude that the fundamental character of regimes matters more today than the international distribution of power. Insisting otherwise is imprudent and impractical. The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system. Attempting to draw neat, clean lines between our security interests and our democratic ideals does not reflect the reality of today’s world. Supporting the growth of democratic institutions in all nations is not some moralistic flight of fancy; it is the only realistic response to our present challenges.

Under this framework, despotic regimes would inevitably seek and use weapons of mass destruction, promote terrorism, menace their neighbors, and plot against American interests. In the Bush administration’s reformulation of traditional concepts of security, Iraq and Iran were threats not just because of their nuclear ambitions but because they oppressed their citizens. Such recalcitrant regimes could be neither contained nor deterred, leaving regime change as the only viable option. The president’s missionary impulse was actively buttressed by a powerful cohort of neoconservatives who had assumed key posts in the administration. From their perch in the Pentagon and in the vice president’s office, the neoconservatives now found a president receptive to their postulations. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith, and Vice Presidential Chief of Staff I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby all became household names as they invoked Wilsonian assertions as a means of stabilizing a turbulent Middle East.

Neo-conservatism was an intellectual movement of significance long before Iraq commanded international attention. Since their emergence in the 1970s, the
neoconservatives had always disparaged the realists’ penchant for managing problems rather than solving them, especially when dealing with non representative regimes. As prime critics of the détente policy toward the Soviet Union, they created organizations with ominous-sounding names such as the Committee on the President Danger and filled their magazines and journals with articles disparaging arms control treaties and U.S.-Soviet summitry. The demise of the Soviet Union led many neoconservatives to focus on the Middle East, particularly the tyrannical regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq with its efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction and its aggressive wars. In many ways, however, the neoconservatives’ critique of U.S. policy in the Middle East transcended Saddam, as they never perceived the region as a bastion of stability, even before September 11. As with their advocacy against the Soviet Union, they called for a muscular policy of imposing American values on a reluctant part of the world. Although Iraq would always remain central to their obsessions, Iran was never far behind. The Islamic Republic, which persistently denounced the United States as the “Great Satan,” humiliated America during a prolonged hostage crisis, and proved relentlessly hostile to Israel, was seen as an ideal candidate for the imposition of America’s will.

For the neoconservatives, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a watershed event—it had not just displaced a reliable American ally, it had ushered in an ideology of radical Islam that was to challenge America’s power and threaten the security of America’s ally, Israel. William Kristol, the editor of the Weekly Standard, employed typically inflated rhetoric in claiming, “We are in a death struggle with Iran,” and called for “measures ranging from public diplomacy to covert operations.” 17 James Woolsey, the former director of the CIA, proclaimed the arrival of World War IV (the third evidently being the Cold War) and Iran as America’s central antagonist in the conflict. For Woolsey, Iran was a “fanatical theocratic totalitarian stage ripe for the ash heap of history.” 18
In many ways, the neoconservative’s image of Iran was frozen in time as Ayatollah Khomeini and his anti-American fulminations continued to disturb and agitate them. The evolutionary changes that Iran had undergone, the transformation of its political system, and its international outlook were simply ignored or dismissed as clerical ploys. Moreover, Iran’s attempt to reach out to the United States in the aftermath of September 11 was disregarded to benefit the new strategy of displacing non-representative regimes. Richard Perle, one of the leading neoconservative thinkers and an architect of the Iraq war, took the lead: “The U.S. should do everything to encourage the centrifugal forces in Iran that, with any luck, will drive that miserable government from office.” Even a distinguished scholar of the Middle East such as Bernard Lewis could not resist the ideological pull; he assured his audience that once the invasion of Iraq was complete, the Iranian people would beseech us, “Come this way.” In the neoconservative conception, Iran was a country ripe for a revolution, and limited American pressure could easily push it over the brink. History and reality would now be twisted to accommodate the distorted neoconservative predilections.

Although much has been written about how the neoconservatives hijacked American foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11 in order to institute their intellectual speculations about the nexus between democracy and stability, the fact remains that their influence stemmed from the coincidence of their ideology with President Bush’s own instincts. Ultimately the president establishes both the rhetoric and the strategy of his administration’s foreign policy. A president with an inadequate understanding of the complexities of regional politics and a propensity to view events in stark black-and-white terms spearheaded a foreign policy that was often self-defeating. The precipitous American invasion of a dispossessed and essentially partitioned Iraqi state on the spurious grounds of searching for nonexistent weapons of mass destruction led many in the
international community to question Bush’s judgment and whether American power can still be a force for good. Iran, with its many shades of gray, would prove an insurmountable challenge for Bush’s simplistic ideological paradigm.

Every crisis requires a catalyst, and in the case of Iran that trigger was a shipment of arms to Palestinian groups resisting Israel. Although Iran’s hard-liners had grudgingly accepted an accommodation with the United States, the issue of Israel was still beyond the pale. By 2002, the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the Palestinian uprising once more seemed to validate the Iranian hard-liners’ strategy and provided them with allies in distress. Tehran’s inflammatory rhetoric was buttressed by the provision of arms to the Palestinian resistance, and it was the Israeli interception of one such ship, the \textit{Karine-A}, in January 2002, that focused Washington’s attention on Iranian terrorism, as opposed to its constructive assistance in Afghanistan. The contradictions of Iranian foreign policy may have diminished, but they were still very much evident in the case of Israel. Tehran simply could not divest itself from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The clerical leaders failed to appreciate that Washington would not acknowledge their help so long as they strenuously sought to obstruct America’s attempts to broker peace between Israel and its neighbors. Cooperation on Afghanistan, high-level negotiations, and international conferences could not balance Iran’s opposition to the Jewish state.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush effectively closed off the possibility of a new chapter in U.S.-Iranian relations, denouncing the Islamic Republic as a member of an axis of evil, along with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Kim Jong Il’s North Korea. Bush described Iran as a “major sponsor of terrorism,” and once more condemned the “unelected few” who suppress a restive populace. The incendiary language entailed a palpable threat. The United States of America, Bush proclaimed, “would not permit the world’s most dangerous
regimes to threaten us with the world’s most dangerous weapons.” In the post-September 11 and post-Afghanistan atmosphere, this was not an idle threat. Iran was once more in America’s crosshairs. Soon the administration officials began echoing the president, essentially calling for a change of Iranian regime. Vice President Dick Cheney expressed his “disappointment” with Iran, invoking a litany of American objections, such as “Iran’s apparent commitment to destroy the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and unstinting efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction.” 21 The new U.S. policy was spelled out in most detail by senior White House aide Zalmay Khalilzad in a speech: “Our policy is not about Khatami or Khamenei, reform or hard-line; it is about supporting those who want freedom, human rights, democracy, and economic and educational opportunity for themselves and their fellow countrymen and women.” 22 The administration would no longer preoccupy itself with the intricacies of Iranian politics but would instead substitute simplistic slogans such as support for freedom” for an actual policy. This was to be regime change on the cheap, as an administration reluctant to commit its own troops hoped that by simply advocating democracy it could somehow trigger a revolution in Iran.

