

NUCLEAR IRAN: PERILS AND PROSPECTS

Jahangir Amuzegar

Dr. Amuzegar was finance minister and economic ambassador in Iran's pre-1979 government.

On April 11, 2006, Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, proudly and triumphantly announced that the Islamic Republic had joined "the club of nuclear countries." Calling it "a very historic moment" of epochal significance, he said that Iranian scientists had succeeded in enriching uranium in a pilot test, thus paving the way for the enrichment process to proceed on an industrial scale. God willing, he added, Iran would soon be self-sufficient in nuclear fuel for its power plants.¹ Worldwide reporting of this claim within hours was the culmination of the global media's almost daily coverage of Iran's nuclear activities over the last three-and-a-half years. Since the summer of 2002, when the world learned for the first time that the Islamic Republic had a secret nuclear plant to enrich uranium, stories about Iran's "nuclear ambitions" have been a regular feature of world news. One-upmanship in getting tough with the Islamic Republic has transcended U.S. neocon think tanks and pro-Israeli action committees to become a campaign issue for potential Democratic and Republican candidates in the 2008 presidential race. President Ahmadinejad's colorless attire and colorful fulminations against the United States and Israel have provided additional

fodder for commentators. Yet the Tehran government's real motives for its nuclear program, its ultimate ability to pursue advanced nuclear technology and the program's potential consequences remain unknown, not only to the public at large, but also to the monitoring agency's seasoned experts.

Iran's nuclear dossier, currently before the UN Security Council for ultimate resolution, contains a tangled web of bilateral and regional issues involving mainly Washington and Israel, with some peripheral global implications. This paper attempts to (1) trace the background of Iran's nuclear program; (2) review Iran's dealings with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Security Council; (3) explore Iran's presumed motives for seeking nuclear weapons; (4) underline the international community's objections to a nuclear-powered Iran; (5) gauge the time-frame deemed necessary for Iran to acquire a deliverable bomb; (6) identify the Security Council's options in dealing with a defiant Tehran government; and (7) evaluate the "ultimate recourse" to deal with Iran's nuclear capability. The last section will try to highlight the real and hidden agenda behind the issue and possible hopes for its resolution.

FROM ALLIANCE TO ENMITY

Despite its diverse aspects, Iran's "nuclear case" is essentially a dispute instigated, developed, orchestrated and brought before the UN Security Council by Washington on behalf of itself and Israel. In its barest essence, Iran claims that it is legally entitled under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to enrich uranium for civilian use and that nuclear-powered electricity would release its oil and gas reserves for higher value-added purposes. Washington claims that Iran's program is a cover for making a bomb and that, on a small scale, nuclear energy would not be cheaper. Above all, since Tehran has for nearly two decades deceived the nuclear watchdog agency about its activities, it has lost whatever legal rights it once enjoyed. President George W. Bush has declared the Islamic Republic part of "an axis of evil," and a "great national security concern" for the United States, but also a regime "bent to destroy our ally Israel."²² In a March 20, 2006, speech in Cleveland, the president said, "Iran's stated objective is to destroy our strong ally Israel; it's a threat, in essence, to a strong alliance. I made it clear, I'll make it clear again, that we will use military might to protect our ally, Israel."²³ The influential Senator John McCain told the Brussels forum in late April 2006 that "the United States would not stand by and let Iran wipe out Israel."²⁴ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said, "We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran whose policies would be 180 degrees different than the Middle East we would like to see developed."²⁵ The U.S. National Security Strategy issued on March 16, 2006, identifies Iran as the "single country" that may

pose the biggest danger to the United States.⁶

The supreme irony in Washington's spirited objections to Iran's nuclear program is that Tehran is now being castigated for trying to master the very same art that the United States encouraged the shah's government to acquire. Iran's initial nuclear program started in the mid-1950s, when Mohammad Reza Shah signed a civilian "atoms for peace" agreement with the Eisenhower administration and later received an American research reactor for the Tehran Nuclear Research Center. The shah's government signed the NPT in 1968 and ratified it in 1970. Iran's subsequent intention to establish a nuclear-energy capability for electric-power generation, in turn, dates back to the aftershocks of the 1974 oil-price explosion, when the shah argued that oil was a "noble" commodity worthy of use in higher-value products. Iran's Atomic Energy Organization was created with the explicit task of replacing oil and gas for power generation. In the same year, an American firm, the Stanford Research Institute, was hired by the Iranian government for assistance in the design and construction of nuclear plants. The monarch wanted to construct 20 nuclear power stations capable of producing 2000 megawatts of electricity by the year 2000.

The current program was thus born nearly 50 years ago with the full consent and support of the United States, not only endorsed but encouraged by Washington. President Gerald Ford offered the shah a full nuclear cycle in 1976. The Ford team — including many senior officials in the present Bush administration who are now opposed to even a limited uranium-enrichment capacity — reportedly approved the

deal for a complete nuclear fuel cycle. U.S. companies offered atomic reactors capable of regenerating fissile materials on a self-sustaining basis to the shah's government for sale, albeit without the uranium-enrichment capabilities sought by Tehran today.⁷ As the first installment of a 20 MW power grid, a light-water reactor was started at Bushehr on the Persian Gulf with the help of Germany's Siemens AG in the late 1970s.

After the revolution, the Bazargan government hastily abandoned the program as costly and wasteful. Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters now claim that he believed weapons of mass destruction were "immoral." By 1987, for reasons that remain unclear, the wartime Mussavi government decided to restart the project. The unfinished plant, however, had been badly damaged by Iraqi bombardment, and Germany declined to resume the work or even supply the original blueprints. Tehran then approached Moscow for help. Russia agreed to undertake the job of finishing the plant by 1995, including initially a centrifuge unit with fissile-material capabilities. The Russian deal called for supplying the Bushehr plant with nuclear fuel for ten years and required Iran to allow IAEA to monitor and observe the safeguards protocol. The 30-year-old plant is still unfinished.

A TRUST NEEDING VERIFICATION

After the resumption of nuclear development in the late 1980s, the Islamic Republic's top leadership openly, repeatedly and unequivocally stated that Iran's sole objective is to enrich uranium at low levels to obtain fuel for its nuclear power plant. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and ex-presidents Rafsanjani

and Khatami reiterated that nuclear weapons were against Iran's political and economic interests, as well as its Islamic beliefs.⁸ President Ahmadinejad, in his turn, has added that "a cultured, learned, rational, and civilized" nation such as Iran "does not need nuclear weapons; only those who want to solve all problems by force do."⁹ Washington, however, has insisted all along that Iran's "peaceful" program is in reality a cover for the ultimate development of nuclear weapons and a threat to its interests in the region as well as Israel's security and survival.¹⁰

In August 2002, the National Council of Resistance — officially, a front for the outlawed exile opposition group Mojahedeen Khalq but, in fact, the recipient of information from anti-regime groups in the region — stunned the international community. It claimed that the Islamic Republic had a secret "nuclear weapons" facility at Natanz, 150 miles southwest of Tehran. Satellite photographs in December 2002 subsequently confirmed the existence of the site. To assuage suspicion about Iran's nuclear ambitions, Tehran invited IAEA inspectors in February 2003 to examine all nuclear facilities for an extended period, and succeeded in obtaining a report in November 2003 stating that the nuclear watchdog agency found no evidence of nuclear-arms activities. Furthermore, in December 2003, Iran signed the Additional Protocol to the NPT, allowing unannounced and more intrusive inspections by IAEA agents. In June 2004, a mysterious laptop, allegedly stolen from a targeted Iranian asset, reportedly showed a test shaft and drawings tangentially related to missile modifications and a nuclear-weapons program, but without any reference to such a plan. Tehran called the

documents forgeries, and there was no independent authentication.¹¹ However, further investigations revealed that, as far back as 1987, Iran had started clandestine negotiations with Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan for the purchase of nuclear equipment, drawings and centrifuge components.

