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Consideration of the preventative military option against Iran is premised on a threat assessment of Iran's potential nuclear capability and its intentions. While much attention is given to competing analyses of the progress of Iranian uranium enrichment and development of a nuclear device, the debate about Iranian intentions receives a short shrift in comparison.¹ Analysis of Iran's intentions begins with the cognitive and theoretical models we use to understand Iran's foreign policy decision-making.² Policy analysts must consider the motivations behind the Iranian nuclear program, Iran's foreign policy ambitions, and its decision-making process.

In the West, analysis of Iran's decision-making is often clouded by biases and false assumptions generated by the rocky historical experience with the revolutionary regime and by the distorting framework of the so-called "War on Terrorism." A number of unwarranted assumptions go unquestioned in many assessments of Iranian intentions: that power is increasingly and dangerously consolidated, that Iranian leaders are unstable and insane, that public rhetoric by leadership reflects state intentions, and that religious and millenarian concepts motivate foreign policy. Examined and reconsidered, Iran's behavior appears increasingly rational, and the option of the United States' engagement with Iran becomes more plausible and advantageous.

The policy debate about Iran's nuclear program has been stunted and characterized by uncertainty. Estimates of Iran's present and future capability vary widely, and the analysis of its intentions and decision-making process is limited and unsophisticated.³ Moreover, the policy

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1. SHAHRAM CHUBIN, *IRAN'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS* 10-13 (Carnegie Endowment for Int'l Peace ed., 2006).

2. Richard K. Herrmann & Michael P. Fischerkeller, *Beyond the Enemy Image and Spiral Model: Cognitive-Strategic Research after the Cold War*, 49 INT'L ORG. 415-50 (1995).

3. Lionel Beehner, *The Iran Intelligence Gap*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

recommendations produced by major think tanks and scholars appear to be uniquely uncertain and hesitant.⁴ While there appears to be a basic consensus that the Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons represents a threat to the United States, the precise description of the offensive threat is rather vague. While a number of individuals and groups have boldly asserted that Iran actually desires war with the West, others focus more hazily on the potential for blackmail and the transfer of nuclear weapons to terrorists.

However, both threat impact assessments assume that Iran has an offensive intent and its purported identity as a revisionist power will inherently trigger a clash with the West and its allies in the Middle East. Depicting Iran in this manner, advocacy of engagement with Iran has been described as "appeasement," and some commentators have directly made comparisons between Iran and Nazi Germany under Hitler.⁵ With the 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, some foreign analysts have used the narrative of an aggressive and unstable anti-Western leader to assert the necessity of immediate action to counter Iran's nuclear program.⁶ This narrative echoes other narratives used to justify war in the past, including the 1986 bombing of Libya⁷ and the 1991 Gulf War.

While there is no denying that Ahmadinejad's election and the rhetoric and behavior of the current regime indicate a number of worrisome trends in Iran, many of the underlying assumptions of the "threat narrative" are problematic. Ahmadinejad's election has not completely transformed Iranian political institutions and many of the institutions involved in Iranian foreign policy decision-making were already misunderstood before his emergence. This article will attempt to reconsider and dispute a number of the problematic assumptions we see as embedded within the most common threat assessments.

First, it is a mistake to assume that the decision-making process in Iran has become more centralized. The outside perception of an organized

BACKGROUND, May 11, 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10663/>.

4. James Jay Carafano, John C. Hulsman, & James Phillips, *Countering Iran's Nuclear Challenge*, HERITAGE FOUNDATION BACKGROUNDER NO. 1903, Dec. 14, 2005, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/bg1903.cfm>.

5. Stephen Koff, *Voinovich calls Iran Leader "Hitler-type"*, THE PLAIN DEALER, Sept. 20, 2006, at A4; Herb Keinon, *Livni Blasts Iran at U.N.*, THE JERUSALEM POST, Sept. 21, 2006, at 2.

6. Alan Caruba, *Only Bombing Can End Iran's Nuclear Capabilities*, THE ATLANTA J.-CONSTITUTION, Jan. 18, 2006, at 15A.

7. Noam Chomsky, *The U.S. and the Middle East*, 16 J. OF PALESTINE STUD. 25, 40-41 (1987); Jochen Schulte-Sasse and Linda Schulte-Sasse, *War, Otherness, and Illusionary Identifications with the State*, 19 CULTURAL CRITIQUE 67, 85-88 (1991); Joe Stork, *Mad Dogs and Presidents*, 140 MERIP MIDDLE EAST REPORT 6, 6-7 (1986).

push toward nuclear weapons has made some assume that there is a central force propelling the nuclear program with some malevolent aim. The specific claims take different forms. Some assert that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei still represents a single theocratic leader desiring to destroy the "Great Satan."⁸ Others, interpreting the election and behavior of Ahmadinejad, have expressed the view that he is a radical leader with increasingly consolidated power attempting to move Iran toward aggressive military action.⁹ In actuality, however, the Iranian regime structure is much more complex.

