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Bringing Iran to the Bargaining Table

KENNETH M. POLLACK

Iran’s interest in nuclear weapons is both wide and deep, but it is not adamant. The issue, as always in politics, is not whether Iran wants to see its nuclear program through to completion, but what it would be willing to sacrifice to keep it. On this matter, I believe the Iranians would be willing to sacrifice a fair amount, but not everything. This suggests that convincing Iran to give up its nuclear program is going to require considerable inducements, both positive and negative, but that doing so is not impossible.

The events of this past summer, unfortunately, appear to have strengthened the hand of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Iran’s radical hard-liners. The continued deterioration in the US position in Iraq, coupled with the seeming “victory” (at least in the minds of Arab publics) of the Iran-backed Hezbollah militia in the Israel-Lebanon conflict, has made Tehran feel more secure in stiffening the international community. Iranian leaders seem confident that, with the US military bogged down in Iraq and the American people unsupportive of that mission, Washington would not dare attack them.

Likewise, Hezbollah’s “victory” appears to have proved the hard-liners’ contention that Iran could adopt an aggressive strategy in the region that would raise their country’s standing without undermining its position in the UN Security Council on the nuclear program. Indeed, Russia and China seem *less* willing now to sanction Iran than they were at the beginning of the summer.

In addition, the regime has done a good job with the Iranian public in building the case that the nuclear program is peaceful, and that United Nations efforts to block it are nothing but another Anglo-American plot to keep Iran from enjoying

its rightful place in the international hierarchy. As a result, Iran’s more pragmatic leaders seem to have little to stand on, and thus the likelihood of Iran compromising seems low in the near term.

That said, the importance of hewing to the diplomatic line for as long as it offers any reasonable hope of success is trebled by the poverty of the alternatives. In particular, a military operation against Iran would be anything but the surgical strike some of its proponents claim. Instead, it would require a massive campaign against a range of targets. It would inevitably provoke an Iranian asymmetric response—terror attacks or piling on the insurgency in Iraq, where the United States can ill afford additional problems—which in turn would require further retaliatory military strikes by the United States.

And because the initial operation might only set Iran’s nuclear program back by two to four years, Washington would have to be ready to mount additional strikes whenever the Iranians began reconstituting their program. Without greater certainty of success, a protracted diplomatic struggle, and even a drawn-out contest of wills over sanctions, would be far preferable to another open-ended conflict in the Middle East.

LIVING WITH ENEMIES

Setting aside the question of whether Iran is determinedly seeking actual nuclear weapons or simply the capability to produce fissile material (and thereby be in a position to acquire the weapons themselves rapidly), there are ample reasons why Iranians might want nuclear arms.

The first reason is deterrence. It has become a cliché in the United States to note that Iran lives in a tough neighborhood. Iranian leaders in Tehran can objectively look beyond their country’s borders and see a wide range of potential threats, including chaos and civil war in Iraq or Afghanistan, a nuclear-armed Pakistan, Israel over the horizon, and American forces arrayed along Iran’s borders.

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Moreover, Tehran's relations are strained or antagonistic with many of its neighbors, and even those with correct relations with the Islamic Republic tend to view it with considerable suspicion. Thus, the Iranians can honestly point to serious concerns about their security, although the fact that their own actions have been responsible for much of the animosity they face is probably lost on most of them.