The Bush administration found these startling revelations to be a golden opportunity to demand that Iran's violations be *referred* to the Security Council as a threat to international peace and security. Failing to muster a consensus for the move, Washington reluctantly agreed to let a European trio — France, Germany and the United Kingdom — carry out the task of persuading Iran to cease its suspicious nuclear activities. As part of the understanding with the Europeans under the so-called Paris Agreement of November 2004, the Tehran government agreed to *voluntarily* suspend all uranium enrichment and related activities while negotiations were in progress. On August 1, 2005, Britain, Germany and France offered their “package” of incentives, including their own security assurances, further economic cooperation, and a guaranteed supply of fuel for electricity reactors. In exchange, Iran had to *permanently* forgo production of fissile material used in nuclear weapons.¹² The Tehran government immediately rejected the so-called “implementation document” as vague and embellished with minor incentives to be exchanged for Iran's permanent abandonment of an “inalienable right.” Shortly afterward, Iran announced the resumption at Isfahan of uranium conversion, i.e., turning yellow cake into a gas that could be further purified and used as a fuel in nuclear reactors and ultimately converted into nuclear weapons.

As the face-off with the EU-3 continued, President Ahmadinejad's fiery speech before the UN General Assembly on September 17, 2005 — mentioning a “nuclear apartheid” and insisting that Iran would develop fuel-cycle technology regardless of the West's concerns — brought the confrontation to a boil. An informal bill of indictment by three European foreign ministers, published as an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, tried to demonstrate Iran's unacceptable behavior since the Paris Agreement.¹³ On September 24, 2005, the IAEA board of governors found Iran in violation of the NPT and voted to report it to the Security Council, ending Tehran's relentless efforts to prevent such a move. The resolution cited “the absence of confidence” that Iran's program was exclusively for peaceful purposes. There were 21 votes in favor, one against and 12 abstentions, including most prominently Russia and China, at whose insistence the actual time of referral to the Council was left open. Tehran denounced the decision as part of the political vendetta initiated by Washington,¹⁴ and, as had already been threatened, the IAEA ordered its inspectors to remove agency seals from the nuclear-enrichment facility at Natanz. The move thus virtually ended the agreement Iran had voluntarily signed with the European trio 16 months earlier.

An IAEA report issued at the end of January 2006 said it had found evidence suggesting a link between Iran's officially peaceful nuclear-research program and its military work on high explosives and missiles under a so-called Green Salt Project.¹⁵ The report was the first such declaration by the agency, which had repeatedly refused to back Washington's

claim that at least some of Iran's nuclear activities had links to a military project. Furthermore, in late January 2006, Iran turned over a raft of documents requested by the IAEA for years, including a 1987 offer from A.Q. Kahn detailing the use of nuclear-weapons components. Iranian officials told UN inspectors that the 15-page document was part of the Pakistani network's package and that Tehran had made no use of its contents.

Iran's abrogation of its voluntary agreement with the EU-3, the breaking of IAEA seals and removal of its cameras, and the reopening of its enrichment plant at Natanz resulted in Washington's call for an emergency meeting of the IAEA board of governors. Ahmadinejad's inflammatory speeches calling the Holocaust a "myth" and wishing to "wipe Israel from the world map" stoked international fury and united the West against Tehran. On February 4, 2006, a solid majority of the governing board of the IAEA decided to report Iran's 16 specific NPT violations to the Security Council. The decision marked the end of years of calculated efforts to avoid being referred to the Security Council, thanks to the new government's belligerence.¹⁶ The European-drafted and carefully worded February 4 resolution was passed by a vote of 27 to three with five abstentions. Only Cuba, Syria and Venezuela voted against it. The resolution was particularly welcome by Washington because it had the signatures of both Russia and China, which had abstained in September 2005. In the resolution, Iran was directed to take three actions to avoid potential sanctions: (1) resume its suspension of all enrichment and reprocessing activities (i.e., shut down its centrifuge facility at Natanz); (2) ratify the Additional

Protocol to the NPT and give IAEA inspectors free rein for spot inspections; and (3) fulfill pending requests of the IAEA inspectors regarding documents, workshop visits and interviews with Iran's atomic scientists. In addition, the Islamic Republic was asked to "reconsider" its plans to build a heavy-water reactor at Arak. The Security Council, however, was to take no action until after the IAEA director general delivered a new assessment of Iran's cooperation, to be done by March 6, 2006.

The IAEA board's nearly unified stand was reached after days of deliberations and a series of delicate compromises on the part of the 35 members. The final statement underscored a consensus between Washington, which had campaigned for nearly three years for an early and immediate referral, and the longstanding Sino-Russian resistance to any involvement by the Council, as well as to what President Vladimir Putin called "rash or erroneous moves."¹⁷ Yet, while Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice afterwards kept using the word "unity," Washington's victory was at best partial, if not Pyrrhic. For one thing, at Chinese and Russian insistence, Iran's dossier was *reported* and not *referred* to the Council, signifying a simple transfer of the case on an informational basis rather than a referral for possible immediate consideration and action. The Russians also blocked the resolution from including the word "non-compliance" by Iran, a phrase that under the IAEA's statute would imply specific legal consequences. Furthermore, Washington had to back down and accept a clause in the resolution referring to the goal of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East (implicitly questioning Israel's nuclear-weapons status).¹⁸ Finally, the resolution

delayed for another month any action by the Security Council until receipt of a new progress report by the agency's director general (before March 2006).

Prior to the February 4 resolution, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator asserted in a letter to the agency's director that a referral to the Security Council would mean the end of all voluntary compliance.¹⁹ He also informed him that the government had decided to build 50,000 centrifuges at Natanz and begin full-scale production of enriched uranium if the case were referred to the Security Council. Faithful to this and frequent previous warnings, the Tehran government announced immediately after the IAEA vote that it would no longer observe the Additional Protocol.²⁰ In a televised speech commemorating the twenty-seventh anniversary of the Iranian revolution, President Ahmadinejad even darkly hinted of the possibility of Iran withdrawing from the NPT.²¹

In a February 27, 2006, report to the IAEA board of governors, the director general said the agency "has not seen any diversion of nuclear material to nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices." Yet, he added, the agency was not "in a position to conclude that there are no undeclared nuclear materials or activities in Iran."²² The report listed a number of specific violations of the NPT by Iran, mainly failures to inform the agency about its nuclear work as required by the treaty. For example, Iran gave IAEA inspectors access to its Lavizan-Shian site only in January 2006, two years after the buildings were demolished, the site leveled and the earth moved. Tehran never allowed the agency to see all requested documents, visit workshops, interview scientists and

operators involved in the programs, or visit certain buildings on its detailed list. Iran also declined to address or discuss matters related to the procurement of dual-use technologies, the design of missile-reentry vehicles, or documents related to centrifuge technology.²³

On the basis of this report,²⁴ the 15-member Security Council unanimously adopted a nonbinding statement on March 29, 2006, calling on Iran to suspend its nuclear-enrichment program within 30 days and return to negotiations with the IAEA. However, the first unified statement on the issue, considered by Washington as a breakthrough, did not commit the United Nations to any action against Tehran. Iran did not immediately offer a formal response, but declared that it did not accept "pressure or intimidation."²⁵ Despite its mild tone of apparent consensus, the agreement masked the persistent disagreement among the Council's five major powers: Russia and China wanted the issue to be handled exclusively by the Vienna watchdog agency, and the other three wished to bring the United Nations into action.²⁶ Two weeks later, Tehran openly defied the Council by announcing that its enrichment decision was "irreversible."