There are a number of different institutions and groups that have input in decision-making, and President Ahmadinejad has nothing even close to solid control. Numerous Iran studies experts have recently stressed, for example, that Ahmadinejad has difficulty controlling the very institutions explicitly designated under his authority.¹⁰ The Iranian political structure is notoriously baroque and multi-layered, and there are multiple checks against a single individual attempting to assert control.¹¹ While these multiple nodes will often demonstrate contradictory behavior, with one node or agent engaging in threatening rhetoric or behavior, extrapolating a single coherent policy is difficult. Even if we concede that ideological hardliners are gaining power over reformists in certain institutions, we should not assume the so-called "hardliners" are committed to conflict. There are differences within the group loosely described as "hardliners," and many in the cohort now have economic and pragmatic interests that make them more risk averse.¹² The frequently-used division between

8. *What Makes Tehran Tick?: Options for Israel and the USA to Prevent a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, IRAN POL'Y COMM., WHITE PAPER NO. 4, May 9, 2006, at 6, http://www.iranpolicy.org/images/stories/may_10pressconference/what_makes_tehran_tick_may_12_2006.pdf [hereinafter IRAN POL'Y COMM., WHITE PAPER NO. 4].

9. Steven Lee Myers & Ilan Greenberg, *Balancing Act: U.S. Welcomes Kazakh Leader*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 28, 2006, at A1; Ray Takeyh, *Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Ambitions: Four Approaches: Continued Pressure Could Backfire*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Mar. 13, 2006, at 9.

10. Abbas William Samii, *Despite Domestic Waves, Iran Will Keep Its President*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Dec. 9, 2005, at 9.

11. CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 37; see generally WILFRIED BUCHTA, WHO RULES IRAN? THE STRUCTURE OF POWER IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC (2000); MEHDI MOSLEM, FACTIONAL POLITICS IN POST-KHOMEINI IRAN 266-70 (2002).

12. For example, such "hardline" newspapers as *Kayhan* and *Jomhuri Eslami* and the Internet site *Baztab* (close to Mohsen Rezaei, the former Commander of the Revolutionary Guards and present Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council) have recently criticized Ahmadinejad for his provocative rhetoric that has not served Iran's national interest well. See Foad Sadeghi, *From Inaction to Extremism: A Study of Four Stages in Iran's Nuclear File*, BAZTAB, Jan. 10, 2007, available at <http://www.en.baztab.com/content/?cid=162>; Behrouz Javedani, *Jenab Rais Jomhour, Lotfan Kami Negaran Bashid (Dear Mr. President, Please Be a Little Concerned)*, BAZTAB,

“pragmatists” and “hardliners” still has some utility as a starting point, but it is increasingly difficult to isolate the precise interests of individuals within these groupings.¹³

Even though Ahmadinejad uses foreign policy issues to gain authority, his greatest immediate challenge lies in the stated domestic agenda of improving the economy and reducing inequality.¹⁴ Unlike as in completely totalitarian regimes, Ahmadinejad is directly subject to public criticism from the media and other elites.¹⁵ Although he has shown some affirmative assertion of authority in purging certain institutions like academia, total reversion to a closed society under one leader seems unlikely.¹⁶ Segments of Iranian society that are accustomed to greater openness after the era of reformist governments will tolerate blustering rhetoric on foreign policy so long as reasonable levels of societal openness and economic function remain.¹⁷ The only scenario where the political environment would permit unified power would be in crisis after an external attack on Iran or after a major internal threat to the regime. Altogether, in the present environment, foreign observers often underestimate the role of consensus and group-based decision-making in Iran, and frequently overestimate President Ahmadinejad’s power.

The potential for groupthink miscalculations is also thwarted by the existence of multiple consensus-based decision bodies within the overall multilayered structure.¹⁸ While this complex process can sometimes make Iranian policy confusing and contradictory, it does not necessarily lend itself to high risk behavior. Even if one agent makes a hasty decision or issues an aggressive policy statement, it may be immediately contradicted by another authority.¹⁹ Individual leaders also have difficulty muting

available at <http://www.baztab.ir/news/58746.php>.

13. Fred Halliday, *Iran and the Middle East: Foreign Policy and Domestic Change*, 220 MIDDLE E. REP. 42-44 (2001).

14. CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 28-31.

15. Amir Taheri, *Making Sense of Amadinejad*, JERUSALEM POST, Sept. 6, 2006, at 13; Michael Slackman, *Iranian President Meets the Press and is Challenged*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 30, 2006, at A3. See also Nazila Fathi, *Iran Bars Inspectors; Dissident Cleric Condemns President's Stance*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 23, 2007, at A7; Najmeh Bozorgmehr & Gareth Smyth, *Coalition of the Concerned Rallies to Resist Ahmadi-Nejad National Interests Fear Inflammatory Rhetoric*, FIN. TIMES, Jan. 17, 2007, at 8.

16. Nazila Fathi, *Iranian Leader Wants Purge of Liberals from Universities*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 6, 2006, at A6.

17. KENNETH M. POLLACK, *THE PERSIAN PUZZLE* 371-72 (2005); CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 29; Nazila Fathi & Michael Slackman, *Iranian's Oratory Reflects Devotion to '79 Revolution*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 20, 2005, at A3.

18. See ASGHAR SCHIRAZI, *THE CONSTITUTION OF IRAN: POLITICS AND THE STATE IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC* (John O'Kane trans., 1998).

19. Mohamad Bazzi, *Iranian Factions Struggle Over Nuclear Policy Control; Bush*

criticism within the regime and forcing all agents to agree on one course of action. While miscalculations and hasty behavior may be the rule at the micro-level, at the macro-level hasty action is checked by the competing nodes of power. While this structure could admittedly be problematic with regard to the nuclear program depending on what form of command and control system to control accidents and illicit transfer is established, it makes the prospect of Iran engaging in a boldly offensive or miscalculated action less realistic.