Iran’s response was predictably incendiary and uncompromising Ayatollah Khamenei proclaimed that the “drunkard shouts of American officials reveals the truth that the enemy is the enemy.”23 Even the mild-mannered President Khatami forcefully rejected Bush’s remarks as “war mongering and insulting toward the Iranian nation.”24 Bush’s strident rhetoric even alienated the Iranian masses who were to be the vanguard of progressive political change. The Iranians may have detested the corruption and inefficiency of the theocracy, but as a deeply nationalistic population they resented being defamed by an American politician and equated with the unsavory states of Iraq and North Korea. A nation that sees its rich culture as the epicenter of the world’s civilization would not easily forgive a petulant U.S. president. The issue that seemingly eluded the president and his
speechwriters was that the Iranian nation could disdain both its rulers and the insulting Americans at the same time. The more complex reality is that September 11 had generated such a dramatic shift in America’s international orientation that an antagonistic approach to Iran was nearly inevitable. The Bush administration could not deal with a regime whose complicated foreign policy defied the simple characterization of “with us or against us.” The four months between September 2001 and January 2002 stand as a watershed in U.S.-Iranian relations. In a sense, this period reflects the tragedy of this relationship, the Iranian theocracy and the United States could not transcend their mutual animosities. During this brief period, the clerical regime had moved far in its readiness to embrace a different relationship with the United States, should America have been willing to reciprocate. However, the Iranian overture came at a time when a besieged America was recovering from a devastating attack on its homeland and contemplating the uses of its awesome power. After hopeful signs of rapprochement, U.S.-Iranian relations had returned to the typical realm of antagonism and emotion.

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 once more confronted the Islamic Republic with a daunting set of challenges. The intricacies of Iran’s approach to Iraq will be examined in chapter IV, but it is important to stress that unlike September 11, the latest American military intervention was not viewed by Iranian officials as an opportunity to forge new ties with the United States. Washington’s harsh rhetoric and its aversion to diplomacy had already closed off the opening that had appeared in the aftermath of September 11. To be sure, there was a degree of tactical Iranian cooperation in that Tehran appreciated that the American displacement of Saddam was in its interests. Nonetheless, the early success of the invasion deeply concerned the clerical elite—an emboldened America might decide to turn its sights on Iran next. That sense of unease soon evaporated as the United States became entangled in a bloody quagmire, and the task of pacifying and
stabilizing Iraq began to drain American power. The theocracy rebounded and regained its sense of confidence. The clerical oligarchs assured themselves that an America preoccupied with its strained alliances, drained treasury, and discredited intelligence services would have a limited appetite for further military incursions. Given the tense U.S.-Iranian relations and persistence of calls for regime change in Washington, Iran had no incentive to press for an opening to America.

In the meantime, important changes were taking place within the theocratic state that further diminished prospects of a rapprochement. The reformers and pragmatic conservatives who had called for cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan seemed increasingly under pressure within the corridors of power. The United States had not only failed to reward Iran’s constructive behaviour but was once more beating the drums of regime change and pressing the international community to embrace its sanctions policy. Washington’s new reliance on democratization as a means of dealing with security challenges like proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism did not bode well for an Iranian regime whose politics were distinctly reactionary. The hard-liners, who had always claimed that America’s hostility toward Iran was immutable and that the core American objective remained the overthrow of the theocracy, seemed validated by the course of events.

After twenty-nine years in power, the face of the Iranian regime was also changing, as a new generation of conservatives came to the surface with their own distinct views and ideologies. For the aging clerics such as Ayatollah Khamenei and Rafsanjani who had been present at the creation of the Islamic Republic, America remained the dominant actor in Iran’s melodrama. For the hard-liners, the United States was the source of all of Iran’s problems, and for the pragmatists it was the solution to the theocracy’s mounting dilemmas. In either depiction, America was central to Iran’s affairs. Given that this generation came to political
maturity during the reign of the Shah and his close alliance with United States, engaged in a revolutionary struggle defined by its opposition to America, and then led a state often in conflict with the United States. For the new generation of conservatives it was the war with Iraq in the 1980s- not the revolution-that defined their political experience. Their isolation from the United States, their suspicion of the international community (which had tolerated Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against Iran), and their continued attachment to Khomeini’s vision defined their ideology. In the meantime, the corruption of many of the founding leaders of the republic and their lack of revolutionary resolution affronted the austere war veterans. The younger conservatives are unyielding in their ideological commitments, earnest in their belief that the Government of God has relevance, and persistent in their simplistic claim that all problems would be resolved if Iran were to return to the roots of the revolution.

In terms of their international perspective, the young conservatives do not share their elders’ preoccupation with the United States. Throughout the 2005 presidential campaign, the striking aspect of the younger hard-liners’ message was the notion of an “Eastern orientation.” As Ali Larijani, a conservative presidential candidate and the current speaker of parliament, noted, “There are certain big states in the Eastern Hemisphere such as Russia, China, and India. These states can play a balancing role in today’s world.” 25 In a similar vein, another stalwart of the new conservatives, the former Revolutionary Guard commander and the current mayor of Tehran, Muhammad Qalibaf, stress, “In the current international arena, we see the emergence of South Asia. And if we do not take advantage of that we will lose.” 26 In the perspective of the new Right, globalization does not imply capitulating to the United States but rather cultivating relations with emerging power centers on the global landscape. They hope such relations might obviate the need to come to terms with the United States at all.
The war generation also displays a degree of indifference and passivity toward America. Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad emphasized this point, stressing, “Our nation is continuing the path of progress and on this path has no significant need for the United States.” 27 The notion that Iran should offer substantial concessions on critical national issues, such as its nuclear program, for the sake of American benevolence or European investments has a limited utility to them. After a quarter-century of hostility, war, and sanctions, Iran’s emerging leadership class is looking east, where its human rights record and proliferation efforts are not particularly disturbing to its prospective commercial partners. All this is not to suggest that the new regime cannot have tactical dealings with America, but a fundamental transformation of U.S.-Iranian relations is unlikely to be achieved by Ahmadinejad and his allies.

