



ISSUE BRIEF

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Mitigating the Security Risks Posed by a Near-Nuclear Iran

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US President Barack Obama has called the international dispute over Iran's advanced nuclear program "one of the leading security challenges of our time."¹ Fitting for a problem of this magnitude, analysts have thoroughly examined the major policy options for addressing the challenge, including most notably, diplomacy, containment, and military strikes.² Lost in this focus on the broad policy options to prevent or deal with a nuclear-armed Iran, however, is the acknowledgement that Iran already possesses a latent nuclear weapons capability and that this capability poses several threats to international peace and security at present. Moreover, it is almost certain that Iran will retain such a capability in the short to medium term regardless of how the nuclear diplomacy progresses—and even if the international community and Iran agree to a "comprehensive" nuclear deal. Rather than an exclusive focus on broad strategies for preventing a nuclear-armed Iran, therefore, it would also be prudent to identify and mitigate against the challenges posed by Iran's extant latent nuclear capability, a capability that will likely remain in place even if Washington's policy of prevention is successful.

That is the purpose of this paper. It will argue that in the coming months and (depending on how events unfold) years, it is almost certain that Iran will retain at least a latent nuclear capability, i.e., the ability to produce nuclear weapons on short order should it decide to do so. The paper does not address the steps Washington can take to roll back Iran's latent nuclear capability or the Iranian concessions necessary for an acceptable "comprehensive" deal. Rather, it focuses on why a latent nuclear Iran is the most likely outcome in

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the short to medium term. Next, the paper identifies the potential threats to international peace and security posed by nuclear latency in Iran, even if Iran refrains from building nuclear weapons. Finally, it provides recommendations for mitigating against these potential risks.

The Near-Inevitability of a Latent Nuclear Weapons Capability in Iran

Regardless of the outcome of the nuclear talks, it is highly likely that Iran will retain a latent nuclear capability for the foreseeable future. A latent nuclear capability is the possession of the technical capacity, including the ability to indigenously produce weapons-grade fissile material, to build nuclear weapons on short order.³ There are a number of states in the world, including Japan, a close ally of the United States, with such a capability.

According to this definition, Iran is already a latent nuclear power. Secretary of State John Kerry has estimated that, from a political decision to do so, it would take Iran two to three months to produce

1 Barack Obama, State of the Union Address, January 28, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/28/president-barack-obamas-state-union-address>.

2 Matthew Kroenig, *A Time to Attack: The Looming Iranian Nuclear Threat* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Kenneth Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

3 On latency, see Scott Sagan, "Nuclear Latency and Nuclear Proliferation," in *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century*, William Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) and Tristan Volpe, "Proliferation Blackmail: The Coercive Threat Advantages of Nuclear Latency" (PhD dissertation, George Washington University, forthcoming).

sufficient quantities of weapons-grade uranium (WGU) for its first nuclear weapon. The time to produce WGU is often referred to as Iran's "breakout" timeline because once Iran produces enough fissile material for one bomb, the United States can no longer physically prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons. For the purpose of preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power, therefore, the timeline to producing one bomb's-worth of fissile material is by far the most important.

IRAN COULD BREAKOUT IN TWO TO THREE MONTHS AND POSSESS A NUCLEAR WARHEAD IN AN ADDITIONAL ONE MONTH TO ONE YEAR. IN OTHER WORDS, IRAN IS ALREADY A LATENT NUCLEAR POWER.

With sufficient quantities of WGU, analysts estimate that it would take Iran roughly one month to produce a crude, gun-type nuclear warhead and about one year to produce a more sophisticated implosion-design weapon.⁴ The estimates on warhead design must come with the caveat that Iran has not come clean on its past weaponization research and, therefore, the international community has much less certainty about Iran's capabilities in this realm. Moreover, it is likely that if Iran were to dash toward a nuclear weapons capability, it would work on producing nuclear fuel and designing warheads in tandem, reducing the combined timeline. Historically, countries have been considered actual (as opposed to latent) nuclear powers from the date of their first test, or from the date at which it is believed they assembled their first nuclear warhead.⁵ If at this point, therefore, Iran conducted a nuclear test, or was widely believed to have assembled a functioning warhead, it would be considered a nuclear-armed state.