The false personalization of the Iranian regime into Ahmadinejad and other leaders brings other risks. Some research has indicated that in foreign policy, actors often attribute to their enemies the identical characteristics they see in themselves.²⁰ If we see the United States President as controlling American foreign policy, we mistakenly assume that our enemies and opponents have a similar political structure. This can encourage policy makers to interpret mistakenly the hostile statements of individual figures as representative of the regime's thinking. It is wiser to reflect and consider how we can use the bifurcations within the regime to avert crisis.

There are additional and more specific fears of ideological consolidation within Iran's ruling structure. Some analysts have expressed fears that recent events, such as the February 2004 Majlis election, indicate that Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members have increasingly hegemonic power in Iranian politics, particularly in connection with the nuclear program.²¹ These analysts also argue that IRGC members are uniquely psychologically unstable and ideological, and are therefore more likely to entertain the transfer of weapons to terrorist groups. While this potential is somewhat exaggerated, it is worrisome and should not be absolutely dismissed. However, the IRGC is not the same institution it once was.

The IRGC is increasingly pragmatist, and the introduction of Guard members into government and business has given them other less ideological interests.²² Although Guard members certainly value the aim of achieving regional power, they empirically did not follow the Iran-Iraq War with a desire to preemptively attack surrounding states. Their cooperation with Hezbollah is connected to long-term regime policy, and

Asks Answer to Offer in July, BOSTON GLOBE, June 28, 2006, at A15.

20. See generally WILLIAM A. GAMSON & ANDRE MODIGLIANI, *UNTANGLING THE COLD WAR: A STRATEGY FOR TESTING RIVAL THEORIES* (1971); ROBERT JERVIS, *PERCEPTION AND MISPERCEPTION IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS* (1976).

21. CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 49.

22. POLLACK, *supra* note 17, at 314 (citing BUCHTA, *supra* note 11, at 125).

there is no evidence that they would have any interest in transferring precious nuclear capability to agents outside of their absolute control.²³ Despite the American frustration, IRGC assistance to Shiite elements in Iraq is perfectly understandable from the perspective of attempting to solidify regional power, and their behavior in Iraq does not emerge from pure hostility to the United States. Also, claims that the Revolutionary Guard views nuclear weapons as inherently offensive, although frequently asserted, are purely speculative, as the program is not advanced enough for any clear concept of its command and control framework to exist.

Second, the rhetoric of describing Iranian leaders, particularly Ahmadinejad, as madmen and insane substantially injures our ability to understand Iranian decision-making.²⁴ Insanity is, by definition, not rational, and these images can obscure the evidently rational motives behind Iran's nuclear program. The image of the theocratic madman, with special emphasis on Iran, is well-entrenched in the American and Western consciousness.²⁵ Despite recent scholarly attempts to reconsider the motives behind the hostage crisis, the premise that challenging the United States was inscrutable is still present in the American understanding.²⁶ Various misunderstandings regarding Islam and Shiism (that also apply to our images of Al-Qaida, Hamas, and Hezbollah) also bolster these unhelpful assumptions.²⁷

The current group of Iranian decision-makers is anything but insane. Their very corruption makes their personal economic interests a top concern. Many of them were educated in the West and they are fully aware of the risks of engaging in war. Beyond the frequent reference to various Iranian sponsored acts of terrorism by advocates of an aggressive policy against Iran, on the whole, Iranian policy has been remarkably risk averse. Iraq initiated the Iran-Iraq War, and it is difficult to find instances where Iran has risked military conflict with any other significant power inside or

23. POLLACK, *supra* note 17, at 420; CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 50-51.

24. See Jürgen Link & Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Fanatics, Fundamentalists, Lunatics, and Drug Traffickers: The New Southern Enemy Image*, 19 CULTURAL CRITIQUE 33, 34-36 (1991); IRAN POL'Y COMM., WHITE PAPER NO. 4, *supra* note 8, at 56.

25. See ALI M. ANSARI, CONFRONTING IRAN: THE FAILURE OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE NEXT GREAT CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST (2006); see also WILLIAM BEEMAN, THE "GREAT SATAN" VS. THE "MAD MULLAHS": HOW THE UNITED STATES AND IRAN DEMONIZE EACH OTHER (2005).

26. POLLACK, *supra* note 17, at 157-58. Pollack discusses the internal political motivations behind Khomeini's behavior during the hostage crisis, revealing a desire to shift focus away from economic problems and sideline moderate forces. *Id.*

27. For an informative account of Islamic radicalism, see FAWAZ A. GERGES, JOURNEY OF THE JIHADIST: INSIDE MUSLIM MILITANCY (2006).

outside the region.²⁸ It went out of its way to reconcile with the Gulf Cooperation Council after the Iran-Iraq War, and it has made other strategic alliances that one would predict from a purely realist analysis.²⁹ Support for militant Shiite groups in Lebanon and Iraq, although defined by the West as support for terrorism, is not irrational at all from their perspective and connects to their regional ambition.