The younger conservatives’ perception that expanding trade with China and India can resolve Iran’s economic predicament reflects their lack of understanding of the complexity and interconnections of the global economy. Although it is true that Iran has signed a handful of blockbuster energy deals with China and India, the rosy headlines often obscure a starker economic reality. These deals represent only the most preliminary phases of projects that, particularly in the case of a proposed natural gas pipeline to India, entail enormous political, commercial, and geological risks. In addition, projects of this scale are unlikely to move forward without significant Western capital and technical expertise—precisely the sort of assistance that the West could withhold. It is such a realization that may eventually lead the younger conservatives to appreciate the centrality of America to the global economy and the international investment community. The hard realities of actually governing may in time temper their ideological designs and lead them in the direction of their more pragmatic elders.
Today, a new consolidated conservative government has the national charge to chart Iran’s international course. The melodramatic depictions of the new president ought not to obscure the reality that this is still a coalition government, with many competing centers of power and levers of influence. To be sure, the hard-line faction of the conservative bloc has assumed a preponderance of influence, diminishing the power of pragmatic conservatives whose patron saint Rafsanjani was defeated in the presidential election. Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, has to once more balance these contending voices, determining Iran’s approach to sensitive issues such as nuclear weapons and terrorism. It is to these issues that we now turn.
Along the Nuclear Program

The Iranian regime is defying the world with its nuclear ambitions, and the nations of the world must not permit the Iranian regime to gain nuclear weapons,” proclaimed President Bush in his 2006 State of the Union address. As the debate still lingers regarding the vanished Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, yet another proliferation crisis is looming in the Middle East. Washington and much of the international community fear that under the guise of a civilian research program Iran is gradually accumulating the technology and expertise necessary for the construction of nuclear weapons. Iran’s nuclear ambitions did not begin with the onset of the Islamic revolution in 1979. The nuclear program actually started in the early 1970s under the Shah, who with the assistance of West Germany, France, and South Africa sought to construct an infrastructure of nuclear power plants. Approximately $40 billion was earmarked for this ambitious project, whose purpose was the construction of at least twenty reactors. Suspicion lingered that behind the Shah’s declared desire for nuclear energy lay a determination to construct a nuclear weapon. Indeed, the Shah’s former foreign minister, Ardeshir Zahedi, has all but confirmed such concerns:

The Iranian strategy at that time was aimed at creating what is known as surge capacity, that is to say to have the know-how, the infrastructure, and the personnel needed to develop a nuclear military capacity within a short time without actually doing so. But the assumption within the policy making elite was that Iran should be in a position to develop and test a nuclear device within 18 months.  

Akbar Etemad, the director of Iran’s nuclear program at the time of the monarchy, similar endorses Zahedi’s claim that the Shah’s program was designed to grant him the option of assembling the bomb should his regional competitors
move in that direction. As the theocratic regime is quick to point out, Washington was not only complicit in the Shah’s program but never asked, as it persistently does today, why an oil-rich state requires nuclear power. Moreover, the European states that currently are calling on Iran to suspend its enrichment activities were busy selling the Shah the needed technology for the construction of an elaborate network of nuclear plants that could have been easily misused for military purposes. The belated Western concerns regarding Iran’s proliferation tendencies adds to Tehran’s arguments regarding the hypocrisy of the great powers and the iniquitous nature of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

During the initial decade of the Islamic Republic, the regime’s preoccupations with consolidating power, the war with Iraq, and its international isolation precluded it from aggressively pursuing the nuclear option. Indeed, for Khomeini and many others within the clerical elite, the indiscriminate nature of such weapons was seen as inconsistent with Islamic canons of war. A more detailed focus on the nuclear infrastructure began during Rafsanjani’s presidency in the early 1990s and was sustained by Khatami’s reformist government. Successive U.S. administrations have sought to thwart Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Over the years, Washington has scored some impressive gains and managed to delay and frustrate Tehran’s quest for nuclear technology. The Reagan administration succeeded in obtaining Europe’s agreement to rigorous export controls with respect to dual-use technologies and in getting Germany to abandon its cooperation with Iran’s nascent nuclear program. Given Europe’s unwillingness to assist in Iran’s nuclear research activities, Tehran turned to a new source, Russia.

The Russian Federation soon began to fill the void left by the Europeans and assisted Iran in building its two nuclear reactors at Bushehr, which suffered from neglect during the Iran-Iraq war. Over the years Russia has also provided
Iran with fuel fabrication technology and possibly, even uranium enrichment centrifuge plans. Throughout the 1990s, the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton attempted to deter Russia from this course by means of warnings, selective sanctions, and promises of expanded economic ties. A number of compacts were negotiated between the United States and Russia, most notably the December 1995 accord hammered out by Vice President Al Gore and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, in which Russia agreed to limit its cooperation with Iran to work on one unit of the Bushehr plant. Russia is essence agreed not to provide additional reactors or fuel-cycle assistance to Iran. By 2000, this arrangement had unraveled, as the lure of profits and strategic cooperation between Tehran and Moscow began to dissuade President Vladimir Putin from a more robust cooperation with the United States.

Despite energetic American diplomacy, throughout the 1990s the international community appeared complacent regarding Iran’s nuclear program. The successful efforts by the Clinton administration to prevent substantial international cooperation with Iran’s nascent nuclear industry, coupled with Iranian corruption and mismanagement, led to perceptions that the program had stalled. Issues such as terrorism, Iran’s opposition to the peace process, and its quest for missile technology and chemical weapons tended to overshadow the nuclear issue. The international community’s sporadic expressions of concern did not necessarily trigger diplomatic sanctions or multilateral pressure. All this changed in August 2002, as a series of revelations forced the Washington establishment to revise its previous intelligence assessments. The first shock came when an opposition group revealed the extensive facilities for uranium enrichment in Natanz, approximately 200 miles south of Tehran. The installations demonstrated Iran’s mastery of the complex process of enriching uranium. The Natanz facilities contained 160 centrifuges needed for enrichment purposes, with another 1,000 under construction. The plan was to reach 50,000 completed
centrifuges within two years, which would give Iran the capability to produce several bombs a year. In addition, it appeared that Tehran had been similarly active in the development of a plutonium route to nuclear capability. The heavy water facilities in Esfahan and the nearly completed plants in Arak point to the fact that Iran’s plutonium enrichment capabilities were more advanced than initially anticipated. Even Tehran’s program is reaching the point of self-sufficiency. Although Iran’s nuclear industry at various stages has benefited from external assistance, particularly from Russia and even more from the Abdul Qadeer Khan network in Pakistan, the sophisticated nature of these facilities reveals that Iran may have reached the point of self reliance, whereby traditional counter proliferation measures, such as more rigorous export controls and curtailment of external assistance will not measurably slow down its nuclear time line. Iran’s former president Rafsanjani confirmed, “That we are on the verge of nuclear breakout is true.” 31 Ali Akbar Salehi, the former Iranian representative to the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), similarly stressed, “We have found the way and we do not have any scientific problems.” 32

In April 2006, Iran appeared to take another important step toward nuclear self-reliance. Amid much fanfare, President Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had succeeded in assembling 164 centrifuges and actually enriching uranium. The latest Iranian announcement made clear that the nuclear program was aggressively moving forward with Iran overcoming many technological hurdles on its path toward creating a sophisticated nuclear network. Despite such revelations, it is still difficult to predict with any degree of accuracy when Iran will be in a position to construct a deliverable nuclear device. Once Iran completes the necessary infrastructure from mining to enriching uranium at the suitable weapons-grade level and masters the engineering skill required to assemble it. All this would depend on the scope and scale of the program and the level of national resources committed to this task. Iran today has an accelerated program, but not a crash one
similar to Pakistan’s in the early 1970s when the entirety of national energies were mobilized behind the task of constructing a nuclear device. In this context, Iran’s persistent determination to complete the fuel cycle – a right it does possess under the NPT.