IRAN'S "NUCLEAR AMBITIONS"

Notwithstanding the Islamic government's repeated and emphatic denial of any intention to develop nuclear weapons, the IAEA's refusal to give Tehran a clean bill of health has now convinced more than two-thirds of the world that the Iranian nuclear program is a clandestine military nuclear scheme.²⁷ A reported statement by Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator that the lengthy talks with the European trio were, in fact, intended to

“dupe” them while Iran completed the Isfahan facility added fuel to the fire.²⁸ The French foreign minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, representing a country with longstanding and sizable commerce with Iran, expressed his concerns in the bluntest terms: “It’s very simple: No civilian nuclear plan can explain Iran’s nuclear program. Therefore, it’s a clandestine military program.”²⁹ Echoing his exasperation, Germany’s chancellor, Angela Merkel, said, “We must prevent Iran from developing its nuclear activities.”³⁰ Moscow and Beijing also talked on various occasions about the world’s lack of confidence in the Iranian nuclear activities.³¹ President Putin emphasized that Russia has a “very close position with England and the United States” in objection to Iran’s nuclear bombs.³² After years of silence, some Persian Gulf states also expressed worries about a nuclear Iran and called for tougher actions. Saudi, Jordanian and Kuwaiti officials similarly expressed worries about threats of environmental disaster in the region.³³

Nevertheless, Tehran’s alleged guilt so far has largely been based on its *motivation* rather than actual *involvement* in an impermissible act. The West argues that Iran is sitting on top of 10 percent of the world’s petroleum and 15 percent of its natural-gas reserves, and thus needs no nuclear power for decades to come. Iran’s leadership routinely rebuts this argument by pointing out that other countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia and China all possess hydrocarbon resources and yet they all find it profitable to produce atomic energy.³⁴ They further point out that, at the current consumption rate, oil and gas reserves would soon be exhausted and have to be replaced by

nuclear power, in which Iran wishes to be self-sufficient, rather than be dependent on unreliable allies or potential enemies. Yet, even on the *intention* score alone, many analysts find the West’s charges based on uncorroborated evidence, questionable intelligence and unauthenticated documents. In the opinion of a seasoned analyst, the evidence collected in the three years since Iran was forced to admit having a secret uranium-enrichment program has been “often circumstantial, usually ambiguous and always incomplete,” thus confounding efforts by policymakers, intelligence officials and U.S. allies to reach a confident judgment.³⁵

Assuming, however, with *The Economist*, that Iran *must* be seeking nuclear weapons because “no one believes otherwise,” three questions emerge. *Why* should Iran want to have nuclear weapons to begin with? *Why* should the international community not allow Tehran to join the nuclear club? In *what* time frame can Iran succeed in its pursuit of the forbidden goal? On the question of Iran’s motivations, several rationales are offered. First, given widespread and profound discontent among an overwhelming majority of Iranian citizens, the theocratic government may feel understandably paranoid about its own security. A nuclear Iran would strengthen the theocratic oligarchs’ sense of invulnerability at home and abroad, and would weaken opponents within and outside the country. While no one thinks the regime would ever use nuclear weapons, once Iran develops a nuclear deterrent, the leadership can more easily ignore international pressure and pursue domestic political repression and human-rights violations with impunity.³⁶ Second, the possession of nuclear bombs would be

considered a hallmark of modernization, giving the country heightened national prestige and clout, thus consolidating its sphere of influence in the region. Third, living in a dangerous neighborhood, surrounded by nuclear powers on all sides and hearing repeated threats from high American and Israeli politicians, a nuclear capability is a credible *deterrent* and a valuable insurance policy against external threats. Indigenous nuclear power might also be regarded as a counterbalance to nuclear-armed Israel and the risks of foreign-inspired separatist movements. Fourth, the Iranian leadership, based on a misperception of the North Korean and Iraqi cases, may believe that an intermediate-range strategic nuclear capability would deter any eventual American or Israeli attacks and thus enable it to assume a bolder and more aggressive foreign policy towards its arch enemies. Fifth, Tehran leaders may believe that the one sure means of bringing Washington to the bargaining table “on an equal-status basis” or at least enjoying the assurances of being treated with greater respect would be to have the bomb; it worked for North Korea. According to an unnamed Pentagon official, the Iranians realize that only by becoming a nuclear state can they defend themselves against the United States.³⁷ Sixth, as a self-appointed standard bearer of “Islam ruling the world,”³⁸ the Islamic Republic may resent taking a backseat to Pakistan (which it regards as a relative newcomer on the global scene) and wish to correct a nuclear imbalance. Finally, possession of an atomic bomb would give the theocratic oligarchy entry into the prestigious nuclear club, which, like all exclusive clubs, bestows on members a coveted status far beyond (and largely

distinct from) its club’s privileges and amenities.³⁹

The question as to *why* the Islamic Republic should be denied a nuclear-weapons capability,⁴⁰ while its neighbors are subject to no such injunctions, has received murkier answers based on some dubious assumptions and certain scare scenarios.⁴¹ The first argument is based on the assertion that a non-democratic and repressive regime defying the world, harboring revolutionary ideals, pursuing regional ambitions, supporting a global terrorist network, and threatening to destroy Israel should not be allowed to have nuclear weapons.⁴² Tehran’s rulers could use the leverage of the bomb to dominate a large part of the Middle East and Caspian regions, challenging the big powers’ interests and clout. A Pew Research Center poll shows that 72 percent of respondents believe that, if Iran were to develop nuclear weapons, it would likely launch attacks on Israel; 62 percent think that Europe and the United States would be the targets.⁴³ Second, Iran’s neighbors would find a nuclear-armed giant a threat to their security and a source of potential blackmail, if not outright aggression. Third, since a nuclear capability would give Iran a distinct military superiority over its rivals — Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria — it might trigger a new and dangerous arms race in the area. Fourth, a nuclear-armed Iran could advance its aggressive religious or political ambitions thorough various terrorist groups by empowering them with “suitcase bombs.” Iran’s spiritual leader has already offered to share nuclear technology with Sudan.⁴⁴ Fifth, a nuclear Iran could wield a predominant influence on OPEC and disrupt maritime traffic in the Persian Gulf. Sixth,

and by far the most pointed, a nuclear Iran would represent an “existential threat” to the state of Israel directly with a single shot or through its agents in Lebanon and Palestine.⁴⁵

Questioning the validity of objections to a nuclear-powered Iran, however, are a large number of experts who find the threats somewhat exaggerated, if not largely based on hysteria. First, the Islamic Republic’s challenge to Washington’s interests and power in the region needs no bomb for leverage, as U.S. interests and influence have already been effectively threatened since 1979 through conventional means and via financial support to groups in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Second, the chances of the Islamic Republic’s engaging in adventurism or naked aggression against its neighbors are far-fetched. The last time Iran started a war was back in 1850 to liberate Herat; its last invasion of another country was in 1738. In the immediate past, even when Afghan Taliban challenged the Tehran government both militarily and ideologically, the clerical leadership showed an astonishing restraint. Third, the possibility of the Iranian nuclear program spawning a Middle East arms race is indeed ominous, but that race started decades ago, and Iran was not the one to launch it. Furthermore, Israel, Pakistan and India are already nuclear powers. Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf emirates all enjoy U.S. or NATO presence, alliance or protection and, thus, have no need of a nuclear defensive shield. No Iranian government, no matter how belligerent or stupid, would dare provoke or challenge American or NATO forces. Still further, potential candidates for the race — Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Turkey — present

technical, financial, political and security problems of their own, and their foray into the nuclear bazaar is highly circumstantial.⁴⁶ Finally, Iran might hesitate to start a regional nuclear arms race because it would lose its current superiority in conventional weapons. Fourth, there is the straw-man issue of a “bold Iran” engaging in nuclear coercion through the so-called “suitcase bomb.”⁴⁷ But chemical and biological weapons would be much cheaper to produce, less cumbersome to pack and carry, easier to handle and more devastating in effect. Fifth, Iran’s influence in OPEC, whatever it might be, will be neither augmented nor diminished by possession of the bomb, but rather by its own oil-capacity limitations. Last, and most crucial, Washington’s concern about the Islamic Republic’s posture toward the Jewish state seems to be a bogus argument to neutral observers. The esteemed Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld believes that, “given the balance of forces,” it cannot be argued that a nuclear Iran will threaten the United States or even Israel.⁴⁸ Since the chances of mutual annihilation loom large in any nuclear first strike, a nuclear Iran would not dare initiate such an attack. Visiting the Natanz centrifuge facility, President Ahmadinejad told the staff, “What enemies fear is not production of an atomic bomb because in today’s world atomic weapons are not efficient.”⁴⁹ The new president may be a political amateur, occasionally making dimwitted statements, but he is neither a fool nor a suicide bomber. Some pundits argue that a Shiite belief in martyrdom, coupled with the Iranian regime’s extremist ideology, could render deterrence meaningless.⁵⁰ Such people know neither Shiite martyrdom nor the regime leaders’ instinct

for self-preservation, nor even the mullahs' *bazaar* habit of always looking for the best deal.

Setting these arguments aside and assuming that the Islamic Republic is intent on acquiring nuclear weapons, the next questions would be, *how well* and *how soon* can the regime achieve its goal? Western government analysts, nuclear scientists, UN inspectors and anti-regime activists differ widely in their estimates,⁵¹ according to their own ideological predilections and presuppositions. Accordingly, the country's bomb-making capability ranges from very small to near total, and the time horizon extends from weeks to years. The comparative advantage of nuclear power over other fuel sources also goes from nil to substantial! To reach reasonable estimates on these questions, one has first to separate the time required to master the centrifuge enrichment process from the time needed to actually build a deliverable bomb. They all require a large volume of resources, though exact amounts are unknown, as is the speed at which the task can be pushed ahead with external help.