Even if the value system of Iranian Shiite leaders would appear insane if they operated in Western politics, their ideology and framework is not irrational in their culture. Verbally threatening Israel, for example, while certainly aggressive, is by no means an insane sentiment in the Middle East. Moreover, even if there is an element of desperation in the leaders' desire to retain power, this does not represent insanity. It is particularly dangerous when these suggestions are used to assert that Iran would be uniquely more subject to miscalculation or have a lower threshold to using nuclear weapons in a conflict. There is no reason to assume that Iran would not be as deterred by nuclear retaliation as any other state would, and the suggestion that they would ever launch weapons against Europe, for example, is implausible.³⁰ Additionally, unlike in North Korea, Iranian leaders are at least somewhat accessible. A large number of states have healthy relations with Iran, and there are numerous potential channels of communication in case of crisis.

Third, it is a mistake to conflate the inflammatory rhetoric used by President Ahmadinejad and other Iranian leaders with the motives behind

28. POLLACK, *supra* note 17, at 384-85.

29. See CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 15.

30. See Int'l Crisis Group, *Iran: Is There a Way Out of the Nuclear Impasse?*, MIDDLE EAST REPORT NO. 51, Feb. 23, 2006, at 18 n.124, available at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/sanction/iran/2006/0223crisisgroup.pdf> [hereinafter Int'l Crisis Group]. In the opinion of the International Crisis Group,

Iran's leaders, while radical in many of their concepts of government and expressed goals, have shown themselves to be pragmatic when calculating the interests of their country. There is no reason, therefore, to believe that they would not be sensitive to the same logic of nuclear deterrence as other countries in possession of nuclear military capacities have shown themselves to be.

Id. See also Francis Fukuyama, *The Neocons Have Learned Nothing from Five Years of Catastrophe*, GUARDIAN Jan. 31, 2007, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329701078-103677,00.html>. Francis Fukuyama confirms this same viewpoint by writing,

Iran is, after all, a state, with equities to defend—it should be deterrable by other states possessing nuclear weapons; it is a regional and not a global power; it has in the past announced extreme ideological goals but has seldom acted on them when important national interests were at stake; and its decision-making process appears neither unified nor under the control of the most radical forces.

Id.

their decision-making. Proponents of military action against Iran frequently cherry-pick the public statements of Iranian leaders to assert that Iran intends to engage in some ill-defined future war against Israel or the West.³¹ A number of specific quotations, usually from Rafsanjani, Khamenei, or Ahmadinejad, are commonly chosen in this effort. Although Ahmadinejad's October 2005 speech referring to the purported threat to "wipe Israel off the map" is the most recent, people frequently refer to Rafsanjani's December 2001 "Al Quds Day" sermon, or Khamenei's reported threat before the Spanish Prime Minister Aznar to "[set] Israel on fire."³² In all of these cases, while some have challenged the translations or their context, there is no doubt that they are inflammatory and irresponsible. However, within the field of threat assessment, isolating quotations has empirically been shown to be a flawed method to examine intentions.³³ In a number of cases, the isolation of aggressive quotations of Soviet leaders contributed to a flawed assessment of Soviet Union intentions.³⁴ In Iran, the extreme rhetoric has a specific internal political function, and on a variety of issues their intentions and beliefs diverge from the rhetoric. Ahmadinejad in particular is a populist leader who knows that his political base is excited by nationalist rhetoric about a powerful Iran. These threats are connected to his political identity, and as well as being more defensively worded than given credit, they are vague enough not to commit any specific offensive course.

The Hitler analogy does not apply.³⁵ Ahmadinejad does not represent a new ideological vanguard, but he is providing a populist face to an unpopular, but still tolerated, regime. His rhetoric may be sufficient to gain enough backing to secure his own political future, but he does not have the deep support to initiate offensive military action independently. The middle class and elite members withholding support are willing to tolerate the aggressive rhetoric that courts Iranian nationalism, but even with greater offensive military capacity, they are not likely to support actions that would fundamentally disrupt Iran's relationship with the outside

31. IRAN POL'Y COMM., WHITE PAPER NO. 4, *supra* note 8, at 4-5.

32. See Suzanne Fields, *No Facts, Just Emotion: When Cliches Trivialize Bold Ideas*, WASH. TIMES, Feb. 12, 2007, at A19; Sheldon Kirshner, *Iran's Budding Nuclear Program Rattles Israel*, 36 CAN. JEWISH NEWS 22, 11 (2006).

33. For a discussion of this phenomena, see generally MIKHAIL A. ALEXSEEV, WITHOUT WARNING: THREAT ASSESSMENT, INTELLIGENCE, & GLOBAL STRUGGLE (1997).

34. See Anne Hessing Cahn & John Prados, *Team B: The Trillion-Dollar Experiment*, 49 BULL. ATOM. SCIENTISTS 22 (1993); Gordon R. Mitchell, *Team B Intelligence Coups*, 92 Q. J. SPEECH 144, 149-50 (2006).

35. See Ray Takeyh, Editorial, *Confronting Iran: Take Ahmadinejad with a Grain of Salt*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 19, 2006, at M1.

world.³⁶

Other Iranian leaders are also only engaging in the regime's tradition of serving up aggressive rhetoric for domestic consumption. Ayatollah Khamenei fulfills his function of symbolically representing pure religious authority—watching against potential corruption of the revolution. His statements can be seen as intended to complicate reformists' moves toward engagement with the West and to warn them against moving too quickly to reconcile. Ayatollah Rafsanjani, on the other hand, has desperately needed to use the appeal of nationalism to distract from charges that he is corrupt and has no sympathy for the average Iranian. Just as in American politics, the Iranian leadership can be accused of using foreign policy to distract attention from domestic political concerns.