Having stipulated the importance of paying attention to Iran’s scientific progress, an excessive focus on technological dimensions of the nuclear program, it creates political and bureaucratic constituencies and nationalistic pressures that generate their own proliferation momentum. As India and Pakistan demonstrated, once a nuclear program matures, it attracts political patrons invoking national prestige, military officers attracted to the weapons of awesome power, and a scientific establishment seeking to perpetuate a program that generates profits and jobs. As such alliances and constituencies develop, a state can cross the point of no return years before it can actually assemble a single bomb. Although Iranian nationalistic pressure has not yet reached the same level of India and Pakistan when they embarked on their crash programs, indications that this phenomenon is becoming all too evident appear in the case of Iran. Although it is customary to suggest that Iran is determined to manufacture the bomb, there is a subtle debate-taking place within the theocratic state on the direction of the program. The critical question thus becomes: What are the securities factors driving Iran’s proliferation tendencies. As constituencies and alliances shift, and policies and positions alter, the United States still has an opportunity to influence Iran’s internal deliberations.

Contrary to many Western assumptions, Iran’s quest for nuclear program does not stem from irrational ideological postulations, but from a judicious attempt to craft a viable deterrent posture against a range of threats. It is often argued that Iran’s dangerous and unpredictable neighborhood grants it ample incentive for acquiring nuclear weapons. But it is hard to see how the possession of such
weapons would ameliorate the persistent volatility on Iran’s frontiers. Instabilities in Afghanistan and Central Asia may be sources of significant concern for Iran’s defense planners, but nuclear weapons can scarcely defuse such crises. A more careful examination reveals that Iran’s nuclear program has been conditioned by a narrower but more pronounced set of threats. Historically, the need to negate the American and Iraqi threats has been the primary motivation for Iran’s policy makers. In more recent times, the simmering concerns regarding the stability of a nuclear-armed Pakistan have similarly enhanced the value of such weapons to Iran’s planners. From the outset, it is important to place the question of Israel in its proper context. It is often assumed that the hostile relations between Iran and Israel, which possesses nuclear weapons but will not acknowledge that capability publicly, inexorably propel Tehran toward the nuclear option. However, both Iran and Israel have been careful to regulate their low-intensity conflict and have assiduously avoided direct military confrontation. Ayatollah Khamenei has characterized Iran’s controlled rage by stressing that “the Palestine issue is not Iran’s Jihad.” The alarmist Iranian rhetoric regarding the immediacy of the Israeli threat is more an attempt to mobilize domestic and regional constituencies behind an anti-Israel policy than a genuine reflection of concern. For the Islamic Republic, Israel may be an ideological affront and a civilization challenge, but it is not an existential threat mandating the provision of nuclear weapons.

To the extent that Israel’s nuclear arsenal figures in the Iranian debate, it is to condemn the hypocrisy of the international community—and the United States in particular—for being perennially critical of Iran’s nuclear efforts yet retaining a strange silence when it comes to Israel’s formidable depository of atomic bombs. Rafsanjani captured the frustration of the clerical class: “When they talk about nuclear weapons, they don’t even mention the Zionist state.” And yet Iran’s antagonism toward Israel is not truly part of a motivation for the bomb. Iranian officials and military officers routinely stress that they do not need nuclear arms to
wage their current low-intensity campaign against Israel. Militant Islamic forces have always been Iran’s preferred method of conducting its conflict with Israel. All this may change should Israel embark on a precipitous action such as military strikes against Iran’s facilities. In essence, such an action would finally lead the Iranian-Israeli confrontation to move beyond its existing limits, transforming Israel into a military challenge that Iran needs to safeguard against.

While Israel may be peripheral to Iran’s aspirations for unconventional weapons, developments in the Persian Gulf are of immense importance. From the Islamic Republic’s perspective, the Gulf is its most important strategic arena, and its most reliable route of access to the international petroleum market. For a long time, it was Iraq that spurred the theocratic elite toward the nuclear option. Saddam Hussein’s Iraq not only sought hegemony over the Gulf, and indeed the larger Middle East, but also waged a merciless eight-year war against Iran. It is the developments in the Gulf that will likely condition Iran’s defense posture and nuclear ambitions for the near future. The impact of the Iran-Iraq war on Tehran’s nuclear calculations cannot be underestimated. Iraq’s employment of chemical weapons against Iranian civilians and combatants has permanently scarred Iran’s national psyche. The Iranian government estimates that the country suffered 34,000 casualties because of Iraq’s chemical weapon attacks. Whatever their tactical military utility, in Saddam’s hands chemical weapons were tools of terror, since he hoped that through their indiscriminate use he could frighten and demoralize the Iranian populace. To an extent, this strategy proved effective. Iraq’s determination to target Iranian cities during the latter stages of the war did much to undermine the national support for the continuation of the conflict. Two decades later, the war and its legacy are still debated daily in the pages of Iranian newspapers, in the halls of Iranian universities, and on the floor of the Iranian parliament. As the newspaper *Ya Lesarat* observed, “One can still see the wounds of our war veterans that were inflicted by poison gas as used by Saddam Hussein
that were made in Germany and France,”. 35 The dramatic memories of the war have led to cries of “Never Again,” uniting a fractious public behind the desire to achieve not just a credible deterrent but also a convincing retaliatory capability.

Beyond the human toll, the war also changed Iran’s strategic doctrine. During the war, Iran persisted with the notion that technological superiority cannot overcome revolutionary zeal and a willingness to offer martyrs. To compensate for its lack of weaponry, Iran launched human wave assaults and used its young population as a tool of an offensive military strategy. The devastation of the war and the loss of an appetite for “martyrdom” among Iran’s youth has invalidated that theory. As Rafsanjani acknowledged, “With regard to chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons, it was made clear during the war that these weapons are very decisive. We should fully equip ourselves in both offensive and defensive use of these weapons.” 36 Moreover, the indifference of the international community to Saddam’s crimes also left its mark, leading Iran to reject the notion that international treaties and compacts can ensure its security. As Mohsen Rezai, the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards said in 2004, “We cannot, generally speaking, argue that our country will derive any benefit from accepting international treaties.” 37 Deterrence could no longer be predicated on revolutionary commitment and international opinion, as Iran required a more credible military response.