Some nuclear experts believe that Iran — with the knowledge and experience accumulated since the 1950s, a vast nuclear infrastructure built since the late 1980s, advice and assistance acquired from nuclear merchants, and sufficient money and scientific talent at its disposal — should theoretically be able to produce the bomb. However, a number of nuclear scientists question Iran's ability to master the chemistry involved in large-scale conversion. It is even claimed that Iran's "scientific elite" is not advanced enough even to the stage of reverse engineering from other people's know-how.⁵² A near consensus, however, exists that the process

of nuclear-weapons development from technical capability to actual construction and delivery is no easy task. At present, Tehran claims to be able to enrich uranium by running a small cascade of 164 centrifuges to a level of 3.5 percent, while bomb-grade uranium must be enriched to a level of well beyond 80 percent. On this scale, which many believe to be a bluff, the country supposedly needs to run 1,500 centrifuges continuously for nearly a year to obtain enough enriched material for one bomb.⁵³ Recent inspections by IAEA technicians reportedly revealed that Iran was encountering many technical or financial difficulties in completing a heavy-water reactor at Arak and a fuel-manufacturing plant at Isfahan.⁵⁴ A Russian military chief familiar with the Iran case is quoted saying that Tehran is incapable of producing a nuclear bomb now or in the distant future.⁵⁵ On the other hand, a former UN nuclear inspector reportedly believes that Iran has enough black market components in storage to build the 1,500 centrifuges needed for making 45 pounds of highly enriched uranium and one crude weapon.⁵⁶

With respect to the time frame, opinions vary even more widely.⁵⁷ A 1984 issue of *Jane's Defense Weekly* reportedly predicted that Tehran would have the bomb within two years! Some experts in Israel have been saying firmly every year for more than ten years that Tehran would get the bomb "next year."⁵⁸ For the past 15 years, various intelligence agencies have warned that Tehran could build a bomb in three to five years. On more than one occasion during the first half of 2006, John Negroponte, U.S. director of national intelligence, has stated that Tehran does not yet have nuclear weapons and probably

will not produce or acquire the necessary fissile materials for the next ten years. A recent estimate points out that Tehran is six to nine months away from mastering the enrichment process and five to ten years from building a bomb.⁵⁹ The latest guess is that with no major new technical problems, the task can be accomplished within three years.⁶⁰ A report issued in March 2006 by the Institute for Science and International Security also subscribes to the three-year possibility. And if President Ahmadinejad's claim of mid-April 2006 should prove true — that Iran is now testing a P-2 centrifuge for enriching uranium (which would presumably quadruple the capacity of the previously acknowledged P-1 type) — the time span would certainly be shorter.⁶¹ The most intriguing speculation is provided by the IAEA director general, who told *Newsweek* in January 2006 that if the Iranians “have the nuclear material and they have a parallel weaponization program along the way, they are not very far—a few months—from a weapon.”⁶² The newest estimate brings it down to “only a week or two!”⁶³

THE BRIKINMANSHIP GAME

If it fails to resume voluntary suspension of its nuclear activities and to fully cooperate with the UN inspectors, the Tehran government has been warned by Washington to expect “tough diplomatic actions.”⁶⁴ Vice President Richard Cheney, addressing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on March 7, 2006, spoke of “meaningful consequences” if the regime stayed on its present course.⁶⁵ Prime Minister Tony Blair of Great Britain warned Iran about “a serious situation.”⁶⁶ President Jacques Chirac of France, in a January 19, 2006,

television address, even threatened to use nuclear forces as retaliation against a “terrorist nation’s” transgressions. And Israel’s top leaders have portrayed Iran’s menace in hyperbolic terms (i.e. “the most serious threat faced by Jews since the Nazi Holocaust”),⁶⁷ and vowed that the Jewish state would not tolerate Iran’s achieving nuclear independence.⁶⁸

Tehran appears not only unshaken by these warnings, but eager for confrontation.⁶⁹ Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has vowed to pursue Iran’s nuclear program in the face of heightened pressure from the international community. “Using nuclear technology,” he said, “is a national obligation and a public demand; any going back is the same as losing the country’s independence at a very high price.” He has further urged Iranians to resist “the enemy’s threats” and preserve the nation’s “honor and glory.”⁷⁰ President Ahmadinejad has echoed the same sentiment by saying in a speech to an enthusiastic crowd that “retreating by even an iota in this [nuclear] path is out of the question. We had the revolution in order not to listen [to the West].” And again, “Nuclear technology is not something someone gave us so they can take it back; no one can take it back.”⁷¹ In a letter to the UN secretary-general, the Iranian Majlis threatened to force the government to withdraw from the NPT if the United States continued pressuring Tehran to suspend uranium enrichment.⁷²

Given these and other similarly belligerent positions, the question naturally is, “What next?” Tehran has so far refused to voluntarily suspend uranium enrichment at home or accept a package of Russian incentives, including having the enrichment process carried out jointly on Russian soil.

The major nuclear powers, in turn, have dismissed the Majlis speaker's suggestion that Tehran is ready to provide the IAEA with an "objective guarantee" that the Iranian nuclear program is purely for civilian use.⁷³ Furthermore, Tehran's proposal to have a private international consortium of foreign countries and foreign companies enrich uranium on Iranian soil under IAEA supervision has not received a positive response from anywhere.

The face-off has placed Iran's case before the UN Security Council. But the Council's efforts to find a mutually satisfactory solution have come to naught, largely due to distrust among the five major powers and disagreements over the best options. Western powers along with Russia and China have agreed to keep Iran from going nuclear but differ about the means. Policies, tactics and approaches vary considerably, but they are all limited and rather unattractive, ranging from diplomatic negotiations to gradually harsher sanctions and to military action.⁷⁴

Sanctions themselves include a vast array of mild to drastic measures with varying impact. Based on past UN actions, possible measures include in order of severity, a Council *statement* by its president, approved by all 15 members, asking Iran to cease and desist, and a series of *resolutions* thereafter (to be approved by nine members, including the five with veto power) specifying punishment. These resolutions may involve merely banning travel by Iranian officials, business leaders or nuclear scientists; limiting the number of diplomatic staff in each capital; excluding Iran from international athletic events; forbidding international flights and other means of transportation and communications into or out of

Iran; restricting worldwide sales of arms and dual-use high-tech equipment; barring loans from private international banks or international agencies to Iran; freezing Iran's assets in foreign institutions; banning foreign investment in or transfer of technology to any Iranian economic sector; forbidding all sales of foreign products (including critically needed gasoline) to Iran; embargoing all oil and non-oil exports by Iran; and, finally, expelling the Islamic Republic from all international organizations.

All these sanctions, however, present problems of their own and are a classical example of the double-edged sword. First, although Washington is no longer isolated in its effort to put Iran's case before the Security Council, it is still doubtful whether Russia, China or even some nonaligned countries would agree to stiff economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Russia in the past has said that sanctions are in no way the best way to solve the impasse. At a special meeting in Vienna on April 21, 2006, the Russian delegate made it clear that sanctions could be "talked about" only after "concrete facts [confirm] that Iran is not exclusively involved in peaceful nuclear activities."⁷⁵ China has also routinely opposed the use of sanctions or similar strong-arm tactics in international disputes.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Iran's leverage over most Council members in trade, investment and security areas would make most sanctions perfunctory, impractical or ineffective. The United Kingdom, France and Germany enjoy a lucrative export market of nearly \$15 billion in Iran. Russia is a major arms vendor to Iran's defense establishment and is the sole contractor to build Iran's atomic reactor in Bushehr, with scores of Russian scientists in charge. China receives 12 percent of its