4 William C. Witt, Christina Walrond, David Albright, and Houston Wood, "Iran's Evolving Breakout Potential," Institute for Science and International Security, October 20, 2012, <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/irans-evolving-breakout-potential/>.

5 Erik Gartzke and Matthew Kroenig, "A Strategic Approach to Nuclear Proliferation," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, April 2009, p. 154.

Of course, to have a militarily useful arsenal, Iran also would need to develop a reliable means to deliver nuclear warheads to an opponent. This could take more time. Tehran has fighter aircraft that could be employed to deliver even the larger gun-type nuclear weapons to neighboring states, but the fleet is aging and the aircraft often have technical difficulty in routine training missions. Tehran also has a large stockpile of ballistic missiles, which could be employed immediately, assuming the previous design stage was successful in producing a warhead small enough to fit on the nosecone of a ballistic missile. It is also quite possible, however, that Iran would struggle with its technical efforts to marry warheads with delivery vehicles. Nevertheless, as noted above, Iran would be considered a nuclear power as soon as it was believed to possess a warhead, whether deliverable or not.

At present, assuming no external interferences, Iran could breakout in two to three months and possess a nuclear warhead in an additional one month to one year. In other words, Iran is already a latent nuclear power.

Moreover, Iran is likely to remain a latent nuclear power for the foreseeable future regardless of how the Iranian nuclear challenge develops. There are five possible near-term outcomes. First, Iran and the international community could continue to negotiate toward a comprehensive nuclear deal and Iran's program would remain roughly frozen in place according to the terms of the interim deal signed in November 2013 and extended in July 2014.⁶ If the sides do not reach a comprehensive bargain by the self-imposed deadline of November 24, 2014, they could agree to another extension. In this case, Iran's capabilities would resemble its capabilities at present. Iran could continue to advance parts of its program, including in research and design work on more advanced centrifuge models, but as long as it abides by the terms of the deal, its breakout timeline would not be greatly altered.

Second, Iran and the international community could successfully conclude a comprehensive nuclear deal. The striking of a comprehensive deal, however, would not remove Iran's latent nuclear capability. Rather, the P5+1⁷ are prepared to allow Iran to continue enriching uranium, and as long as Iran can enrich uranium, it can produce fuel for nuclear weapons. According to Kerry, the goal of a comprehensive nuclear deal would be to

6 Joint Plan of Action, Geneva, November 24, 2013, http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131124_03_en.pdf.

7 P5 + 1 refers to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States) plus Germany.

extend Iran's dash time from the current two to three months to six to twelve months.⁸ Although a comprehensive nuclear deal would push back Iran's dash time and prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons (assuming Iran abides by its terms), it would still leave Iran as a latent nuclear power.

Third, the negotiations could break down altogether and Iran could resume the development of its nuclear program consistent with its pattern prior to the interim deal in November 2013. Negotiations could collapse if one side or the other: refuses to extend the terms of the interim deal, decides that the other is making insufficient progress toward a comprehensive deal, renounces the deal's terms, or defects in response to suspected or actual failure of the other party to follow through on the deal's terms. Slow resumption of the program consistent with its pattern of development prior to November 2013 would mean that Iran would not immediately dash to a nuclear weapons capability, but rather would slowly improve and expand its program, possibly including: introducing greater numbers of centrifuges, introducing more advanced centrifuges, building new nuclear facilities, enriching to levels greater than 5 percent, and stockpiling low-enriched uranium. These steps would have the effect of gradually shrinking Iran's dash time to a nuclear weapon from the current two to three months to weeks and, conceivably, days. At some point, Iran's dash time could become shorter than the international community's response time, forcing Washington either to act militarily or acquiesce to a nuclear-armed Iran. This scenario has been labeled the "undetectable breakout," and it is estimated that it would take Iran roughly one year to reach this point.⁹ If Iran were deterred by fear of provoking the international community, it could voluntarily moderate its development, further extending this timeline. In sum, therefore, under this scenario, Iran would remain a latent nuclear power for one year or more from the breakdown of negotiations.