The overthrow of Saddam’s regime has diminished but has by no means eliminated the Iraqi challenge. The unpredicatable nature of developments in Iraq has intensified Iran’s anxieties and further enhanced the utility of the nuclear option. Should Iraq merge as a close U.S. ally policing the gulf at the behest of its superpower benefactor, Iran will stand marginalized and isolated. Indeed, the long-standing ambition of successive Iraqi governments to assert predominance in the Gulf may finally be nurtured by a superpower seeking local allies to contain
recalcitrant states such as Iran. A revival of the Nixon Doctrine, whereby the United States sought to ensure the stability of the Persian Gulf by arming its pliant Iranian ally, with Iraq now assuming the role once played by the Shah, would seriously constrain Tehran’s options. A presumptive nuclear capability would grant Iran a greater ability to assert its interests and press its claims. Although today Iraq appears far from such a position, the theocratic regime still must formulate a range of contingencies, and one such option is to sustain a robust nuclear research program. Iraq is not the only potential problem that Iran faces; looking east lies a nuclear-armed Pakistan with its own strain of anti-Shiism. Although General Pervez Musharraf is routinely celebrated in Washington as a reliable ally in the war against terrorism, Pakistan’s past is more checkered and problematic. Throughout the 1990s, Pakistan perceived the demise of the Soviet Union as a unique opportunity to exert its influence in Central Asia and to capture the emerging markets in that critical area. Afghanistan was viewed as an indispensable bridge to central Asia, and Pakistani intelligence services did much to ensure the triumph of the radical Taliban movement in the ensuing Afghan civil war. The rise of the Taliban and the eventual establishment of the al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan had much to do with Pakistan’s cynical strategy. Throughout the 1990s, such Pakistani machinations caused considerable tensions with Iran, which was uneasy about the emergence of a radical Sunni regime on its northeastern border.

Although Pakistan’s relations with Iran have improved since September 11, with Pakistan’s final abandonment of the Taliban, the specter of instability in Islamabad haunts Iran’s leadership. The possibility of the collapse of the current military government and its displacement by a radical Sunni regime with access to nuclear weapons is something Iran feels it must guard against. Pakistan’s nuclear test in 1998 caused considerable anxiety in Tehran, with Rafsanjani stressing, “This is a major step toward proliferation of nuclear weapons. This is a truly
dangerous matter and we must be concerned.” 38 Foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi also mused, “This was one genie that was much better to have stayed confined in the bottle.” 39 Along with Iraq, Pakistan is a potential threat that Iran must take into consideration as it plots its defense strategy.

Although both Iraq and Pakistan constitute long-term sources of concern, today the United States stands as Iran’s foremost strategic challenge. U.S.-Iranian relations have become even more strained in recent years, with the Bush administration routinely calling for a change of regime in Tehran. The massive projection of American power on all of Iran’s frontiers since September 11 has added credence to the Iranian claim of being encircled by the United States. The conservative newspaper Jomhuri-ye Islami captured Tehran’s dilemma: “In the contemporary world, it is obvious that having access to advanced weapons shall cause deterrence and therefore security, and will neutralize the evil wishes of great powers to attack other nations and countries.” 40 In a rare note of agreement, the leading liberal newspaper, Aftab-e Yazd, similarly stressed that, given the regional exigencies, “in the future Iran might be thinking about the military aspects of nuclear energy.” 41 The remarkable success of Operation Iraqi Freedom in overthrowing Saddam cannot but have made an impression on Iran’s leadership. The reality remains that Iraq’s anticipated chemical weapons did not deter Washington from military intervention. As an Iranian official confessed, “The fact that Saddam was toppled in twenty-one days is something that should concern all the countries in the region.” 42 Conversely, North Korea offers its own lessons and possibilities. Pyongyang’s presumed nuclear capability has not only obviated a preemptive invasion, but actually generated potential security and economic benefits. President Bush may loathe Kim Jong II, but far from contemplating military action, the United States and its allies are considering an economic relief package and security guarantees to dissuade North Korea from its nuclear path.
Post-September 11 developments in the Middle East have had a paradoxical impact on the Islamic Republic. Two of Iran’s formidable foes, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, have been overthrown by the United States. In the meantime, Iran’s American nemesis is entangled in an Iraq quagmire, draining its resources and tempering its ambitions. Nevertheless, the Iranian clerical elite expect a turbulent future, which accentuates their sense of insecurity. Iran remains in America’s crosshairs, at a time when the U.S. military presence in the region has never been greater. The influential Iran News emphasized this point in an editorial: “Based on Bush’s record after 9/11, one can only conclude that the U.S. did not invade out two immediate neighbors to the east and the west just to fight al-Qaeda. Consequently, astute political observers warn that Iran is next on the U.S. list of direct targets.” 43 Such anxieties enhance the apparent strategic utility of nuclear weapons to Iran and validate the claim that the Islamic Republic requires such a capability to ensure both regime survival and territorial integrity.

Hovering over all these threats is the reality of Iran’s strategic loneliness. Iran does not have true allies; rather it has convenient relationships with states such as Syria that are often based on mutual animosities. True alliances based on shared values and common vision has largely eluded the Islamic Republic. Iran is still surrounded by states with important security ties to the United States and continues to possess conventional arms that cannot deter its more powerful adversaries. Such a precarious strategic environment has led to a search for a deterrent power predicated on indigenous resources. In essence, the inability of Iran to integrate itself into the regional landscape and to craft conventional forces sufficient for dealing with all its potential threats makes nuclear weapons even more compelling. However, this is still the Islamic Republic, a fractious, divided state that can rarely forge a consensus on key issues. Even on an important topic such as nuclear weapons, voices of dissent within the clerical establishment are still sufficiently influential to have an impact on Iran’s nuclear deliberations.
The Debate

More than any other issue, the nuclear question has exposed the divisions within the clerical establishment over Iran’s international orientation. Iran’s contending factions are united on the need to sustain a vibrant nuclear research program that, in due course, will offer Tehran the option of assembling a bomb. However, the prospect of actually crossing the nuclear threshold in defiance of the international community and in violation of Iran’s long-standing treaty commitments has generated a subtle yet robust debate.