oil imports from Iran; it has been active in many local development projects (including the Tehran metro) and it has recently signed a \$100 billion energy agreement with Tehran.⁷⁷ Washington could of course raise its own unilateral sanctions,⁷⁸ but as its experience in Iran and some 80 countries so far indicates, these sanctions could easily be thwarted by a shift of trade and investment to other countries at the U.S. companies' peril. Still further, global experiences show that sanctions are likely to hurt ordinary citizens and not be effective in changing the leadership's behavior. Realizing this fact, both American and European officials have repeatedly emphasized that they do not intend to cause hardship and internal suffering to the Iranian public. Aware of the fact that sanctions also run the risk of creating a nationwide backlash similar to the anti-Saddam case, a U.S. State Department official admitted that a heavy-handed sanctions approach would hurt a lot of Iranians "that we do not want to alienate."⁷⁹ Finally, short of a total universal sanction on Iran's sales of oil, none of the other economic measures would shake the leadership's resolve or drastically change their behavior. Banned imports can be purchased in the black market. Domestic investments can be financed out of huge oil export receipts and accumulated gold and foreign-exchange reserves. A ban on non-oil exports could hurt carpet weavers and pistachio growers but would not cripple the whole economy and could easily be overcome, given Iran's vast open borders. Only a complete embargo on oil exports (which Iran relies on for 85 percent of its total foreign exchange and more than 70 percent of its annual budget) would make the difference. But, given the near ab-

sence of the spare capacity in the global oil supply to make up for the loss of Iranian oil, a large shortage might develop and lead to a disastrous oil-price explosion that no country — least of all, the United States and Israel — could afford for long. And, despite International Energy Agency director Claude Mandel's repeated assurance that the world has enough stocks to replace all of Iran's exports for a year and a half,⁸⁰ oil traders speak of \$100-a-barrel crude oil in no time if stiff sanctions are imposed. Even the mere mention of a possible ban has in recent weeks sent daily tremors through the New York and London oil-futures markets. For all these reasons, there are great doubts about the vaunted efficacy of sanctions.⁸¹ Some analysts even argue that Iran may win a sanctions war.⁸²

OPTING FOR THE UNTHINKABLE

To paraphrase a celebrated dictum, the military option is sanctions by different means. Bush administration officials have repeatedly quoted the president's declaration that all options, including surgical nuclear strikes, are on the table, but that Washington's strong preference is to deal with the Iranian threat through "effective diplomacy." The military option is backed by the adage that "whoever wishes for peace, let him prepare for war." Needless to say, military intervention, including "surgical" strikes at Iran's nuclear facilities, would at first glance appear to be a viable option for many reasons. It is tailor-made for the 2002 Bush doctrine of preemption; it is backed not only by various neoconservative factions but also by some influential politicians in and out of the Bush administration and the U.S. Congress; and it is supported by a surprisingly large number of Americans in several national

polls (*The Washington Post-ABC News*, Fox News, *Los Angeles Times-Bloomberg*),⁸³ although support seems to have varied at different times and in response to differently worded questions.⁸⁴ An attack on Iran is also said to give the embattled Bush administration a new story line on Iraq-Iran machinations.⁸⁵ There have been suggestions by a number of American neoconservative hawks to denuke Iran with “swift, massive, devastating force that decapitates the regime.”⁸⁶ It is claimed that this can be done in a single night.⁸⁷

Yet this option is the most controversial of all choices. The British, the Chinese and the Russians have all rejected it as impractical because it involves grave drawbacks. To begin with, the Israeli attack on Iraq’s facility in 1981 cannot be duplicated and offers no useful paradigm: Iran’s 125-odd nuclear facilities (e.g., chemical plants, missile launchers, airfields and small workshops) are partly, if not largely, situated in populated areas or camouflaged from U.S. satellites, and much better protected. The Pentagon has the military capability (attack aircraft, Tomahawk and cruise missiles, B2 Stealth bombers) to knock out Iran’s dozen known nuclear sites. Stealth bombers could penetrate Iran’s space and suppress air-defense systems relatively easily. Underground facilities could be taken out with bunker-buster bombs. But military experts believe it requires hundreds of sorties over weeks of operation. Yet, despite untold civilian casualties, the strikes might not destroy Iran’s nuclear capacity, but only set it back by a few years. Nevertheless, ardent supporters of the military option, while conceding that the costs would be high, believe that they would not be as high as

the cost of a nuclear Iran.⁸⁸

The use of military force by Washington alone, or through a “coalition of the willing” also involves a range of dire consequences. First, it is most likely to face stiff resistance and retaliation from Iranian forces.⁸⁹ Tehran has already threatened Washington with a counterpunch, saying, “The U.S. may have the power to cause harm and pain” but it is also vulnerable.⁹⁰ Tehran now boasts of having recruited 40,000 volunteer suicide bombers. Iran also possesses thousands of surface-to-air missiles in range of U.S. forces in Iraq. Iranian naval and air forces could attack oil facilities and tankers in the Persian Gulf and choke off oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian navy exercises during April 2006 in the area where new weapons were tested were meant to warn against a naval blockade. Tehran may use its fifth-column assets in Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan to destabilize those countries or engage in mischief against U.S. and Israeli targets around the world.⁹¹ The Mahdi army of Moktada Sadr, closely linked to Tehran, has loyal agents in both the Iraqi police and army and can come directly to Iran’s support.⁹² Lebanese Hizballah possesses thousands of missiles based in Israel’s proximity. Military strikes are also likely to alienate not only Washington’s European allies, but also even the most moderate and pro-American groups elsewhere. Syria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and other Middle East countries with Shiite populations will witness crises and demonstrations, stirring up feelings of resentment, anger and hatred throughout the Muslim world and reinforcing the perception of an anti-Islamic Judeo-Christian conspiracy.⁹³ The Tehran government will receive a good deal of sympathy

thy and support from the Non-Aligned Movement as well.⁹⁴ There is also a presumption — although questioned by some analysts — in which Iranians of all political stripes will rally around the flag and unite behind the current leadership despite their opposition to the theocratic regime.⁹⁵ Some analysts even argue that a military strike would be a godsend for the regime as it would create ill-will against the West, enhance the system's authority, and prolong the regime's survival as a vast majority of citizens genuinely support their country's having a domestic nuclear capacity.⁹⁶ The move may actually harden Iran's resolve to pursue its nuclear programs even more diligently.⁹⁷ And there will be charges of aggression in the United Nations, based on a "unilateral, preemptive, illegal and unprovoked assault."⁹⁸ Finally, an attack on the Bushehr power plant would run the risk of many civilian casualties in addition to other collateral damage, including an environmental disaster dreaded by all U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf region. A former U.S. national security adviser believes that Washington's war with Iran would be "the end of America's present role in the world."⁹⁹ As has been pointed out by many strategic analysts, neither non-universal stiff sanctions nor military strikes short of actual invasion and occupation would be enough to topple the regime.¹⁰⁰ And even if the mullahs were defeated, which foreign government or international organization has the ability or manpower to carry out an extended occupation or to prevent a civil war? Iran of 2006 is vastly different from that of 1941, when it was easily occupied and administered with the help of a cooperating government. In short, the military option is regarded as irrational, lots of pain

for not much gain.¹⁰¹ Yet it should be kept in mind that irrationality has never in history served as insurance against wrongful acts by political daredevils.

A HARD NUT TO CRACK

Iran's nuclear program has become a vexing international drama at center stage on the global scene. The reasons are not hard to grasp. First, EU-Washington "unity" has been highly effective in converting an opaque foreign-policy matter of no interest to the man in the street in either Iran or the United States into a hot-button domestic issue. The Islamic regime, by underscoring Washington's double standards, hypocrisy and heavy-handed tactics, has been highly successful in galvanizing popular support for Iran's right to enrich uranium at home.¹⁰² In fact, with the exception of respect for Iran's territorial integrity, no other single issue has received such universal backing from Iranian citizens, including diehard opposition groups at home and abroad. In a curious mixture of national pride, anti-colonialism, and standing up to "global arrogance" (a.k.a. Washington), the nuclear program has now become a question of national sovereignty, political independence, and even inalienable rights.¹⁰³ The issue is frequently compared with Iran's success in nationalizing its oil in 1951. Western correspondents, analysts and academics visiting Iran and interviewing workers, students and housewives echo the feeling that the United States and the West are trying to keep Iran among an underclass of "nuclear have-nots" in the guise of nonproliferation. Reference is often made to Washington's "strategic hypocrisy" of saying yes to India's nukes and no to Iran's,¹⁰⁴ implying in effect that, if a country somehow manages to build a

nuclear bomb despite universal injunctions, it will eventually get away with it.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly enough, both the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference also fully back Iran's right to nuclear research and development.¹⁰⁶