Fourth, negotiations could break down, Iran could dash to a nuclear weapons capability, and the international community could decide to stand by and acquiesce to a nuclear Iran. In this case, Iran would become an actual, not a latent, nuclear power within months.

Fifth, and finally, negotiations could break down, Iran could dash to a nuclear weapons capability, and Israel, or the United States, consistent with Obama's pledge to "do what we must to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon," could take military action.¹⁰ It is estimated that an Israeli strike would (under worst-case assumptions in which Iran decides to immediately reconstitute its program and does not encounter any significant difficulties) set back Iran's program by one to two years and a US strike (under the same assumptions) would buy three to five years.¹¹ If one makes the reasonable assumption that Iran encounters technical, political, or geopolitical difficulties in its reconstitution efforts, then these timelines would be longer. It is possible, therefore, that Iran would reconstitute its program and that, over time, it would once again become a latent nuclear power. Still, military conflict is the only scenario under which Iran would no longer remain a latent nuclear power in the short to medium term.

IN NEARLY ALL OF THE CONCEIVABLE OUTCOMES TO THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CHALLENGE, IRAN WILL REMAIN AT LEAST A LATENT NUCLEAR POWER FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.

In nearly all of the conceivable outcomes to the Iranian nuclear challenge, Iran will remain at least a latent nuclear power for the foreseeable future.

The Threats Posed by a Nuclear-Capable Iran

Although less troubling than an Iran armed with an actual nuclear weapons arsenal, a latent nuclear Iran still poses many threats to international peace and security. This section, therefore, brackets the very real risk of Iran using its latent capabilities to build nuclear weapons and, instead, focuses on the other challenges a

8 *National Security and Foreign Policy Priorities in the Fiscal Year 2015 International Affairs Budget*, United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 113th Cong., second session (April 8, 2014), <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/04%2008%202014,%20International%20Affairs%20Budget1.pdf>.

9 David Albright, Mark Dubowitz, and Orde Kittrie, "Stopping an Undetectable Iranian Bomb," *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324789504578380801062046108>.

10 "President Obama's 2012 Address to the UN General Assembly," *Washington Post*, September 25, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/president-obamas-2012-address-to-un-general-assembly-full-text/2012/09/25/70bc1fce-071d-11e2-aff-d6c7f20a83bf_print.html.

11 Kroenig, *A Time to Attack*.

latent nuclear Iran poses to the global nonproliferation regime, Middle Eastern security, and democracy and human rights inside Iran.

Proliferation. A latent nuclear Iran would pose a nuclear proliferation threat even if it does not itself build nuclear weapons. It could transfer sensitive nuclear technology to other states, set off a nuclear arms race in the region, and weaken the global nonproliferation regime.

First, Iran could transfer sensitive nuclear material and technology—such as uranium enrichment designs, centrifuges, enriched uranium, and nuclear weapons designs—to other states or nonstate actors. Today, Iran already possesses sufficient materials and technology to pose a serious proliferation threat.

A LATENT NUCLEAR IRAN WOULD POSE A NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION THREAT EVEN IF IT DOES NOT ITSELF BUILD NUCLEAR WEAPONS. IT COULD TRANSFER SENSITIVE NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY TO OTHER STATES, SET OFF A NUCLEAR ARMS RACE IN THE REGION, AND WEAKEN THE GLOBAL NONPROLIFERATION REGIME.

Nuclear-capable states have repeatedly exported dangerous nuclear technology in the past.¹² The Soviet Union aided China's nuclear program in the 1950s and 1960s; France helped Israel during the same time period; China transferred sensitive nuclear technology to Pakistan in the 1980s; and Iran itself got a jump start with help from A.Q. Khan and Pakistan. More recently,

12 Matthew Kroenig, *Exporting the Bomb: Technology Transfer and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

North Korea built a nuclear reactor for Syria only to have it bombed by Israel in 2007.