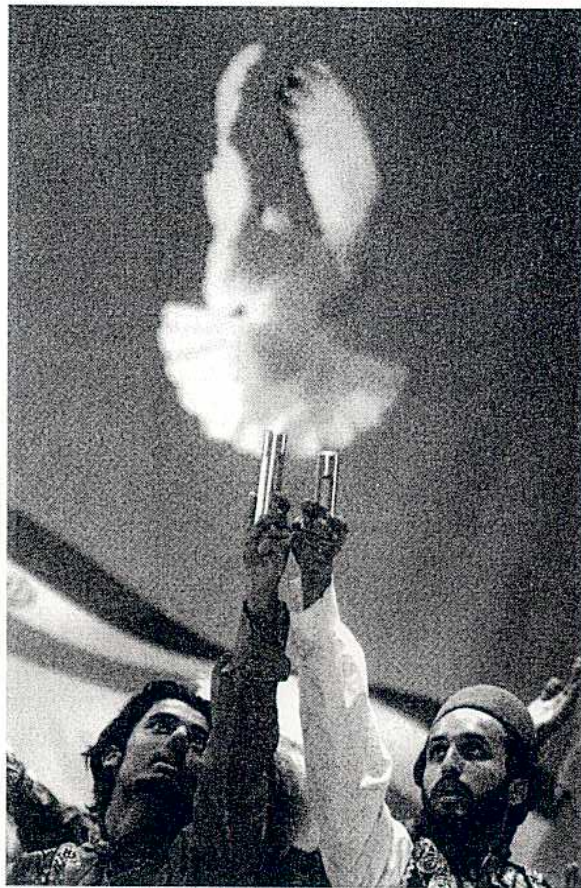
From an Iranian perspective, possession of nuclear weapons makes sense for purely defensive purposes. While nuclear weapons cannot solve all of Iran's security problems, they can solve some, and in so doing might make dealing with the rest much easier. At the most extreme, Iran is unlikely to be able to deter a determined American military operation without a nuclear arsenal. This lesson has no doubt been driven home to the Iranians by the divergent experiences of Iraq and North Korea, the two other members of President George W. Bush's "axis of evil."

North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, and so the United States has not attacked it and is being forced to engage with Pyongyang. Saddam Hussein's Iraq did not possess nuclear weapons—but was believed to be trying to acquire them—and so the United States was willing to invade and overturn the Baathist regime. It is hard to imagine that the leadership in Tehran did not see this as a very simple set of reinforcing conclusions: if you have nuclear weapons, the United States will not dare use force against you, but if you do not, you are vulnerable.

PERSIAN PRIDE

Prestige is a second reason why Iran would want nuclear weapons. The Iranians see themselves as the lineal descendants of a 2,500-year-old civilization that bequeathed to the world its first super-

power (the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great, Darius, and Xerxes) and a long string of great powers that stretched from the Parthians and the Sassanids to the Safavids. Only recently has Persian power been supplanted in the region by European and now American power. A great many Iranians believe that their country's history, experience, and natural resources mandate for it a role as one of the world's great powers and the dominant force in Southwest Asia and the Persian Gulf.



Cheers

Performers hold up samples of enriched uranium as part of a celebration of Iran's nuclear program.

To the legacy of Persia's imperial greatness can be added the pride of the Islamic Revolution. Since 1978 it has reinforced to many Iranians the sense that their nation has been marked by destiny to play a leading—perhaps "the" leading—role in the region and the Islamic world. Although many Iranians have soured on the revolution, others continue to see it as vital to Iran's global mission, and many more still see it as another sign that Iran should be the region's intellectual, diplomatic, and military hegemon.

Persian pride appears to be a motivation in Iran's pursuit of nuclear enrichment capability, if not actual nuclear weapons. Acquiring nuclear arms would give Iran a status that only a few other

nations possess. It would immediately catapult Iran into the "major leagues" of world politics. It would likely force other states to pay more attention to Iran's aspirations and wishes.

Here the recent model that seems to stand out in the minds of many Iranians is India. Its development of nuclear weapons—and their acceptance by the international community—has been a critical element in New Delhi's elevation to one of the great powers of the world, a power whose views should be considered on any matter of importance. Since this is the position to which many Iranians seem to aspire, matching India in the nuclear realm also appears to be a self-evident necessity for Iran.

EXPORTING THE REVOLUTION

For at least some Iranians, typically referred to as the “radical hard-liners,” Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s dream of exporting Iran’s Islamic revolution to the rest of the Muslim world (and possibly even beyond) constitutes yet another motive for acquiring nuclear arms. Throughout the 1980s and, to a lesser extent, during the early 1990s, Iran tried to realize this dream by attempting to subvert reactionary Middle Eastern governments and assist would-be revolutionaries in those same countries. Iranian efforts in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and even Lebanon were all motivated to some degree by this goal.