Second, due to the whipped-up political frenzy in both Tehran and Washington and the consequent mutual distrust, IAEA efforts and EU-led diplomacy so far have failed to find a mutually satisfactory solution. Washington's adamant refusal to negotiate directly with "a regime that is dictatorial in its practice and revolutionary in its aims with an agenda for destabilizing neighbors and the broader Middle East"¹⁰⁷ has further complicated the dispute. The Security Council, in turn, has not been able to agree on any effective measures to induce Iran to compromise, and will probably continue to be deadlocked after the expiration of its deadline. The U.S. threat to invade Iran now has not proved credible, and, with the exception of a small coterie of rabid hawks in and out of the Bush administration, nearly everyone in both liberal and conservative camps finds military intervention a blunt instrument and war with Iran a reckless folly.¹⁰⁸ For all these reasons a number of influential opinion makers in and outside of the U.S. Congress believe that the best course of action is for Washington to enter direct talks with the Islamic Republic towards a grand bargain.¹⁰⁹ The combination of these factors has enabled Iran to ignore the West's warnings and proceed belligerently with its program. In fact, Iranian officials have hinted that Tehran may respond to international pressure by stopping cooperation with the IAEA, exporting its nuclear technology, hiding its nuclear program, withdrawing from the NPT and even

curtailing oil production.¹¹⁰

The third and most crucial reason for the impasse has been the hidden nature of the sparring partners' true agendas. For both domestic political and ideological reasons that have little to do with the threat,¹¹¹ Washington and Tehran have been reluctant to publicize their real demands and unable to meet them. As a result, both governments have engaged in a kabuki dance of dissimulation.

Washington's near obsession with the fate of Iran's nuclear program now, as compared with its blissful unconcern during the 1970s, is clearly the *nature* of the Islamic regime as Israel's arch enemy and the principal non-Arab supporter of the groups endangering Israel's security. A simple explanation of Washington's flagrant denigration of the same program today is that Iran is now perceived to be a threat to Israel, while the shah had a close de facto collaboration with the Jewish state.¹¹² For this crucial reason, there is a minority of pro-Israel groups who will not be satisfied with any solution short of depriving the Tehran government of *any* involvement in nuclear-related work, whether research, engineering or experimentation.¹¹³ As U.S. ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton told *Time*, Iran could defuse international concerns over its nuclear program by following the example of Libya¹¹⁴: abandon *all* nuclear activities and curtail its hostility toward Israel.

Tehran has its own hidden agenda in this high-stakes game. The leadership's defense of its "inalienable" rights under the NPT, its repeated denials of any nuclear-weapons ambitions, its labeling of the IAEA accusations of deception and concealment as lies have resonated with the rank and file. Feigning martyrdom,

calling the wider world to its side, invoking the “power of the meek,” claiming to be defending not just Iran’s rights but also those of other developing countries¹¹⁵ and reviving Third World laments of the ’60s have all been part of a smokescreen to hide the leaders’ mortal fear of regime change. Reflecting their distrust, they have on numerous occasions openly argued that, if they submitted to Washington’s demand for suspension of uranium enrichment, other excuses would be put on the table. American officials would subsequently raise the issues of the undemocratic structure of the government, violations of human rights, discrimination against women and minorities, absence of religious freedom, support of the Palestinian cause, bankrolling international terrorism, interference in Iraq and Afghanistan, and maybe even teaching nuclear physics at the universities — until Iran ceases hostility toward Israel and accepts the latter’s “right” to exist.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, American neocons’ open advocacy of regime change, Secretary of State Rice’s assertion that Iran is “a menace beyond the nuclear issue,”¹¹⁷ her \$75 million budget request to “promote democracy” in Iran, leaked reports about the Pentagon’s war preparations¹¹⁸ and U.S. Special Forces operations inside Iran’s ethnic minorities, full-page ads in support of Israel, and the passage of a stiff sanctions bill by the U.S. House of Representatives in late April 2006, have played into the mullahs’ hands. The price of oil has skyrocketed, and sympathy for Iran’s case has increased.

Acutely aware of the fact that, despite occasional official denials, Washington’s plan for Iran is regime change, the clerical oligarchs have decided to play the high-value cards in their hand to thwart it. The

faux nuclear card is thus played to obtain the maximum concession: a security guarantee from Washington in the form of a bilateral nonaggression pact (as requested by North Korea) or a similar commitment through other international arrangements. All indications show that Tehran’s unpublicized demand, in its formal negotiations with the EU-3 and in informal contacts with Washington from day one, has been a formal security guarantee that would offer the regime immunity against foreign threats. Keeping the West guessing about its nuclear enrichment program has been a ruse to insure the regime’s continuity and survival, even at the expense of Iran’s national interest.

IS THERE A WAY OUT?

On April 28, 2006, when the Security Council’s 30-day deadline expired, the IAEA’s director general, in a sharply worded report, told the Council that, despite the latter’s formal request, Iran has accelerated rather than curbed uranium-enrichment activities and has not provided UN inspectors with any new information. As a result, the country’s nuclear program continues to be “a matter of concern.”¹¹⁹ The report thus opened the door for a new series of Council debates over how to contain Tehran’s nuclear ambitions. The deliberations promise to be lengthy and difficult, due to both parties’ intransigence. Iran’s leadership has repeatedly said that giving up enrichment is “our red line and we will never cross it.”¹²⁰ President Bush has said the Iranian government’s “intransigence is not acceptable. The Iranians should not have a nuclear weapon, the capacity to make a nuclear weapon, or the knowledge as to how to make a nuclear weapon.”¹²¹ These parallels lines will never meet.

The international community now has five theoretical choices, none of which is attractive or satisfactory. The first is “watchful waiting,” leaving Tehran to its own devices, ignoring Ahmadinejad’s swashbuckling gestures and outrageous statements, letting Iran proceed with industrial uranium enrichment, and trying to contain the program, as in the North Korean case. The second option is to rely on continued world diplomacy i.e., furthering negotiations with the EU-3 and preferably with Washington’s participation, returning the Iran file to the atomic-energy agency in Vienna (as requested by Tehran and preferred by Russia and China) to search for some mutually satisfactory arrangements.¹²² The third alternative is for Washington and the EU-3 to invoke Chapter 7 of the UN Charter and lean on Russia and China to come up with certain legally binding and effective sanctions. Fourth, failing to get a vote out of the Security Council, Washington and the EU-3, along with “like-minded” governments, could impose their own sanctions (denying Iran such items as military equipment, dual-use technology, and foreign loans and credits). The last option would be “shock and awe,” to threaten military intervention, and ultimately engage in armed intervention.

Given the fact that no one wants to see Iran develop a nuclear-weapons capability, and considering military action “the worst of worse-case scenarios,” the second option i.e., a package of both carrots and sticks, would seem the most promising choice. It involves giving the Tehran regime some credible security assurances, removing or reducing U.S. bilateral sanctions, allowing some limited and supervised form of local enrichment, guaranteeing the

supply of nuclear fuel for Iran’s power reactors, and offering some tangible incentives to help Iran cope with its acute problems of unemployment and inflation. In exchange, Tehran would agree to a verifiable suspension of any industrial-scale enrichment at home, ratification and implementation of the Additional NPT Protocol, adoption of a noninterference policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict (including withdrawal of support from all anti-Israel groups), and full acceptance of any peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.¹²³

The chances of this package being embraced by either Tehran or Washington are not great. The Ahmadinejad government cannot easily abandon its anti-Israeli clients in the region without losing face at home and credibility in the Islamic world. Nor can the Bush administration afford to give Tehran a non-aggression pact, for an array of domestic political reasons.¹²⁴ In all probability, the Iranian strategy from now on will be to play the game and engage in interminable “diplomatic” negotiations with the IAEA in order to gain time while pursuing uranium enrichment and mastering the latest nuclear technology. The Washington-Israel strategy, in turn, would likely involve continued pressure on the international community through increasingly stiff sanctions and other punitive measures to prevent Iran from advancing in the game. Meanwhile, given politicians’ almost limitless capacity to take disastrous decisions, military intervention cannot be ruled out. Stupid provocations on the part of the Tehran government or a plausible link between Iran and a terrorist incident on U.S. soil could actually trigger a “surgical” nuclear strike by either Washington or Israel on Iran’s facilities.