Nuclear technology transfer has been the subject of intense scholarly scrutiny, and Iran fits the characteristics of countries most likely to export nuclear technology.¹³ Iran's lack of global power-projection capabilities and its poor relations with the United States provide permissive conditions. As a regional power, there is good reason for Iran to be threatened by the spread of nuclear capabilities in its own backyard, but since it lacks the ability to project conventional military power outside of the Middle East, it would be less threatened by the presence of sensitive nuclear capabilities in other regions. Moreover, its poor relations with the United States mean that it would be less likely than other nuclear capable states to respect Washington's consistent attempts to safeguard global nonproliferation norms.¹⁴

There are positive motivations to export sensitive nuclear technology as well. Tehran's leaders might decide to export nuclear technology in an attempt to help friends, constrain enemies, establish Iran's reputation as a nuclear energy power, or to earn hard currency. The exports could be done surreptitiously, or, perhaps, more likely, under the guise of peaceful nuclear cooperation protected by Article IV of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).¹⁵ Iran has already signed nuclear cooperation agreements with Bolivia and Venezuela, and it could conceivably transfer sensitive nuclear capabilities to these countries or others.¹⁶ Dangerous nuclear capabilities in an additional country, including possibly countries in the Western Hemisphere, would generate the next nuclear crisis and result in a significant strategic problem for Washington.

Finally, there is the possibility that Iran could provide nuclear assistance to terrorist groups, but this prospect causes less reason for concern than the state transfer scenario. Unlike technology transfer to a state, even the most sophisticated terrorist organizations would be unable to construct and operate their own nuclear weapons production complex. A terrorist group,

13 Kroenig, *Exporting the Bomb*; Matthew Fuhrmann, *Atomic Assistance: How "Atoms for Peace" Programs Cause Nuclear Insecurity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

14 For more on these points, see Kroenig, *Exporting the Bomb*.

15 Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, <http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2005/npttreaty.html>.

16 James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Venezuela Country Profile," updated August 2012, <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/venezuela/>; Anna Mahjar-Barducci, "Iran Helping Bolivia Build Nuclear Power Plant; Bolivia Sending Uranium to Tehran," Gatestone Institute International Policy Council, December 3, 2010, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/1692/bolivia-iran>.



US Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Vienna to discuss Iran's nuclear program. *Source:* US Department of State.

therefore, would need to receive either a fully-functioning nuclear weapon or sufficient quantities of weapons-grade fissile material, but a latent nuclear Iran without nuclear weapons or weapons-grade uranium would not be in a position to provide such assistance. Iran would have the technical capability, however, to provide terrorist groups with radioactive material that terrorists could use in a radiological dispersion device (RDD), but it is unlikely that Iran would offer such assistance given its past practice of calibrating the amount and types of lethal aid it lends to proxy groups. Moreover, although an Iranian-sponsored RDD attack is a potential source of concern, it is less menacing than the other threats surveyed in this section because RDDs would likely cause more confusion than death or destruction. For this reason, RDDs, also known as dirty bombs, are sometimes referred to as “weapons of mass disruption,” but they should not be confused with genuine weapons of mass destruction.

The Rouhani government’s interest in improving Iran’s relations with the outside world might make nuclear transfers unlikely in the short term, but the internal political dynamics in Iran can shift quickly. Moreover, it is possible that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which oversees the nuclear program, could

transfer sensitive nuclear technology without the knowledge of the Rouhani government. Finally, it is conceivable that even the Rouhani government would decide to export nuclear technology under the guise of peaceful nuclear cooperation as a means of asserting Iran’s nuclear rights under the NPT.

In addition to technology transfers, a latent nuclear Iran might spur a proliferation of similar capabilities in the Middle East. As Obama has stated clearly, if Iran develops nuclear weapons, “It is almost certain that other players in the region would feel it necessary to get their own nuclear weapons. So now you have the prospect of a nuclear arms race in the most volatile region in the world.”¹⁷ The risk of a regional nuclear arms race would certainly be less severe than if Iran had a complete nuclear arsenal, but Iran would still be only months away from the bomb, and leaders in these states might hedge their bets and begin pursuing a latent nuclear weapons capability that would allow them to join the nuclear club on short notice if necessary.