From the outset, it must be emphasized that for all the factions involved in this debate, the core issue is how to safeguard Iran’s national interests. The Islamic Republic is not an irrational rogue state seeking such weaponry as an instrument of an aggressive, revolutionary foreign policy designed to project its power abroad. This is not an” Islamic bomb” to be handed over to terrorist organizations or exploded in the streets of New York or Washington. The fact is that Iran has long possessed chemical weapons, and has yet to transfer such arms to terrorist. Iran’s cautious leaders are most interested in remaining in power and fully appreciate that transferring nuclear weapons to terrorists could lead to the type of retaliation from the United States or Israel that would eliminate their regime altogether. For Iran, this is a weapon of deterrence, and the relevant question is whether its possession will serve its practical interests. The primary supporters of the nuclear breakout option are hard-line elements association with the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Through command of key institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards and the Guardian Council, Iran’s reactionary clerics have enormous influence on national security planning. A fundamental tenet of the hard-liners’ ideology is the notion that the Islamic Republic is in constant danger from predatory external forces, necessitating military self-reliance. This perception was initially molded by a revolution that sought not just
to defy international norms but to refashion them. The passage of time and the failure of that mission have not necessarily diminished the hard-liners’ suspicions of the international order and its primary guardian, the United States, *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, the conservative newspaper and the mouthpiece of Ayatollah Khamenei, sounded this theme. The core problem is the fact that our officials’ outlook on the nuclear dossier of Iran is faulty and they are on the wrong track. It seems they have failed to appreciate that America is after our destruction and the nuclear issue is merely an excuse for them.44

In a similar vein, *Resalat*, another influential conservative paper, sounded the themes of deterrence and national interest by claiming, “In the present situation of international order whose main characteristics are injustice and the weakening of the rights of others, the Islamic Republic has no alternative but intelligent resistance while paying the least cost.” 45 Given its paranoia and suspicions, the Iranian Right does not necessarily object to international isolation and confrontation with the West. Indeed, for many within this camp, such a conflict would be an effective means of rekindling popular support for the revolution’s fading élan. Iran’s nuclear calculations have been further hardened by the rise of war veterans, such as President Ahmadinejad, to positions of power. Although the Iran-Iraq war ended nearly twenty years ago, for many within the Islamic Republic it was a defining experience that altered their strategic assumptions. Even a cursory examination of Ahmadinejad’s speeches reveals that for him the war is far from a faded memory. In his defiant speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2005, Iran’s president pointedly admonished the assembled dignitaries for their failings:

> For eight years, Saddam’s regime imposed a massive war of aggression against my people. It employed the most heinous weapons of mass destruction including chemical weapons against Iranians and Iraqis alike.
Who, in fact, armed Saddam with those weapons? What was the reaction of those who claim to fight against WMDs regarding the use of chemical weapons then? 46

The international indifference to Saddam’s war crimes and Tehran’s lack of an effective response have led Iran’s war-veteran president to perceive that the security of his country cannot be predicated on global opinion and treaties. At the core, all disarmament agreements call upon a state to forgo a certain degree of sovereignty in exchange for enhanced security. Once a state renounces its weapons of mass destruction programs it can be assured of support from the international community should it be threatened by another state possessing such arms. This implied trade off has no value for Iran’s hard-liners. Once more, the prolonged war with Iraq conditions their worldview and behavior. Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against Iran—with impunity, if not the tacit acceptance of Western powers—has reinforced Iran’s suspicions of the international order. Jomhuri-ye Islami observed, “As a rule, it is futile to enter any deal with the West over issues related to the country’s independence and national security.” 47 For many of the Islamic Republic’s leaders, the only way to safeguard Iran’s interests is to develop an independent nuclear deterrent.

Beyond the legacy of the war, America’s demands that Iran relinquish its fuel cycle rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty have aroused the leadership’s nationalistic impulses. As a country that has historically been the subject of foreign intervention and the imposition of various capitulation treaties, Iran is inordinately sensitive to its national prerogatives and sovereign rights. The rulers of Iran perceive that they are being challenged not because of their provocations and previous treaty violations, but because of superpower bullying. In a peculiar manner, the nuclear program and Iran’s national identity have become fused in the imagination of the hard-liners. To stand against America on
this issue is to validate one’s revolutionary ardor and sense of nationalism. Ali Hussein-Tash, deputy secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, stressed this point, saying, “A nation that does not engage in risks and difficult challenges, and a nation which does not stand up for itself, can never be a proud nation.” Thus, the notion of compromise and acquiescence has limited utility to Iran’s aggrieved nationalists. After decades of tension, Iranian reactionaries perceive that conflict with the United States is inevitable and the only means of tempering America’s ambitions is through the possession of the bomb. Although today the United States may seem entangled in an Iraq quagmire, for Iranian hawks it is still an aggressive state whose power cannot be discounted and whose intentions must not be trusted. The archconservative Keyhand newspaper pointedly advised the regime “to plan for acquiring the knowledge and ability to make nuclear weapons, which is necessary in preparation for the next phase in the future battlefield.”

Despite their bitterness and cynicism, the theocratic hard-liners are eternal optimists when it comes to their assessment of how the international community will respond to Iran’s nuclear breakout. Many influential conservative voices insist that Iran will follow the model of India and Pakistan, with the initial international outcry soon followed by an acceptance of Iran’s new status. Thus, Tehran would regain its commercial contracts and keep its nuclear weapons. The former Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati noted this theme, stressing, “Whenever we stand firm and defend out righteous stands resolutely, they are forced to retreat and have no alternatives.” The Right thus rejects the notion that Iran’s mischievous past and its tense relations with the United States will militate against the international community’s accepting Iran’s nuclear status. Should their anticipations prove misguided, however, and Iran becomes the subject of sanctions, it is a price the hard-liners are willing to pay for an important national prerogative. Ahmadinejad has pointedly noted that even if sanctions were to be
imposed, “the Iranian nation would still have its right.” 51 In a similar vein, Ayatollah Jannati has stated, “We do not welcome sanctions, but if we are threatened by sanctions, we will not give in.” 52 The notion of the need to sacrifice and struggle on behalf of the revolution and resist imperious international demands is an essential tenet of the hard-liners’ ideological perspective.