However, Iran’s efforts in these countries triggered the animosity of the United States. In at least one case—America giving assistance to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War—this animosity prompted limited but direct US military intervention against Iran. In Lebanon, Iranian actions were part of what inspired American intervention in that country. In Saudi Arabia, Iranian activities sparked other aggressive US responses, as well as prompting debate in Washington over whether to mount retaliatory military actions against the Islamic Republic.

For some Iranians, the goal of exporting revolution is thus linked to the goal of waging war against the United States, and this adds to the motivation to obtain nuclear weapons. Proponents of this view continue to see the world as Khomeini described it: as a battle between the forces of good, represented by Iran, and the forces of evil, represented by America. In this worldview, Iran will not just face endless attack by the United States; it will also confront constant opposition from the Americans to its efforts to export Islamic revolution. Therefore, Iran must have the power to drive American influence out of the region and prevent the United States from blocking Iran’s efforts to achieve its destiny.

For Iranians holding either or both of these more offensive rationales—exporting revolution and battling America—acquisition of nuclear weapons would appear to be vital. It represents the only sure way to limit or preclude an American military response against Iranian asymmetric warfare, terrorism, and subversion against the United States and its conservative allies in the region.

MOTIVATIONS VERSUS PRIORITIES

The Iranians clearly have a range of powerful motivations, strategic, ideological, and psychological, for desiring an arsenal of nuclear weapons—or at least the capability to manufacture such weap-

ons in short order. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to confuse motivations with a universal and indomitable determination to achieve this goal. The history of the past 60 years demonstrates that other states with equal or greater strategic need, ideological justification, or psychological desire for nuclear weapons ultimately chose not to pursue them or to give up their pursuit midstream.

In the 1960s it was considered a foregone conclusion that Egypt would develop a nuclear weapon. Indeed, that nation’s strategic and psychological incentives were even more compelling than Iran’s are today. Egypt was locked in a conflict with a nuclear-armed Israel that resulted in four mostly disastrous wars (for Egypt) in 25 years, and Cairo aspired to be the “leader of the Arab world.” Yet Egypt shut down its nuclear weapons program entirely of its own volition because the leadership in Cairo concluded that it had higher priorities than the pursuit of nuclear weapons was undermining.

Italy, Australia, Sweden, Japan, and South Korea considered developing nuclear weapons at various times, and the Italians and Australians actually made considerable progress toward that goal. However, all of them decided that nuclear arms would be counterproductive in relation to other, higher priorities, and that they could find ways to deal with their security problems (including even South Korea) through other means.

In the early 1990s, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan went even further, voluntarily surrendering the nuclear arsenals they had inherited from the Soviet Union. Although many Western academic strategists believed that they were insane to do so, all three recognized that the security benefits from possessing nuclear weapons were outweighed by the diplomatic and economic benefits of giving them up. Strong economies and good relations with the rest of the world were of far greater importance to them.

Finally, there is the case of Libya, long one of the Middle East’s worst rogue states. In December 2003 it agreed to terminate its nuclear program after 10 years of UN sanctions convinced Muammar Qadhafi that his pursuit of the bomb was not worth the devastation of Libya’s economy and international relationships.

These examples demonstrate that it is entirely possible for the international community to dissuade states from trying to acquire nuclear weapons and even persuade them to give them up, even when those states have compelling strategic rationales for possessing the weapons. In every case,

the key has been to create a powerful set of incentives and disincentives geared to the priorities of the state in question.

A DIVIDED LEADERSHIP

Iran's political leadership is divided over its nuclear program in important ways. While the available evidence suggests that most Iranian leaders would like at least a nuclear weapons capability (if not the weapons themselves), it also indicates that they differ widely in the priority they ascribe to this goal. For instance, in an interview in 2002, the Iranian minister of defense, Ali Shamkhani, warned that the "existence of nuclear weapons will turn us into a threat to others that could be exploited in a dangerous way to harm our relations with the countries of the region."

More important still, former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has warned that "If there [are] domestic and foreign conflicts, foreign capital will not flow into the country. In fact, such conflicts will lead to the flight of capital from this country." Statements like these demonstrate that important Iranian leaders do not regard possession of nuclear weapons as an unvarnished blessing or Iran's highest priority.