¹⁷ Joe Sterling, “Obama Says He’s Not Bluffing on Iran Nukes,” CNN.com, March 3, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/02/politics/obama-iran-israel/>.

Indeed, this process might already be underway. In the past several years, several other countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have either expressed an interest in, begun, or developed an existing nuclear power program. Moreover, officials in Riyadh openly talk about their desire to develop their own nuclear arsenal if Iran joins the nuclear club.¹⁸ These countries currently lack the nuclear infrastructure necessary to build nuclear weapons, but any of them plausibly could erect a nuclear capability over the course of a decade with foreign assistance.

A LATENT NUCLEAR IRAN COULD FURTHER DESTABILIZE REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS AND EXACERBATE TENSIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND ITS REGIONAL RIVALS.

It is also conceivable that Israel could rethink its longstanding policy of nuclear opacity. A more explicit Israeli nuclear capability could have a number of downside consequences, including increased pressure on Arab states to acquire nuclear weapons in response.

Perhaps the greatest proliferation threat posed by a latent nuclear Iran, however, is damage to the broader nuclear nonproliferation regime. The United States has enforced a policy of preventing the spread of sensitive nuclear technology to new states since the 1970s. India's "peaceful nuclear explosion" in 1974 brought home the ease with which supposedly civilian nuclear technologies could be converted to military purposes. In response, the United States spearheaded an international effort to control the spread of sensitive fuel-cycle facilities like uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, which resulted in the creation of new international institutions such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group. In addition, the United States has brought direct, unilateral pressure to bear on countries intent on developing sensitive technologies, including its own allies. In the 1970s, for example, the United States pressured Seoul and Taipei to abandon incipient

reprocessing programs. More recently, the United States has considered making the formal renouncement of future enrichment and reprocessing (ENR) capabilities a prerequisite for any civil nuclear cooperation with Washington, and, in 2009, the United Arab Emirates signed up to this new, so-called "gold standard" for peaceful nuclear cooperation. At present, Seoul is expressing an interest in developing plutonium reprocessing capabilities for legitimate applications, but Washington is putting up resistance, citing the proliferation risk.

Acquiescing to a latent nuclear Iran would be a major exception to this longstanding policy and would risk undermining decades of nonproliferation efforts. This danger would be most severe if the international community formally recognized and enshrined Iran's enrichment capability in a comprehensive nuclear deal, but its effects would still be present in any scenario in which Iran maintains an indigenous enrichment capability. Other countries will demand similar rights and capabilities and cite Iran as a precedent. South Korea might intensify its calls for indigenous reprocessing, and the United Arab Emirates might renege on its commitments in its "gold standard" agreement. It will be difficult if not impossible for Washington to claim that it trusts Tehran's leaders with sensitive nuclear technology but not its own friends and allies.

In addition, and more broadly, the Iran case could teach would-be proliferators that continued defiance of nonproliferation rules and norms will eventually pay off. The lesson of Iran (and of North Korea) might be especially damaging to the regime, because unlike India, Pakistan, and Israel, Tehran developed its capability as a party to the NPT. States might be encouraged to launch their own ENR projects on the assumption that, after a period of pressure, they too will be able to keep their sensitive nuclear capabilities and perhaps eventually join the nuclear club.

Regional Security. The risks of a latent nuclear Iran extend beyond nonproliferation. It could further destabilize regional security dynamics and exacerbate tensions between Iran and its regional rivals.