Finally, it is a glaring error to see religious and millenarian beliefs as the core motivation behind Iran's nuclear ambitions. The nuclear program began under the Shah, and there is no need to identify religious motives when the desire for nuclear capability can be explained by a traditional, realist analysis of economic needs and military power. Yet these assumptions based on religion have become a central feature of the rhetoric of those who favor aggressive action toward Iran.³⁷ While religion stands at the core of the Iranian regime's identity, their foreign policy decision-making does not seem primarily tied to religious factors.³⁸ A number of incidents demonstrate this. First, despite its forced exclusion from a number of institutions, Iran is reasonably integrated into the international community and has decent relations with a number of Western states.³⁹ Second, a myriad of specific policy choices demonstrate that religion is not their primary motivator. Iran has chosen not to focus on the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in its relations with surrounding states, and it has frequently chosen to ally itself with non-Muslim powers even when competing alliances with Muslim powers would be feasible.⁴⁰

36. See *Iranians Want Capacity to Enrich Uranium But Accept NPT Rules Against Developing Nuclear Weapons*, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org> (last visited Feb. 23, 2007) (citing the results of a public opinion poll of 1,000 urban and rural Iranian respondents conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org in 2006).

37. Michael A. Ledeen, *The Reality of Religion: Putting Things in Context*, AM. ENTERPRISE INST. FOR PUB. POL'Y RES., Sept. 26, 2006, available at http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.24944/pub_detail.asp.

38. See generally K.L. AFRASLABI, *AFTER KHOMEINI: NEW DIRECTIONS IN IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY* (1994).

39. See CIA: The World Factbook, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html> (last visited Feb. 23, 2007) (listing Iran as a member of fifty international organizations).

40. For example, in the conflicts over Chechnya, Kashmir, and Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran has sided with Russia, India, and Armenia against Muslim Chechnya, Pakistan, and

In addition to the primarily nationalist, and not religious, rhetoric used in public discussion of the nuclear program within Iran, the internal decision-making, even by the most religious actors within the regime, is still dominated by secular and strategic considerations.⁴¹ Nationalism is still an important value both within the regime and among the public. A number of observers have noted the strong appeals to Iranian nationalism that have been used in defense of the nuclear program, and any survey of Iran's media shows this logic to be ubiquitous.⁴² Nationalism presents other problems and is also a dangerous force, but it is at least something that we have experience with and can adapt our policy to deal with.⁴³

The cultural idea that Shiites, in particular, are uniquely untrustworthy and more willing to engage in *taqiya* (dissimulation) is also an unhelpful assumption.⁴⁴ While the Iranian negotiating style is fierce and clever, the course of the nuclear crisis does not necessarily indicate that Iran is inherently untrustworthy. Iran is attempting to achieve what it can within the rules of a game that is stacked against it.⁴⁵ One strange element of the current IAEA farce, for example, is that Iran has voluntarily offered much of the information that has now placed them in trouble.⁴⁶ There is no doubt that any agreement with Iran must be accompanied by careful verification and skepticism, but the assumption that they can never be trusted for cultural reasons is discriminatory and borders on racism.

In August 2006, a rumor pulsed through media networks that Iran's response to the IAEA report would be timed to esoteric dates connected to the Shiite concept of the Awaited Mahdi or Hidden Imam.⁴⁷ Like some

Azerbaijan.

41. For example, see the following explanation of the Iranian position provided by Hassan Rowhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme Nat'l Security Council under President Khatami: *Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and IAEA Pertaining to the Nuclear Issue*, in 37 RAHBOURD (1384/2005), at 7-38 (The Persian title of this speech is Farasoy-e Chaleshay-e Iran va Azhance dar ParvandeH Haste'i); KAVEH L. AFRASIABI, *IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM: DEBATING FACTS VERSUS FICTION* (2006).

42. CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 28-31. See also, INTERMEDIA AUDIENCE ANALYSIS & MARKET PROFILE, IRAN (2005).

43. CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 50.

44. See Michael Rubin, *Can Iran Be Trusted?*, AM. ENTER. INST. FOR PUB. POL'Y RES., Sept. 1, 2006, available at http://aei.org/publications/pubID.24854,filter.all/pub_detail.asp.

45. For a classic study of how developing states try to challenge the dominant international regimes, see generally STEPHEN D. KRASNER, *STRUCTURAL CONFLICT: THE THIRD WORLD AGAINST GLOBAL LIBERALISM* (1985).

46. See Foad Sadeghi, *Who Is Responsible? Rowhani or Ahmadinejad?*, BAZTAB, Jan. 18, 2007, available at <http://en.baztab.com/content/?cid=175>.

47. Waller R. Newell, *Why Is Ahmadinejad Smiling?*, THE WKLY. STANDARD, Oct. 16, 2006, at 23; Sarah Baxter, *Apocalyptic Ahmadinejad Rattles Sabre*, THE AUSTRALIAN, Aug. 21, 2006, available at <http://pewforum.org/news/display.php?NewsID=11142>.