The same appears to hold true for Iranian public opinion, as best we can discern it. When Iranians took to the polls in the spring of 2005 to elect a new president, they did not vote for Ahmadinejad because he was determined to acquire nuclear weapons. They voted for him because he promised to reform Iran's economy and curb the rampant corruption that is the principal blight on the economy. Anecdotal evidence has repeatedly confirmed that for the Iranian people, "it's the economy, stupid."

Of course, many average Iranians continue to voice their support for Iran's nuclear program and even for acquisition of nuclear weapons. But stated in a vacuum—that is, without regard for potential trade-offs—such sentiments are meaningless. As a friend of mine, a Swedish diplomat, put it to me, "If you were to ask Swedes whether Sweden should have a nuclear weapon most of them would probably say 'yes' too, until you told them that it would come at the cost of isolation or even sanctions."

What is more, the Iranian regime appears to be well aware of this. Supreme Leader Ali Khame-

nei and his allies have tried hard to steer clear of policy paths that would cause Iran's European and Japanese trading partners to impose economic sanctions on Tehran, even saying in 2003 that they were willing to agree to suspend Iran's nuclear program to avoid such a fate.

It is noteworthy that, while President Ahmadinejad and his hard-line colleagues in Iran's foreign ministry regularly reject foreign overtures to deal with Iran's nuclear program, Khamenei's people have just as frequently contradicted the hardliners by announcing a willingness to negotiate. It was Ahmadinejad's foreign ministry, for example, that rejected a Russian proposal in 2005 to allow Iran to enrich uranium at Russian facilities. Yet days later National Security Adviser (and Khamenei protégé) Ali Larijani accepted the Russian offer to start a dialogue on this proposal (albeit almost certainly in an effort to drag out talks, postpone UN Security Council action, and possibly harden Russia's support for Tehran's position).

It is also important to note that the regime itself has scrupulously maintained that the nuclear pro-

gram is about securing Iran's energy needs (so that it can export more oil and gas) and developing a high-technology industry. While there are a number of logical and evidentiary problems with these claims, what is critical is that they are designed to portray the nuclear program as necessary to Iran's economy, not its security. Indeed, Tehran is so paranoid about this that it temporarily evicted CNN's bureau from Iran when a CNN interpreter mistranslated "nuclear power" as "nuclear weapons" in a speech by Ahmadinejad. This too makes it clear that the regime shares the belief that if the Iranian people were ever forced to choose between the nuclear program and their country's economic health, they likely would choose the latter.

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

Convincing Iran to give up its nuclear program is going to be tough. The Iranians are not going to do so willingly. But it is also clear that doing so should not be impossible, because for some Iranians—both the bulk of the people and important members of the regime—nuclear weapons are desirable, perhaps even important, but neither essential nor even their first priority.

The evidence suggests that Iran is more like Libya: difficult, but hardly impossible to convince.

Another comparison is useful to illustrate this point. North Korea's calculus regarding nuclear weapons was clearly different from Iran's. For Pyongyang, its nuclear weapons program was its highest priority, and it was willing to tolerate hardships that few other countries (including even Iran) would be willing to. Ultimately, North Korea accepted the devastation of its economy, the impoverishment of its citizenry, and the starvation deaths of 3 million of its people to hold onto its nuclear weapons program.

If the same could be said about Iran then it probably would be impossible to convince Tehran to give up its nuclear program. However, there is no Iranian or Iran expert who believes that this is the case. There is absolutely no evidence that Tehran is willing to tolerate the extremes of sacrifice that North Korea did. Instead, the evidence suggests that Iran is more like Libya: difficult, but hardly impossible to convince.

The key is for the United States and its allies to compel the Iranians to choose between their nuclear program and their highest priority—their economic well-being. How? Briefly, this would involve a multilateral sanctions regime that would gradually shut down Western investment in Iran, particularly its gas and oil sectors, in response to continued Iranian recalcitrance. Even with oil prices above \$60 per barrel, Iran is desperate for Western investment capital because corruption is sucking the oil revenues out of the system, thus reducing their impact on the overall economy. Despite the claims of some that Russia and China could make up for any loss of capital from Europe and Japan, their economies are still roughly a decade away from being in a position to do so.