Iran might become more aggressive with a latent capability. As David Petraeus and Vance Serchuk have written, a comprehensive nuclear deal would lift economic sanctions on Iran, providing a financial boost to the world's largest state sponsor of terror and providing it with more resources to project malign

¹⁸ Jason Burke, "Riyadh Will Build Nuclear Weapons if Iran Gets Them, Saudi Prince Warns," *Guardian*, June 29, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/29/saudi-build-nuclear-weapons-iran>.

influence abroad.¹⁹ Even if there is not a comprehensive deal, the economic noose on Iran could loosen over time if—as many sanctions experts believe is inevitable—international support for sanctions eventually gives way to economic incentives to do business with Iran. The lifting or loosening of sanctions on Iran would result in an economic windfall that Tehran could use to step up support for terrorist and proxy attacks in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, the Palestinian territories, the Arabian peninsula, and around the world. Although it is possible that a latent nuclear Iran might feel more secure and self-confident, Iran is a revisionist power with ambitious geopolitical goals. This means it is more likely that a latent nuclear capability might embolden Iran to more aggressively pursue its objective of becoming the most dominant state in the region. One might assume that this risk could be less severe as long as Rouhani is in power, but even under Rouhani, Iran has continued to aggressively support violent proxies throughout the region.

In addition, if regional states are unwilling to adapt to a latent nuclear Iran, they might take steps to eliminate or counter this capability, leading to even greater levels of regional conflict. Israel might decide to take military action against Iran's nuclear facilities if it becomes convinced that international efforts will be insufficient to stop Iran's nuclear progress. An Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities would be a highly undesirable outcome for Washington. Not only does Israel lack the ability to impose lasting damage on Iran's nuclear infrastructure, an Israeli strike would unleash all of the downside consequences of conflict, including Iranian military retaliation and spikes in global oil prices. Alternatively, Israel could choose to counter Iran's nuclear ascendance by undermining Iranian influence in other ways, such as by intensifying its strikes in Syria against Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia also could counter Tehran by escalating conflicts against Iran-sponsored proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula.²⁰

A Strengthened Islamic Republic. A latent nuclear capability in Iran, especially one recognized by the international community in a comprehensive nuclear deal, could strengthen Iran's theocratic regime. Since ascending to power in 1979, Iran's clerical regime has counted among the United States' foremost geopolitical

foes. It has regularly sponsored terrorism on a global basis, pursued weapons of mass destruction, denied its citizens basic human rights, and espoused resistance to the West. It is no secret that Washington would prefer to see a more democratic, pro-Western regime in power that protects human rights and pursues a less aggressive foreign policy. The recent election of President Hassan Rouhani was, from Washington's point of view, a great improvement over the previous government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but Rouhani is still a regime insider and fully supports the basic ideals of the Islamic Republic, including resistance to the West. Moreover, while Rouhani may be committed to improving Iran's relations with the outside world and easing some cultural restrictions inside Iran, there is no evidence that he intends to engage in meaningful political reform.²¹ To be sure, hardliners in Iran currently oppose a nuclear deal and human rights campaigners in Iran support it, but, perhaps paradoxically, nuclear latency (with or without a deal) may actually give the current regime a longer lease on life.

A LATENT NUCLEAR CAPABILITY IN IRAN, ESPECIALLY ONE RECOGNIZED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN A COMPREHENSIVE NUCLEAR DEAL, COULD STRENGTHEN IRAN'S THEOCRATIC REGIME.

A nuclear deal likely would result in a significant lifting of sanctions that would alleviate the economic pressure on the regime. Even short of a deal, a latent nuclear Iran could be bolstered economically if the international community provides Iran with additional targeted relief as a step in continued negotiations, or if the sanctions regime gradually weakens over time. An improving economy would reduce domestic political discontent with the clerics and win the government

19 David H. Petraeus and Vance Serchuk, "US Needs to Plan for the Day After an Iran Deal," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/us-needs-to-plan-for-the-day-after-an-iran-deal/2014/04/09/056ff992-bf4b-11e3-b195-dd0c1174052c_story.html.

20 Dalia Dassa Kaye and Jeffrey Martini, "The Days after a Deal with Iran: Regional Responses to a Final Nuclear Agreement," RAND Corporation, 2014, p. 14, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE122/RAND_PE122.pdf.

21 Alireza Nader, "The Day After a Deal with Iran: Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy," RAND Corporation, 2014, p. 3, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE124.html>.

greater levels of popular support. The clerics also could use a financial windfall to continue popular but costly programs such as price controls and subsidies or to crack down on domestic opposition groups.