In the Islamic Republic’s informal governing structure, the national security decisions are subject to input by many figures, even those not necessarily with a portfolio. For instance, the former prime minister Mir Hussein Mussavi, who has been out of power for nearly twenty years but is greatly respected due to his service during the war with Iraq, is consulted intimately about Iran’s nuclear course. It appears that despite Western perceptions that the nuclear issue is decided by a narrow band of conservatives, Ayatollah Khamenei has broaden the parameters of the debate to include relevant elites from across the political spectrum in the nuclear deliberations. Thus, reformers out of power, moderate conservatives struggling against their reactionary brethren, as well as professionals from key bureaucracies are allowed to stress their points of view. Given the provocative nature of the nuclear program, elite of Iran seems to be hoping that the burden of any ensuing international confrontation would be assumed by all political factions, as opposed to being the responsibility of only the conservatives. The systematic consolidation of power by the conservatives over the state does not necessarily mean that voices of restraint have been excised from the decision-making process. In contrast to the hard-liners, the pragmatic elements within the Islamic Republic insist that Iran’s integration into the international order and the global economy mandates accepting certain restrictions on its nuclear program. Although it is tempting to see this issue as divided between conservative and reformers, the coalition pressing for reticence features both pragmatists, such as Rafsanjani, who is currently the head of the Expediency Council, and Hasan Rowhani, former secretary for the Supreme Council on National Security –
officials within the ministries and important elements of Iran’s national security establishment who retain their status irrespective of who is president. The proponents of this strategy do not call for the dismantling of Iran’s nuclear edifice but for the development of an advanced capacity within the flexible guidelines of the NPT. Given Iran’s long-term commitment to the NPT and the prevailing international scrutiny, a provocative policy could invite multilateral sanctions and lead Iran’s valuable commercial partners, such as the European Union, to embrace the U.S. policy of isolating and pressuring Iran. Thus, for this constituency, a hedging strategy can sustain Iran’s nuclear program while maintaining its international ties.

Over the winter of 2005-2006, as Iran’s reckless diplomacy generated a series of IAEA resolutions condemning its conduct and referring it to the UN Security Council, the members of this group called for restraint, and even for suspension of various nuclear activities. Rafsanjani took the lead in admonishing President Ahmadinejad: “We have reached a sensitive point. There is need for prudence on both sides.” 53 The reformers went still further; in March 2006, Muhammad Reza Khatami, the head of the Islamic Participation Front, insisted, “We have written numerous letters to Leader Khamenei to explain that insisting on enriching uranium is not in the country’s interest; that in this way we lose all the benefits gained over the past sixteen years; and that the only proper position is suspension of uranium-enriching activities and negotiations with the aim of fostering trust and having international oversight.” 54 The more moderate elements see the nuclear program in a wider context of Iran’s international relations. Given that Iran’s pursuit of its nuclear ambitions damages other aspects of its foreign policy, this group favors compromise and even a potential suspension of the program. Beyond the fears of sanctions and isolation, some proponents of nuclear restraint argue that such weapons do not necessarily serve Iran’s strategic interests. Should Iran cross the nuclear threshold, the Gulf States and the newly independent
Iraq are likely to gravitate further toward the American security umbrella. Indeed, under the auspices of the United States, a Persian Gulf security architecture may evolve with the purpose of containing and isolating the Islamic Republic. As Iran’s former representative to the IAEA, Ali Akbar Salehi, emphasized in June 2004, “We cannot buy security by having nuclear weapons which only invite more threats against ourselves.”

Unlike their conservative, the more pragmatic elements appreciate that given Iran’s “exceptional” nature and the eagerness of the United States to publicize all of its infractions as a means of multi-lateralizing its coercive policy, a defiant posture may not serve it well. The influential moderate politician Mohsen Mirdamadi stipulated, “The reality is that our recent achievement in the area of nuclear technology has been part of our strength and created new opportunities for us in the international arena, but we should not turn this into a new threat. We should be careful not to bring the U.S. and Europe together.” To be sure, other states have surreptitiously developed nuclear weapons, but they did so with superpower acceptance—even complicity—and in an international environment that was not suspicious of their intent. Iran’s pragmatists have increasingly been drawn to the North Korean model, as Pyongyang has adroitly managed to employ its nuclear defiance to extract concessions from the international community. Through a similar posture of restraint and defiance, threats, and blandishments, perhaps Tehran can also play the nuclear card to renegotiate a more rational relationship with its leading nemesis, the United States. The conservative publication *Farda*, with its ties to the hard-line community, put forward such a proposition: “The credibility that these weapons have had an continue to have at the global level, their importance, is in the support they give to bargaining in international negotiations and advancement of the country’s national interests.” The influential conservative politician Muhammad Javad Larijani echoed this theme: “If our national interests dictate, we can go to the bowels of hell to
negotiate with the devil.” The Supreme Leader called for defiance and pursuit of the nuclear option. But in his role as the guardian of the state, he must consider the nuclear program in the context of Iran’s larger international relations. Thus far, he has opted for compromise and appeasement of all the factions involved in the debate. On the one hand, Ayatollah Khamenei has endorsed the acceleration of Iran’s program and construction of an advanced nuclear infrastructure. Yet, he has also conceded the need for negotiations with the international community and has pressed the state toward a degree of restraint. All this may change, since Iran needs to make critical decisions regarding its nuclear program, with many of those decisions conditioned by the conduct of external actors, particularly the United States.

In assessing a state’s nuclear path, it is important to note that its motivations cannot be exclusively examined within the context of its national interests and security considerations. Whatever strategic benefits such weapons offer a state, they are certainly a source of national prestige and parochial benefits to various bureaucracies and politicians. As such constituencies emerge; a state can cross the nuclear threshold even if the initial strategic factors that provoked the program are no longer salient. The emergence of bureaucracies and nationalistic pressures in Iran is generating its own proliferation momentum, empowering those seeking a nuclear breakout. As time passes, the pragmatic voices calling for hedging are likely to be marginalized and lose their influence within the regime.

The Politics of Nuclear Weapons

As Iran’s nuclear program matures and becomes the subject of international scrutiny, another dynamic is entering the debate: public opinion. Far from being a source of restraint, the emerging public sentiment is that Iran, as a great
civilization with a long history, has a right to acquire a nuclear capability. The recent disclosures of the sophisticated nature of Iran’s nuclear program have been a source of pride for a citizenry accustomed to the revolution’s failures and setbacks. Rafsanjani, one of the Islamic Republic’s most astute politicians, acknowledged this trend when he said, “No official would dare allow himself to defy the people on such an issue.” In March 2005, the Islamic Republic even issued a postage stamp celebrating the achievements of its nuclear energy program. Washington’s incendiary rhetoric and its designation of Iran as par of an “axis of evil” that should not have access to such technologies has only inflamed a highly nationalistic population. In the popular discourse, the notions of sovereign rights and national dignity are increasingly displacing calls for adherence to treaty commitments.