Simultaneously, as Western nations did with the Libyans, in return for Iran agreeing to abandon its nuclear program and to do so in a verifiable fashion, the West (or the UN Security Council) would offer Tehran a package of incentives much larger than those proposed so far. These could include admission to the World Trade Organization and integration into the global economy; a lifting of US economic sanctions (assuming that, like Libya, Iran renounced terrorism as well); a universal settlement of all outstanding claims; investment guarantees to make investing in Iran more attractive for Western companies; provision of properly safeguarded light water reactors; terms for giving Tehran access to nuclear enrichment technology (without the feedstock materials, the equipment, or the spent fuel); and security guarantees.

Ideally, the incentives would also include a new security architecture in the Persian Gulf similar to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This would allow Iran to address its legitimate security concerns through a peaceful process of dialogue and, eventually, arms control.

Presenting such a package would make clear to the Iranian people and their leadership that their country really did have just two choices. They could retain their nuclear program (and their support for terrorism) and they would become an international outcast and have their economy slowly crippled by sanctions. Or they could give these up and enjoy all the benefits of the international community.

BIG CARROTS AND STICKS

In light of Iranian motives and priorities, two caveats apply. First, the package would have to make very clear that all Iran has to give up is its pursuit of nuclear weapons—not nuclear energy or nuclear technology—to get all of the benefits promised. Any ambiguity here would allow Iran's hard-liners to continue to proffer the canard that Iran's nuclear program is about its economy, thus engaging Iran's highest priority and making it less likely that the Iranian people would favor the bargain.

Second, both the carrots and the sticks employed by the international community would have to be very big. Iran has major strategic, ideological, and psychological equities attached to its nuclear program and it will not budge easily. Small carrots, like those offered by President Bush on March 10, 2005—admission to the World Trade Organization and sale of spare parts for Boeing passenger aircraft—or simply deals for nuclear reactors and technology, are probably not going to be adequate. The Iranian people will have to believe that a huge pot of gold waits at the end of the rainbow, especially if they are going to be able to help Iran's more pragmatic leaders defeat Tehran's hard-liners in what is likely to be a tough internal political battle.

Similarly, no one should be under the misimpression that Iran will accept such a deal without the threat of serious economic sanctions. Indeed, it seems likely that the international community, or merely the West acting outside the United Nations in multilateral fashion, will have to impose strong sanctions on Iran and keep them in place for some time before Tehran accedes. It took 10 years for Libya to come to terms, although the Libya sanctions were relatively light as far as sanctions go.

Throughout the 1990s, European countries threatened Iran with sanctions for its bad behavior but never followed through on their threats no matter how outrageous Iran's behavior. Consequently, it appears that Iran does not believe that the Europeans will be willing to impose such sanctions, let alone maintain them for very long. This is the root of Tehran's current strategy of brinkmanship: the Iranians seem certain that, in the end, the Europeans will balk—and when that happens, the crisis will be over and they can go back to both pursuing nuclear weapons and enjoying trade and investment from Europe.

The Iranian strategy is to give on nothing and force the Europeans either to make good on their threats or, as Tehran seems to believe, admit that they are bluffing. For this reason, the Iranians are probably going to have to see the Europeans actu-

ally impose meaningful sanctions and be willing to hold them in place for some time before Tehran believes the Europeans mean business.

None of this is terribly heartening, but neither should it be cause to lose hope. The stakes are certainly high. A nuclear-armed Iran, though it might well be contained, could hardly be considered non-threatening. It will always be difficult to convince states like Iran, which have a range of important rationales for pursuing a nuclear capability, to give up that capability. And yet, few things in the worlds of politics and diplomacy are impossible. There is good reason to believe that Iran can be dissuaded from its current course if the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia can forge a common position and make clear to Iran that pursuit of a nuclear weapon will cost the country what most Iranians value most. ■

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