

MANAGING NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – CHAPTER 4

CURRENT U.S. EFFORTS to stop Iran's nuclear program have failed. Fortunately, however, because of technical limits, Iran appears to be two to three years away from building an enrichment facility capable of producing sufficient weapons-grade uranium quickly enough to support a credible nuclear weapons option. As a consequence, the Obama administration will likely have some breathing space to develop a new diplomatic approach to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. Part of this new approach should involve direct and unconditional talks between the United States and Iran on a range of bilateral issues, as well as formal nuclear negotiations between Iran and the EU-3 plus 3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, plus China, Russia, and the United States). To make these negotiations effective, the new administration should seek agreement among the EU-3 plus 3 to support stronger political and economic sanctions if Iran rejects an offer to resolve the nuclear issue and improve bilateral relations with the United States. Faced with more attractive inducements and the prospect of more serious sanctions, the Iranian regime might be persuaded to limit its nuclear activities below the threshold of a nuclear breakout capability.

If this new diplomatic effort fails to stop Iran from achieving completion of a nuclear breakout capability (that is, the ability to produce significant amounts of weapons-grade uranium), the United States will face a difficult choice: It could accept Iran as a nuclear-capable state with a breakout option and try to build firebreaks to prevent Iran from actually producing such material (and building nuclear weapons). If that fails, the United States could attempt to contain and deter a nuclear-armed Iran, while seeking to discourage oth-

ers in the region from developing nuclear weapons. Or the United States could decide to attack Iran's nuclear facilities in an attempt to damage and set back Iran's breakout capability. But that choice has uncertain prospects for success and very high likelihood of wider conflict and instability. Complicating this dilemma is Israel, which faces a perceived existential threat and could decide to take matters into its own hands even before the United States has decided that the course of diplomacy has been exhausted. Neither an American nor an Israeli military option is likely to produce sufficient gain to be worth the potential costs, but, paradoxically, without a credible military threat, Iran is much less likely to make nuclear concessions that meet U.S. requirements. Therefore, the Obama administration will want Iran to believe that it is prepared to use force if Iran rejects a diplomatic solution.

To prepare for dealing with these difficult choices—and mitigating the downsides of whatever decision is taken—the Obama administration will need early on to begin a quiet discussion with countries, especially Israel and the Arab Gulf states, which will be most directly affected by a nuclear-armed Iran. Iran is already a dangerous adversary and a nuclear-capable or -armed Iran would be more dangerous. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it is likely to behave like other nuclear weapons states, trying to intimidate its foes, but not recklessly using its weapons, nor giving them to terrorists, if faced with a credible threat of retaliation by the United States. While a nuclear Iran will prompt a regional nuclear arms race—indeed it already has begun—none of the Arab states has a capability to develop an indigenous weapons program for at least a decade.¹ American diplomacy will have an opportunity to shape

¹ For example, see the International Institute of Strategic Studies report, *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East: In the Shadow of Iran* (London: 2008), which comes to the same conclusion.

the regional reaction to a nuclear Iran but will also be constrained by the universal perception of inconsistency in its handling of the Israeli nuclear arsenal. If diplomacy or force fails to prevent Iran from acquiring

nuclear weapons, a declared U.S. nuclear umbrella for the region or parts of it should be a key mechanism for deterring Iran, reassuring Israel, and incorporating our other allies into an effective regional balance.