Iran’s experience during the past quarter-century with war, sanctions, and estrangement from the international community has fostered a population that is somewhat unresponsive to external pressures. Among the themes consistently propounded in the press is the notion of American hypocrisy over the application of the NPT. The fact that Israel has escaped criticism from Washington has been cleverly exploited by conservative politicians to arouse nationalistic backing for Iran’s acquisition of nuclear capabilities. Moreover, the attempt by the United States to restrict membership in the exclusive nuclear club has always irked the Iranian leaders and masses alike. America is thus routinely condemned by Iranian writers, academics, and politicians as arrogant and self-serving. The leading conservative thinker, Amir Mohebian, pointedly criticized the U.S. posture: “The Americans say in order to preserve the peace for their children, they should have nuclear weapons and we should not.” In a strange note of agreement, one of the foremost reformist activists, Mostafa Tajzadeh, noted, “It’s basically a matter of equilibrium: if I don’t have a nuclear bomb, I don’t have security.”
Among the most vociferous critics of any accommodation on the nuclear issue are student organizations. Iranian students are seen by many analysts as a reliable barometer of public opinion, as they often play a vanguard political role in significant movements in Iranian history. It is customary for Western audiences to identify Iranian students with progressive causes, as they have been the most vocal advocates of greater democratization and reform of the Islamic Republic. On the nuclear issue, however, Iran’s educated youth seem to view disarmament agreements as an abridgment of national rights and have warned their elders against capitulating to external pressures. Upon Iran’s acceptance of the Additional Protocol, which called for more intrusive inspections of its nuclear plants in October 2003, Iran’s universities were rocked with demonstrations against the agreement. In the prestigious Sharif Technical University, students passed a resolution equating the accords with “treason.” In a meeting of university students from across the country in Bushehr (the site of Iran’s nuclear reactor), an easily passed resolution proclaimed, “We, the Iranian students, consider access to nuclear energy as the legitimate right of the Iranian nation. We will never bow to oppression and hegemonic policies.” 61 In 2004 yet another open letter signed by 1,700 students from across the country stated, “The nation will never accept any negligence or justifications from the officials with respect to the application of nuclear technology.” 62 As public opinion becomes a factor in the nuclear deliberations it is likely to further press the clerical elite in the direction of enhanced nuclear capabilities that can be transformed for military purposes.

Alongside this popular sentiment is the emergence of a bureaucratic and scientific establishment with its own parochial considerations. As with the students, Tehran’s acceptance of the Additional Protocol in 2003 brought forth protest from these corners, with 250 of Iran’s leading scientists signing an open letter, warning, “We the signers of this letter urge the government of the Islamic Republic to, under no circumstances, sign any letter which would create an
impediment to our legitimate right to acquire knowledge and technology.” 63 The continued Iranian negotiations with the European states and the suspension of its program brought forth another rebuke by 1,375 professors who signed a letter calling for resumption of activities, which are, after all, legal under the provisions of the NPT. 64

In an even more ominous manner, the Revolutionary Guard leadership has been dubious about the utility of treaties in terms of safeguarding Iran’s security interests. In a remarkable outburst, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, Yahya Rahim Safavi, pointedly asked, “Can we withstand America’s threats and domineering attitude with a policy of détente? Will we be able to protect the Islamic Republic from international Zionism by signing conventions banning the proliferation of chemical and nuclear weapons?” 65 Disturbingly, the operational management of Iran’s nuclear program rests in the hands of the hard-line elements who have scant respect for international treaties and obligations. The prestige and profits generated by this mission reinforce the strategic arguments for the prolongation of the nuclear program. The surprising aspect of the public debate in Iran is the extent to which it mirrors the discussions that took place in China, India, and Israel before those states joined the nuclear club. National prestige, notions of sovereign independence, great-power hypocrisy, and the need for a viable deterrence posture against enemies, both imagined and real, dominate Iranian newspapers and official discourse. Although Iran initiated its program to address certain strategic challenges, as the program matures, nationalistic sentiments and patronage politics are emerging as rationales for sustaining it. To be sure, the level of nationalistic pressure has not reached the heights achieved in India or Pakistan, but as time passes public opinion is likely to harden, belying the notion that prolonged negotiations and incremental pressure will somehow solve the problem. Even if the original strategic calculus that provoked the search for
nuclear weapons alters, the program may actually continue, as it becomes part of Iran’s national identity.

A Nuclear Future

Today the Islamic Republic stands at a crossroads. For nearly five years, Iran was involved in delicate negotiations with Britain, France and Germany regarding the direction of its nuclear program. Subsequently, it began contemplating a plan for outsourcing its nuclear enrichment activities to Russia. As Iran’s nuclear program becomes the subject of deliberations at the UN Security Council, it is time for a more imaginative approach. Ultimately, the course of Iran’s nuclear policy may be decided less by what the UN contemplates than by what the Americans do. The nature of Iran’s relations with the United States and what type of security architecture emerges in the Persian Gulf are likely to determine Iran’s decisions. It is neither inevitable nor absolute that Iran will become the next member of the nuclear club; its internal debates are real and its course of action still unsettled. The international community and the United States will have an immeasurable impact on Iran’s nuclear future.

As Iran grabs headlines and as its nuclear program becomes the subject of sensationalist accounts and exaggerated claims, it is important to appreciate that this is not the first time that the international community has faced a proliferation challenge. Since the inception of the atomic bomb, many states have looked at its awesome power as a solution to their security problems, yet their course of action was reversed. In the past two decades, states as varied as Brazil, Argentina, and Ukraine eventually retreated from the nuclear precipice. Although each state is different and must be viewed within the context of its national experiences, in all cases, diminishing external threats have been critical to their relinquishment of nuclear ambitions. In a similar vein, economic incentives such as favorable
commercial ties and access to international lending organizations have been effective, because they provide palpable benefits to ruling elites. It is rare, however, for a state that views nuclear weapons as fundamental to its security interests to dispense with such weapons under relentless threats of military reprisal and economic strangulation. Decades of pressure and economic sanctions ultimately did not dissuade Pakistan from pursuing a nuclear option it felt was necessary for national survival. Similarly, it appears that China’s tense relations with the United States ultimately pushed it toward an indigenous nuclear capability, irrespective of costs and burdens. In the end, it appears that a clever mixture of incentives and penalties can accomplish more in the realm of counterproliferation than can threats of military reprisal and economic coercion.

As Washington seeks to grapple with Iran’s nuclear challenge, it must accept that its threats and its hostile rhetoric have limited effect in altering Iran’s path. Indeed, a belligerent U.S. posture only assists those within the theocracy who argue that the American danger can only be negated through the possession of the “strategic weapon.” Given the disutility of force and threats, a realistic engagement strategy may still alter Iran’s nuclear course. President Ahmadinejad should not be the focus of U.S. diplomacy, as his pathologies are immutable. However, should Washington and its allies craft a generous package of security assurances and measurable sanctions relief in exchange for Tehran’s suspension of the critical components of its nuclear infrastructure, it may succeed in peeling away important clerical power brokers from the cause of nuclear arms. Beyond crafting such a package, the additional key to resolving Iran’s nuclear conundrum lies in international solidarity. It is unlikely that the Islamic Republic will be impressed with measures that do not enjoy multilateral consensus. It is thus critical for Washington to sustain the support of its European allies, and to the extent possible, keep China and Russia on board.
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