Christian views of Revelations, this religious belief claims that the Imam's return will come after great war and devastation.⁴⁸ Ahmadinejad has allegedly alluded to these scenarios in a number of statements.⁴⁹ However, the corollary belief that Iranian rulers like Ahmadinejad would intentionally prompt a major crisis in order to trigger the catastrophe that would bring back the Hidden Imam has absolutely no evidentiary basis.⁵⁰ Perhaps faced with the Sunni extremism we have seen with Al-Qaida, we are increasingly tempted to elucidate a similar nihilistic and millenarian ideology in Iran. Viewed this way, Iran's risk horizon would look short-term and the prospect that they would take substantial risk would appear high. Yet it is an absolute mistake to interpret this form of rhetoric as a newly salient phenomenon now matured with the election of President Ahmadinejad. Messianism is a fundamental feature in Shiism, and these elements have always been present in regime discourse to some degree.⁵¹ Ahmadinejad's use of them may be tied to his specific brand of populism, but there is no evidence that he makes state decisions based on this logic. By analogy, some have claimed that President George W. Bush also exploits his evangelical supporters' beliefs about the Rapture in his political rhetoric, but there is little evidence that he is actually motivated by their logic.⁵²

Altogether these errors distort the debate about Iranian intentions and make extremely risky policy options seem more desirable and necessary than warranted. As we advance beyond some of the faulty assumptions that have characterized the debate and discussion, Iran's nuclear ambitions appear increasingly rational and understandable. Iran is located in a dangerous region bordered by major nuclear powers in India, Pakistan, Israel, and Russia.⁵³ While the Israeli situation appears most tense at present, acquiring a nuclear deterrent would enable Iran to protect against possible political transformations in Pakistan and Russia that might make historical conflicts reemerge. Iran has been ravaged by a number of

48. See Newell, *supra* note 47.

49. See *id.*

50. See *id.*

51. See SAID AMIR ARJOMAND, *THE SHADOW OF GOD AND THE HIDDEN IMAM: RELIGION, POLITICAL ORDER, AND SOCIETAL CHANGE IN SHI'ITE IRAN FROM THE BEGINNING TO 1890* 4 (1984).

52. See Howard Fineman, *Apocalyptic Politics*, NEWSWEEK, May 24, 2004, at 55; Sarah Posner, *Pastor Strangelove*, THE AM. PROSPECT, June 1, 2006, at 39; *Behold the Rapture*, ECONOMIST, Aug. 24, 2002.

53. See *Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance*, <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat.asp> (last visited Feb. 23, 2007).

conventional wars in its history (usually triggered by attack from external forces), and it has witnessed the stabilizing effect that nuclear weapons have had in other regions, especially in South Asia.⁵⁴ Although Al-Qaida does not represent an immediate threat to Iran, its apparent ambition to acquire weapons of mass destruction, along with the Taliban's past conflict with Iran, means that a deterrent might have some utility against non-state actors and anti-regime forces as well.

Through its actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has become a regional power by default, and its military now borders Iran on two sides. The aggressive posture toward Iran adopted by the Bush Government makes Iran's pursuit of a deterrent rather understandable. The very talk of preemptive action will almost certainly induce Iran to accelerate its program.⁵⁵ Although it is frequently observed, the contrast between the United States' policy toward Iraq and North Korea certainly indicates that progress in a nuclear program is the best way to deter the launch of a preemptive war.⁵⁶ Iran has learned that in order to gain the capability to functionally deter, it rapidly needs to pass the threshold into where others fear it may be more advanced than previously assumed.⁵⁷

The acquisition of nuclear weapons would also solidify Iran's claims to being a core regional power in the Middle East, a long-term strategic goal of Iran even before the revolution. Iran feels that it has a historical right to be a major power in the region and its size, oil, and gas wealth should give it a greater role. Solidifying its regional power status would certainly give Iran leverage against the Gulf States, but there is little or no specific evidence that it has territorial aims against them.⁵⁸ In particular, so long as Iraq remains strongly influenced by the Shiite majority, Iran can cooperate with its Iraqi neighbor without needing to control additional territory in Iraq.⁵⁹ Iran's rapprochement with Syria is also intended to demonstrate that it is not a threat, and although distrust certainly exists, it has increased cooperation with Saudi Arabia in diplomacy and trade.

54. See generally *History of Iran: Historic Periods & Events*, http://www.iranchamber.com/history/historic_periods.php (last visited Feb. 24, 2007); Chris Gagné, *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia: Building on Common Ground*, available at <http://www.stimson.org/southasia/pdf/NRRMGagne.pdf>.

55. A study by the International Crisis Group concludes that "[a]ll in all, a so-called preventive military option would entail very high costs, for very dubious benefits." Int'l Crisis Group, *supra* note 30, at 18.

56. *Id.* at 10; see generally Gagné, *supra* note 54.

57. See generally Gagné, *supra* note 54.

58. CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 136.

59. See Reuters, *Iraq and Iran Pledge an Era of Cooperation*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., May 18, 2005, available at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/05/17/news/iraq.php>.

Finally, the acquisition of nuclear weapons could function as an insurance policy and weapon of last resort for the revolutionary regime, which has repeatedly demonstrated that its primary interest is its own self-preservation. Other considerations, including advancing indigenous scientific knowledge, expanding electricity generation, and diversifying energy sources through nuclear power are equally rational.

Iran must balance all of these motivations with the risks of international sanctions and military response, but the current political dynamic does not necessarily indicate miscalculation. Yet it is critical to note that Iran does not desire or anticipate a war with the United States and we argue a military strike on Iran would represent a major surprise and shock to the regime. Otherwise, the prospects of avoiding substantial penalties seem reasonably good. Despite the sanctions imposed by the Security Council on Iran in December 2006, it may prove difficult to implement any major sanctions package due to the opposition of Russia and China.⁶⁰ Iran has many buyers for its oil, especially with new buyers in Asia, and a smaller sanctions package by European countries, although having some costs would not necessarily cripple the Iranian regime economically. It does not seem to be in Europe's economic interest to pursue substantial sanctions in any event, and in Iran's view, Europe has repeatedly and empirically backed down. However, these economic concerns are not insubstantial and Iran will likely continue its policy of negotiation and delay for some time to come.