The regime also would be boosted by the political victory that would be won by maintaining its popular nuclear program after a decade of intense international pressure. The international recognition of Iran's "right to enrich," whether *de jure* as part of a deal or *de facto*, could help shore up domestic political support among patriotic Iranians—current regime supporters and opponents alike. Moreover, the regime will likely get credit for competence, refusing to give up on the nuclear program, steering the ship of state through intense international pressure, and ultimately achieving an important national objective.

WASHINGTON SHOULD CONTINUE TO ACTIVELY REASSURE REGIONAL PARTNERS. OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE IS DEMONSTRATION OF THE CAPABILITY AND WILL TO DO "WHAT WE MUST," INCLUDING THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE IF NECESSARY, TO MAKE SURE THAT IRAN NEVER ACQUIRES NUCLEAR WEAPONS.

To be sure, a nuclear deal, or a *de facto* international recognition of Iran's nuclear latency, might strengthen Rouhani and other relative moderates within Iran's theocratic system in relation to hardliners. Given the current instability in the Middle East and the unfulfilled promise of the Arab uprising in many countries, there are many in Washington who would be satisfied with a moderating Iran and who would fear the potential chaos unleashed by a regime change in Iran. Still, an unstated long-term goal of many senior

US officials and security analysts is not just the moderation of the current theocratic government but the ushering in of a different, more democratic system altogether. For the reasons discussed above, a latent nuclear Iran could potentially push that day off further into the future. The nuclear issue is probably not among the most important determinants of this regime's hold on power, but, to the degree that it matters, nuclear latency could serve to extend the clerics' reign.

Policy Recommendations

To counteract these threats, Washington should take a number of immediate steps. First, Washington should publically reaffirm its commitment, last articulated in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, to "hold fully accountable any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor that supports or enables terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction, whether by facilitating, financing, or providing expertise or safe haven for such effort."²² In doing so, it should go further and revive the broader conception and language from the George W. Bush administration that made clear that sensitive nuclear technology transfers to states, as well as to terrorist groups, are prohibited. US officials should immediately seek P5+1 consensus on this issue and communicate privately as soon as possible with their Iranian counterparts in the ongoing nuclear negotiations that any Iranian transfers of uranium enrichment technology or material to state or nonstate actors would be a red line that would scuttle the diplomatic track, be referred to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for enforcement, and that could trigger the use of military force. Washington also should warn potential recipients of nuclear technology transfers, including Bolivia and Venezuela, of the intense international pressure that awaits recipients of sensitive nuclear technology.

Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets should be redeployed and positioned to identify any technology transfer and the military must be prepared for possible interdictions. Iran's nuclear program is likely already a high intelligence priority, but additional focus could be given to issues specific to nuclear technology transfer, including monitoring individuals with access to centrifuge designs and component parts.

Next, to prevent a regional nuclear cascade, Washington should continue to actively reassure regional partners. Of paramount importance is demonstration of the capability and will to do "what we must," including the use of military force if necessary,

22 US Department of Defense, Nuclear Posture Review, April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20nuclear%20posture%20review%20report.pdf>.

to make sure that Iran never acquires nuclear weapons. Specifically, the United States can make public information about military capabilities, exercises, and planning. In addition, Washington can share detailed information with regional partners about the status of Iran's nuclear program and compliance with any negotiated agreements that go beyond International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reporting. Finally, Washington should take additional steps to make clear its willingness to use force in the event that the current engagement track collapses. Congress can pass an authorization for the use of military force, the president can set clear red lines related to Iran's nuclear development that, if crossed, would trigger an immediate military strike, and international allies and partners, including NATO, can express support for the military option in the event that Iran decides to actualize its latent nuclear capability.

The United States also can assuage regional concerns about the Iranian threat through stepped up arms sales, missile defense cooperation, military-to-military contacts, and defense posture enhancements in the region. Specifically, the United States should adopt a more strategic approach to its Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program, providing partners with capabilities better suited to their defense needs. A more effective regional missile defense architecture would include additional Patriot batteries and greater integration among Gulf state and US systems. To make US military assets less vulnerable to potential Iranian military strikes, Washington could diversify its force posture in the region, creating several smaller and even offshore bases. The US Fifth Fleet could incorporate greater numbers of smaller, agile platforms such as the Cyclone-class patrol coastal ship. The United States also can increase military exercises and engage in broader strategic dialogues with key states in the region.