On May 8, 2006, President Ahmadinejad sent an 18-page letter to President Bush hinting at the possibility of new talks. Regarded as the first direct official contact between the two countries in 27 years,¹²⁵ the letter evoked totally different reactions. The Islamic Republic's handful of ardent apologists in the United States and elsewhere praised it as bold, daring, compassionate, shrewd and full of initiatives — opening the door for an entente. Secretary of State Rice, on the other hand, said, "This letter is not the place that one would find an opening to engage on the nuclear issue or anything of that sort."¹²⁶ Indeed, the missive was a rambling, poorly drafted, and religion-laced narrative about history and philosophy with no concrete proposals on anything.¹²⁷ The Iranian president later proposed direct negotiations with the United States, but Washington stood fast in rejecting direct talks, arguing that there are plenty of channels of communication for Iran to pass information, and that the United States has no intention of making the nuclear dispute a bilateral issue.¹²⁸

With the Security Council deadlocked on any concrete and binding resolution, the EU-3, with Washington's approval, again volunteered on May 9 to come up in two weeks with a package of fresh incentives (including affordable energy and greater trade with the West) as well as an implicit threat of sanctions if Tehran refused to accept it.¹²⁹ For the moment, all options remain on the table. Those who believe that the Washington-Tehran minuet on nuclear weapons continues because the

United States has refused to join the EU in direct talks with the Tehran government, may yet prove their point. The Iranians do not care *who* delivers the goods, just *what* the *package* contains.¹³⁰ The only way to resolve the problem effectively is to find a way to satisfy both parties' hidden agendas. Under such an ideal policy, Iran, like many other Islamic states, would abstain from establishing formal diplomatic relations with Israel and would object to the latter's policies towards the Palestinians but would refrain from hostility towards the Jewish state. Israel, in turn, would tone down its hawkish rhetoric towards the Islamic Republic, stop pressuring the U.S. Congress and the EU governments to squeeze Iran, and cease its behind-the-scenes maneuvers to forestall a Washington-Tehran rapprochement.¹³¹ The key to establishing an entente between Tehran and Washington on all their disputes, including Iran's nuclear challenge, might thus be found in neither Tehran nor Washington, but in Israel's capital. A rapprochement between the new governments of Israel and for the Palestinian Authority, the establishment of an effective central government in Iraq, and improved security conditions in Afghanistan will work in favor of the West in dealing with Tehran — and vice versa. Changes in relations among the United States, Russia and China will also palpably affect the outcome, as may the upcoming elections for Iran's Experts Assembly and the U.S. Congress. In the meantime, Iran's nuclear capability remains front and center on the international stage.

¹ "Iran Declares Nuclear Advance," *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2006.

² *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2006.

³ For the allegation of Israel's influence on Washington's Iran decision, see John Mearsheimer and Stephen

Walt, "The Israel Lobby", www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06. March 21, 2006.

⁴ *Reuters*, April 29, 2006.

⁵ "It's Regime Change Again," commondreams.org/views, March 13, 2006.

⁶ *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2006.

⁷ See Dafna Linzer, "Past Arguments Do Not Square with Current Iran Policy," *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2005; and Ed Haas, "U.S. Endorsed Iranian Plans..." *Muckraker Report*, March 6, 2006.

⁸ For the latest confirmation of this position, see "Iran's Ayatollah Affirms Peaceful Nuclear Plans," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2006. See also *BBC.Persian.com*, March 9 and 13, 2006.

⁹ "Iran's President — His Own Words," *BBC News*, January 16, 2006.

¹⁰ For a full defense of Iran's position, see Javad Zarif, "We Do Not Have a Nuclear Weapons Program." *The New York Times*, April 6, 2006.

¹¹ For a brief chronicle of events, see Dafna Linzer, "Strong Leads and Dead Ends in Nuclear Case against Iran," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2006.

¹² "Europe to Offer Iran Benefits," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2005.

¹³ "Iran's Nuclear Policy Requires a Collective Response," *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2005.

¹⁴ *The New York Times*, September 25, 2005.

¹⁵ "Atomic Agency Sees Possible Link of Military to Iran Nuclear Work," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2006.

¹⁶ "Iran's Gift: New Unity in the West," *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2006.

¹⁷ "China, Russia Join Call for Iran to Suspend Nuclear Program," *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2006.

¹⁸ "U.S. Compromises on Wording of Iran Nuclear Resolution." *The New York Times*, February 4, 2006.

¹⁹ "Iranian Threatens Full Production of Nuclear Fuel," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2006.

²⁰ "Nuclear Inspections Are Curbed by Iran." *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2006.

²¹ *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2006

²² "IAEA: Iran Advancing Uranium Enrichment," *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2006.

²³ See *Washington Post*, February 28, 2006; and *The New York Times*, February 28, 2006.

²⁴ For the details of these stonewalling efforts, see *The Wall Street Journal* editorial, March 1 2006.

²⁵ See "Security Council Pressures Tehran," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2006.

²⁶ For a sample of these differences see "Russia Warns Against Fast Action on Iran,"

www.themoscowtimes.com/stories, March 20, 2006; "Envoys Remain Split on Plan Against Iran," *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2006; and "Russia Rejects U.S. Appeal on Iran," *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2006.

²⁷ *Financial Times*, February 17, 2006.

²⁸ "How We Duped the West," *Telegraph*, March 5, 2006.

²⁹ Interview with France 2 Television, *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2006.

³⁰ *Iran Times* (Washington), February 10, 2006.

³¹ See Jim Hoagland, "Iran's Gift and New Unity in the West," *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2006.

³² *The New York Times*, January 17, 2006, and January 31, 2006.

³³ "Gulf States Join Call for Tougher Action toward Iran," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2006; and "Iran's Nukes Concern Some Arab Countries." *Associated Press*, March 22, 2006.

³⁴ For a decidedly sympathetic but poorly evidenced argument about nuclear energy's "profound economic sense" for Iran, see W.O. Beeman, "Warning Signs," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 19, 2006.

³⁵ Dafna Linzer, "Strong Leads and Dead Ends", *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2006.

³⁶ For arguments for and against this motive, see Nader Habibi, "Impact of Nuclear Empowerment," payvand.com, March 22, 2006.

³⁷ David Ignatius, "An Iran Missile Crisis," *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2006.

³⁸ See "Global Jihad," www.worldnetdaily.com/news, January 10, 2006.

³⁹ Cf. Mark Helprin, "After Diplomacy Fails," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2006.

⁴⁰ See J. C. Moore, "Why Shouldn't Iran Have Nuclear Weapons?" *Independent*, April 30, 2006.

⁴¹ See T.G. Carpenter, "Dubious Assumptions about Iran," *Foxnews.com*, February 8, 2006.

⁴² "Iran Bomb Scare," *Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2006. See also *Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2006.

⁴³ info@people-press.org, February 7, 2006.

⁴⁴ Anne Penketh, "The Big Question." *Independent*, May 9, 2006.