The various policy options must be analyzed in terms of their impact on political dynamics in Iran. Because of public support for the nuclear program, which has been demonstrated in opinion polls run by international organizations, and strong nationalist sentiment, implementation of one of the various military options would almost certainly cause the public to rally around the regime.⁶¹ This is the broad consensus of Iran experts in the West, and we are not alone in defending this assessment. The opposition groups are not sophisticated enough at present to challenge the regime. Many of them still think in terms of past resistance and do not fully understand the present dynamic in Iran.⁶² However, if the damage to

60. See Press Release, U.N. Security Council, S.C. RES 8928, Security Council Imposes Sanctions on Iran for Failure to Halt Uranium Enrichment, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1737 (Dec. 23, 2006), available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8928.doc.htm>; Robert McMahon, *Iran, the United Nations, and Sanctions*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN REL., http://www.cfr.org/publication/10222/iran_the_united_nations_and_sanctions.html.

61. Abbas Milani, *How Experts View a Strike Against Iran*, SAN FRANCISCO CHRON., Oct. 1, 2006, at F2.

62. See Connie Bruck, *Exiles: How Iran's Expatriates are Gaming the Nuclear Threat*,

civilian areas was substantial enough, some groups might challenge the regime on why they took such risks, but there would certainly be no revolution or major resistance prompted by the attacks. While this effect would have an uncertain political effect in Iran (one that could also prompt a hardliner backlash), it is not sufficient or reliable enough to be used as an argument to strike Iran.

While sanctions would have a more subtle impact, it would of course depend on their type and the degree of implementation. The regime's ability to absorb economic cost is not infinite and certain packages of sanctions could, and already have, generated fears.⁶³ However, we should bear in mind that the nationalism and symbolism behind the nuclear program are strong forces, and the power of sanctions to affect regime policy is limited. Limited sanctions that target consumer goods might have some effect in reaching the public, especially as they would target the central element of the regime's foreign and economic policy "bargain" with the public.⁶⁴ Also, European sanctions on foreign investment and trade might encourage "pragmatist" elements of the Iranian regime to challenge the hardliner focus on the nuclear program.⁶⁵ However, the broad-based support for the principle of nuclear development and Iran's history of adapting to international sanctions means that the ultimate impact of limited sanctions would not be decisive.⁶⁶

Because of these still relevant costs, Iran is likely to continue its policies of attempting to negotiate and delay negative sanctions. Its history of risk aversion, as demonstrated in a number of historical episodes, shows that it is unlikely to force a total impasse upon the West.⁶⁷ While it could survive the imposition of sanctions, the political costs would not be null. Iran ultimately backed down in both the hostage crisis and Tanker Wars, and the regime knows that it cannot survive a full scale war with the United States.⁶⁸

THE NEW YORKER, Mar. 6, 2006, at 48.

63. See Kamal Nazer Yasin, *Iran: Fear of UN Sanctions May Prompt Nuclear Policy Change*, EURASIANET.ORG, Feb. 3, 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav020306.shtml>.

64. See CHUBIN, *supra* note 1, at 87-88.

65. See *id.* at 31-32.

66. See Interview by Bernard Gwertzman with Flynt Leverett, Senior Member, National Security Council, State Department, and CIA (Mar. 31, 2006), available at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10326/leverett.html>; see also Jeffrey J. Schott, *Economic Sanctions, Oil, and Iran*, July 25, 2006, <http://www.iie.com/publications/print.cfm?doc=pub&ResearchID=649>.

67. See Charles W. Nass & Henry Precht, *Shining a Light Into the Darkness of Iranian-U.S. Relations*, 22 WASH. REP. ON MIDDLE E. AFF. 41, 41 (2003).

68. See Algiers Accords, U.S.-Iran, Jan. 19, 1981, available at

Therefore, it is still possible for the United States to use this opportunity to pursue a policy of engagement toward Iran. While the mutual rhetoric between Presidents Bush and Ahmadinejad has made the prospect more difficult politically, Iran and the United States have shared interests in a number of areas, and Iran has made a number of overtures ignored by the United States.⁶⁹ The cooperation between American intelligence and the Iranian government in the wake of September 11 has been well documented.⁷⁰ In 2003, Iran offered to initiate a grand round of negotiations to resolve every outstanding problem between the two sides.⁷¹ Also, Ahmadinejad's May 2006 letter to President Bush and his appearance on *60 Minutes* demonstrate that even though his rhetoric is demanding and contradictory, Iran's relations with the United States and the conditions that could facilitate an opening are central considerations for him.⁷² Iran's regime knows the dangers of opening up too quickly, but cooperation with the United States could provide a number of immediate benefits.

