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Negotiation is Still the Best Option: Revisiting the Iranian Nuclear Issue

Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Todd Fine

Despite the numerous negative ramifications and the barriers to its actual efficacy, the prospect of a preemptive air strike against Iran's nuclear program remains a specter hanging over contemporary politics. There are frequent rumblings in the media that the United States and Israeli governments have advanced plans for such an action, and the open concern expressed by several high-level officials in Israel about its possibility should make observers continue to be wary. All signs indicate, however, that President Barack Obama does not wish to launch a preemptive attack and would prefer to restrain Israel. He came to office with the clearly expressed goal of engaging Iran on its nuclear program (even recording a public audio overture to the Iranian regime at the beginning of his term). However, the large protests after the 2009 presidential election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, now followed by the Arab Spring, have made the regime much more preoccupied and nervous and, as a result, possible negotiations very challenging. With the entire region destabilized, increasingly dividing along a Sunni-Shia axis, and the regime visibly frightened by the protests, the stakes are much higher in every respect.

Our 2007 paper in the *Syracuse Law Review* focused on how a general failure by American policymakers to appreciate the complexity of Iran's decision-making processes contributes to flawed assumptions about the consequences of preemptive strike and about the potential dangers of Iran's nuclear program. With the structural politics of Iran shifting and becoming even more opaque, the importance of serious area studies analysis of Iranian politics only grows. Ahmadinejad, who is increasingly out of favor with Supreme Leader Khamenei, was substantially weakened in the 2012 parliamentary elections, and it is likely that he will begin to slowly disengage from the political scene as his term ends in 2013.

There are even signs now that, after the turmoil of Ahmadinejad's terms with his populism that unduly provoked the West, the Supreme Leader may choose simply to eliminate the office of the presidency, along with its elections which might easily create another crisis. The prime minister's office was once also eliminated, so there is a precedent for dramatic change like this.

The general nuclear policy of Iran is likely to continue, and, while Iran is unlikely to try to provoke the outside world with overt nuclear weapons development, it will likely continue its uranium enrichment activities. The most important motivation for the Iranian regime has always been its own preservation, and the talk of outside intervention by Western powers in 2009, alongside the lessons learned from Libya which had given up its nuclear program and still had the West turn against it, is likely to increase the urgency of developing a virtual nuclear capability.

The series of assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists and revelations about the "Olympic Games" cyberwarfare sabotage efforts have also reinforced a general nationalist sentiment toward continuing the nuclear program, and the West is mistaken if it conflates domestic opposition to the regime's human rights abuses with opposition to the nuclear program. The recent parliamentary elections have been interpreted as a sign of support for the nuclear program, and an attack on the nuclear facilities still seems extremely unlikely to trigger any sort of revolution. Indeed, the reverse ramification of an attack causing the public to rally around the regime and to further constrain reformist activity seems the most likely result.

The failure of the Green Movement to grow indicates the continued lack of a shared and organized ideological platform for a revolution. While the Arab Spring has revealed how spontaneous and non-ideological revolutions can manifest, the Iranian people's unique experience with revolutions getting out of control and turning out negatively seems to make them especially cautious in advancing the total commitment regime change through protest requires. Iran also has, through the Revolutionary Guards, an ideological section of the military that is unlikely to abandon the leadership as the Egyptian military did.

In 2007, we argued that a nuclear Iran might not be a nightmare as nuclear deterrence could also create some regional stability and as Iran has little history of being an expansionist power. The Arab Spring, however, has certainly complicated the geopolitical implications. The Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies may be advancing their own clandestine nuclear programs as they fear threats to their own regimes and also seek to shift blame for revolutionary activity in Bahrain and in Eastern Saudi Arabia to a malicious Shia power in Iran. Therefore, Iranian advances in its nuclear program are likely to further propel proliferation in the region, and there are certainly some dangerous risks associated with this. However, if a preemptive strike were not successful in halting its uranium enrichment, this proliferation would advance regardless.

Despite all of the impulses toward continuing its nuclear program, the Iranian regime has important material interests that it would like to see advanced, and once it feels a bit more secure internally it might still be open to negotiate if the West were sincerely willing to put all outstanding issues on the table, including the economic sanctions which are indeed having a significant effect on the economy. Depending on developments in Syria and in Lebanon with Hezbollah, Iran might also be able to assist quietly (as they offered in Iraq) if the West would negotiate honestly without constantly moving the goalposts. This requires however that the West stop constantly threatening Iran and begin an outreach more attuned to their cultural needs to save face and to negotiate quietly.

While the Iranian nuclear program is not going away and pressures on policymakers to halt it by any means will continue, this issue cannot remain the focus of American policy in the Middle East. The most important need at this moment is to support the newly changed states and to ensure that the Arab Spring does not "turn against" the United States through imprudent policy regarding Israel or regarding Iran. A new ill-considered war at this important turning point in history could have horrible ramifications. The

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