- ⁴⁵ For a sampling of the scenarios, see Fred Kaplan, "Yes, We Should Worry About Iran," *Slate*, March 4, 2006; and "Why the World is Afraid of Iran Nukes," *Indian Express*, February 21, 2006.
- ⁴⁶ For an elaboration of these handicaps and other reasons for nonproliferation, see a maverick op-ed by B.R. Posen, "We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2006.
- ⁴⁷ See *Harvard Gazette*, March 23, 2006.
- ⁴⁸ Martin van Creveld, "Knowing How Not to Bomb Iran." www.forward.com/articles/7683, April 21, 2006.
- ⁴⁹ *Iran Times*, February 24, 2006.
- ⁵⁰ See Mark Sappenfield, *Christian Science Monitor*, April 14, 2006; and Dilip Hiro, "It Is Not Just Iran's Leaders Who Think It better to Fight and Die Than Compromise with America," www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion, March 11, 2006.
- ⁵¹ *Iran Times*, February 24, 2006.
- ⁵² Cf. sarjoman@notes.cc.sunysb.edu.
- ⁵³ *Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2006.
- ⁵⁴ *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2006.
- ⁵⁵ "Iran Incapable of N Arm," *Itar-Tass*, April 15, 2006.
- ⁵⁶ abcnews.com, March 25, 2006.
- ⁵⁷ For samplings of different estimates, see *Newsweek*, February 13, 2006; *RFE/RL*, "Iran Report," February 22, 2006; *radiofarda*, March 7, 2006; *timesonline.co.uk*, March 9, 2006; *Guardian*, March 10, 2006; and *Agence France Presse*, March 10, 2006.
- ⁵⁸ *Iran Times*, February 24, 2006.
- ⁵⁹ *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2006.
- ⁶⁰ "Iran's Nuclear Steps Quicken," *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 2006.
- ⁶¹ "Iran Claims It's Testing a New Centrifuge," *Associated Press*, April 17, 2006.
- ⁶² See "An 'Intolerable' Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 2006.
- ⁶³ *Agence France Presse*, March 25, 2006.
- ⁶⁴ *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2006.
- ⁶⁵ iran-press-service.com, March 7, 2006.
- ⁶⁶ *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2006.
- ⁶⁷ *CNN.com*, April 24, 2006.
- ⁶⁸ *CNN.Com*, April 15, 2006.
- ⁶⁹ "Iran's Nuclear Progress," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2006.
- ⁷⁰ *BBC Persian.com*, March 14, 2006
- ⁷¹ For the sources of all these statements, see *IranMania*, March 14, 21, and 26, 2006.
- ⁷² Associated Press, May 7, 2006.
- ⁷³ *IranMania*, February 19, 2006.
- ⁷⁴ See The Congressional Research Service, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," May 3, 2006.
- ⁷⁵ *Reuters*, April 21, 2006.
- ⁷⁶ *The New York Times*, January 18, 2006.
- ⁷⁷ For a detailed discussion of these factors see F. W. Engdahl, "A High Risk Game of Nuclear Chicken," *Asia Times*, January 31, 2006.
- ⁷⁸ See "A Financial Hit on Iran," *Time*, May 1, 2006.
- ⁷⁹ *The New York Times*, January 20, 2006.
- ⁸⁰ Several interviews with French radio stations reported in *Iran Times*, February 24, 2006.
- ⁸¹ Carne Ross, "Could Sanctions Stop Iran," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2006.
- ⁸² J.P. Gundzik, "Risky Business," <http://atimes.com>, May 11, 2006.
- ⁸³ According to a recent poll, 57 percent of Americans favored military intervention to stop Iran building a bomb. *Times*, February 7, 2006.
- ⁸⁴ See Angus Reid Global Scan, *CBS News*, May 8, 2006; and www.zogby.com/news, May 11, 2006.
- ⁸⁵ E.S. Clark, "Slouching Towards Tehran," *TomPaine.com*, May 4, 2006.
- ⁸⁶ Mark Steyn, "Facing Down Iran," *City Journal*, Spring 2006. See also Ilan Berman, "Preempting Iran's Ambitions," *Washington Times*, March 3, 2006; and R.M. Gerecht, "To Bomb or Not to Bomb," *Weekly Standard*, April 24, 2006.
- ⁸⁷ E. N. Luttwak, "In a Single Night," *Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2006.

- ⁸⁸ Michael Robin, "Nuclear Hostage Crisis," *Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2006.
- ⁸⁹ Supreme Leader Khamenei has already warned that "American interests around the world will be harmed if the United States launches an attack on the Islamic Republic," *VOA News*, April 26, 2006; and *Washington Post*, April 27, 2006.
- ⁹⁰ Molly Moore, "Iran Threatens U.S. With 'Harm and Pain'," *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2006.
- ⁹¹ Richard Clarke and Steven Simon, "Bombs that Would Backfire," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2006.
- ⁹² "Iraqi Shiite Cleric Pledges to Defend Iran," *The Washington Post*, January 24, 2006.
- ⁹³ Cf. Anwaar Hussain, "Dear Neo-Cons," *baltimorechronicle.com*, February 7, 2006.
- ⁹⁴ Polls taken earlier this year by Aljazeera TV and Zogby International reportedly indicate that a large majority of the population in Moslem countries, e.g., Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, find Iran's access to nuclear technology in their interest, and are adamantly opposed to any Western restrictions on Iran's pursuit of peaceful nuclear energy. *Hamshahri*, February 22, 2006; and *www.emrouz.info*, March 17, 2006.
- ⁹⁵ For a sample of these views, see Michael Slackman, "Nuclear Dispute Arouses Patriotism among Iranians," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2006.
- ⁹⁶ Scott Bohlinger, "America's Options for Iran," *Asia Times*, March 19, 2006.
- ⁹⁷ David Sanger, "Why Not A Strike on Iran," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2006.
- ⁹⁸ *commondreams.org/views*. March 4, 2006.
- ⁹⁹ *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2006.
- ¹⁰⁰ For objections to bombing see E. N. Luttwak, "Three Reasons Not to Bomb Iran," *Commentary*, May 2006.
- ¹⁰¹ David Isenberg, "What We Know about Iran," *www.tompaine.com/articles*. April 25, 2006.
- ¹⁰² A recent semiofficial poll of nearly 16,000 citizens showed that 76.8 percent back the regime's current nuclear stance. See RFE/RL, *Iran Report*, March 23, 2006. Other polls suggest that more than 80 percent of the public supports Iran's decision to use its full right under the NPT, which is all the government says it has in mind. See John Daniszewski "Iranians Defend Nuclear Rights," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2006.
- ¹⁰³ For a sampling of public sentiments, see a panel discussion at *www.radiofarda.com*, March 7, 2006.
- ¹⁰⁴ "Good Nukes, Bad Nukes," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2006.
- ¹⁰⁵ See C.A. Robbins, "Explosive Test," *Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2006. For a similar "double-standard" criticism, see "Iran's Best Friend," *New York Times* editorial, March 5, 2006.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 8, 2006; and *IranMania*, March 10, 2006.
- ¹⁰⁷ "Bush Adviser Dismisses Call for Talks with Iran," *IranMania*, April 24, 2006.
- ¹⁰⁸ See two views from opposite camps: Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Been There, Done That," *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 2006; and Thomas Joscelyn, "Iran War on the West," *Weekly Standard*, April 21, 2006.
- ¹⁰⁹ For a sample, see S.R. Burger, "Talk to Tehran," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2006; Glenn Kessler, "U.S. Under Pressure to Stop Talk to Tehran," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2006.
- ¹¹⁰ "Iran Hints at Exiting Nuclear Treaty," *Associated Press*, April 24, 2006; and "Iran Raises Stakes," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2006.
- ¹¹¹ "The method behind Iran's madness," *Taipei Times*, April 20, 2006.
- ¹¹² See *pacificnews.org/news/view*, February 3, 2006.
- ¹¹³ See George Melloan, "Getting Serious about Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2006.
- ¹¹⁴ *Yahoo! News*, February 19, 2006.
- ¹¹⁵ President Ahmadinejad's statement at Jakarta, *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2006.
- ¹¹⁶ "Iran Digs In," *IranMania*, March 9, 2006; and "Tehran Stands Firm," RFE/RL, *Iran Report*, March 17, 2006.
- ¹¹⁷ *Associated Press*, March 28, 2006.
- ¹¹⁸ Seymour Hersh, "The Iran Plan," *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2006.
- ¹¹⁹ "Report Sets Stage for Action on Iran," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2006.
- ¹²⁰ "Iran's Strategy: Cold War Echo," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2006.
- ¹²¹ "U.N. Agency Says Iran Falls Short on Nuclear Data," *New York Times*, April 29 and April 30, 2006.
- ¹²² Tehran has already indicated that it would allow UN inspectors full access if the dossier was returned to the IAEA. But Washington has rejected the offer.
- ¹²³ For a sample of such proposals, see "Iran," *International Crisis Group*, February 23, 2006.

¹²⁴ See Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Nuclear Dilemma," *Middle East Economic Survey*, April 7, 2006.

¹²⁵ *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2006.

¹²⁶ "No Proposals in Iranian's Letter to Bush," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2006.

¹²⁷ For a quick look at the letter's main points see "Will You Not Accept This Invitation?" *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2006.

¹²⁸ See U.S. State Department spokesman, reported by Agency France Press, May 22, 2006.

¹²⁹ "Europeans Work on New Anti-Nuclear Deal for Iran," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2006.

¹³⁰ Dennis Ross, "A New Strategy on Iran," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2006.

¹³¹ See Trita Parsi, "A Modus Vivendi between Jerusalem and Tehran," *Forward Forum*, March 17, 2006.