While the nature of an engagement policy would have to be determined, a number of possible incentives exist (security guarantees, lifting of sanctions, WTO entry, etc.). Security guarantees, such as repealing the Iran Freedom Support Act and promising not to attack or overthrow the regime, would give the regime greater confidence that could enable them to take the risks that would be associated with greater openness.⁷³ The increasingly capitalist interests of the political elite means that their survival is not necessarily tied to remaining closed, and honest, substantial United States offers could be attractive.⁷⁴ Because the United States can control Iran's access to key international institutions like the

http://www.parstimes.com/history/algiers_accords.pdf; see also *Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-iraq.htm> (last visited Mar. 4, 2007).

69. See Interview by Bernard Gwertzman with Flynt Leverett, *supra* note 66.

70. See POLLACK, *supra* note 17, at 345-49.

71. See Interview by Bernard Gwertzman with Flynt Leverett, *supra* note 66; see also Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann, *What We Wanted to Tell You About Iran*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 22, 2006, at A1. The apparent text of the offer, which was never classified, is available online. See *Purported Iranian Letter of 2003 Proposing Cooperation with USA*, Apr. 2003, http://www.mideastweb.org/iranian_letter_of_2003.htm (last visited Feb. 26, 2007).

72. See *Ahmadinejad's Letter to Bush*, May 9, 2006, available at <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/world/0605/transcript.lemonde.letter/>; see also Interview by Mike Wallace with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of Iran, in Tehran, Iran (Aug. 9, 2006), available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/08/09/60minutes/printable1879867.shtml>.

73. See generally Iran Freedom Support Act, Pub. L. No. 109-293, 120 Stat. 1344 (2006).

74. This can include allowing the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf or from Iran to Pakistan and India, as well as allowing Iran to seek compensation from Iraq for its invasion of Iran in 1980.

WTO, its offers can have much more symbolic and economic weight than the E.U.'s failed incentive packages.⁷⁵

By not treating the Iranian regime as a legitimate government, the United States excludes Iran from conventional markets and central international institutions. For example, Iran was forced to illicitly pursue nuclear components via the Khan network instead of pursuing normal channels that would appear more consistent with the NPT.⁷⁶ The United States has essentially forced Iran to pursue its nuclear program in a way that will raise fears of its hostile intentions.

At the very least, an engagement policy might minimize the security implications of Iran's development of nuclear weapons. Even limited cooperation means that Iran is less likely to fear that the United States aims to topple the regime, the one scenario where Iranian leaders might engage in high risk behavior. If we permit the assumption that their desire for nuclear weapons is not purely aggressive, some of the other motives behind their nuclear policy can be addressed in negotiations. It is precisely these assumptions, such as the inherent need for confrontation, that must be questioned. Once the rigid necessity of halting Iran's nuclear program at all costs is removed as the orienting assumption in the discussion, a number of other possibilities and interesting considerations are opened.

Regardless of one's ultimate policy conclusions, we must recognize that the current policy debate has been remarkably narrow. While President Bush has stated the United States finds Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons "unacceptable," he has failed to offer a threat assessment that would justify the costs of a preventative strike.⁷⁷ The problems in Iraq conclusively demonstrate the risks of rash action before the unique dynamics of the country are understood. Many of revanchist goals attributed to the Iraqi regime now seem to be fantasies; their main goal was

75. See Christian Oliver, *Iran's Ahmadinejad Scorns EU Atomic Incentives*, DEFENSENEWS.COM, May 17, 2006, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?F=1808101&C=mideast>.

76. See Sharon Squassoni, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Recent Developments*, CRS REPORT FOR CONGRESS, July 20, 2006, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/70030.pdf>.

77. The Associated Press, *Bush: Iran With Nuclear Weapons Is "Unacceptable,"* FOXNEWS.COM, Oct. 27, 2006, http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,225864,00.html. Muhammad El-Baradei, Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, declared at the World Economic Forum (Jan. 2007) that "an attack on Iran would be catastrophic and encourage Tehran to develop a nuclear bomb." Golnaz Esfandiari, *Iran: El-Baradei Says Attack on Country Would be Catastrophic*, Jan. 26, 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticleprint/2007/01/20e65b32-383f-4778-a13d-1d438c4e2f34.html>.

actually self-preservation.⁷⁸

Broadening the types of questions open to consideration can only have a beneficial effect on the discussion of the problem and the potential policy options. Having a more reasonable image of Iran means that we can imagine their receptivity to offers of negotiation without assuming that their responses and intentions will always be hostile.⁷⁹ Initiating negotiations does not commit the United States to any course of action, and in fact, the limited contact that began after September 11 shows that a course of "appeasement" can be halted if Iran proves that it cannot be trusted. Finally, as some of Iran's prominent human rights activists (Akbar Ganji, Shirin Ebadi, Emmadeddin Baghi) have repeatedly mentioned, all of the focus on nuclear issues has detracted attention from the regime's abhorrent human rights record.⁸⁰

78. See Andrew Mack, *Saddam is Contained: The Case for War on Iraq Looks Weak*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., Oct. 10, 2002, available at http://www.iht.com/articles/2002/10/10/edmack_ed3_.php.

79. See Michael Slackman, *If America Wanted to Talk, Iran Would*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 3, 2006, § 4, at 4.

80. See Maziar Bahari, *Wrong Fight: A Prominent Activist in Iran Says the West Should Focus on Human Rights, Not Nukes*, NEWSWEEK, Aug. 22, 2006, available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14472471/site/newsweek/print/1/displaymode/1098>; see also Reuters, *Iran Nuclear Program Overshadows Rights: Ebadi*, Nov. 24, 2006, <http://mailman.lbo-talk.org/2006/2006-December/026008.html>.