To salvage the global nonproliferation regime, Washington should take a number of additional steps. It should reiterate Kerry's remarks in the immediate aftermath of striking the November 2013 interim agreement that Iran does not have a "right to enrich" and that the interim deal, despite Iranian claims to the contrary, does not recognize any such right.²³ In addition, Washington should repeatedly make clear that any decision to permit enrichment in Iran, *de facto* or *de jure*, will not set a new precedent for future "peaceful" nuclear energy programs. Such language also should be worked into the text of any

23 Aaron Blake, "Kerry on Iran: 'We Don't Recognize a Right to Enrich,'" *Washington Post*, November 24, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/11/24/kerry-on-iran-we-do-not-recognize-a-right-to-enrich/>.

"comprehensive" nuclear deal that permits Iranian enrichment. Privately, US officials can communicate that countries in search of a similar deal can expect the same treatment Iran received: a decade of international pressure, isolation, sanctions, and threats of military strikes.

WASHINGTON SHOULD REPEATEDLY MAKE CLEAR THAT ANY DECISION TO PERMIT ENRICHMENT IN IRAN, *DE FACTO* OR *DE JURE*, WILL NOT SET A NEW PRECEDENT FOR FUTURE "PEACEFUL" NUCLEAR ENERGY PROGRAMS.

To prevent Iran from using its financial windfall to fund terrorist organizations, the United States should take a number of steps. First, the United States should make it clear, in private and public messaging, that Iran will not be fully welcomed back into the community of nations as long as it supports terrorist activity. This is true even if the nuclear issue is resolved to Washington's satisfaction. Next, to keep the economic pressure on, the United States needs to maintain in place all terrorism-related sanctions, even if other sanctions are lifted as part of the nuclear negotiations. Assuring US allies and partners in the region is another important component of combating Iran's malign influence and many of the necessary measures to achieve this goal are outlined in the above section on preventing a regional proliferation cascade. In addition, however, the United States needs to work with its partners in the region, including Israel and Gulf states, to put in place a strategy for countering Iran's terror networks. Iran sponsors terrorist groups even as it cooperates on the issue of nuclear diplomacy, and there is no reason why the United States cannot similarly negotiate on nuclear matters while also combating Iran's malign influence in other areas.

Finally, the United States can take a number of steps to prevent the clerical regime from solidifying its stranglehold on power. The United States must make it

THE UNITED STATES MUST MAKE IT CLEAR THAT EVEN IF IT IS WILLING TO ACCEPT IRAN'S ENRICHMENT PROGRAM, IT IS NOT WILLING TO RESPECT AN AUTOCRATIC GOVERNMENT THAT CONTINUALLY VIOLATES INTERNATIONAL NORMS AND THE BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS OF ITS OWN PEOPLE.

clear that even if it is willing to accept Iran's enrichment program, it is not willing to respect an autocratic government that continually violates international norms and the basic human rights of its own people. Human rights-related sanctions must remain in place. Washington can also increase funding for programs designed to promote democracy in Iran, including television and radio programs beamed into Iran; Farsi-language websites; public diplomacy and exchange programs; dissemination of information technology to opposition groups; projects to document and broadcast Iranian human rights violations; and to support the efforts of legal, media, and human rights nongovernmental organizations both inside and outside Iran. Finally, the United States can facilitate interactions between "graduates" of successful

democratic transitions in eastern Europe and elsewhere and Iranian opposition groups so that they might exchange information on best practices.²⁴

Conclusion

The potential threats posed by a latent nuclear Iran include proliferation, regional insecurity, and strengthened autocratic governance in the country. Washington can use the policy recommendations outlined in this paper to mitigate these threats. Many of these recommendations are complementary and synergistic. For example, steps to enhance security assistance to partners in the Arabian Peninsula can help to simultaneously dissuade nuclear proliferation and counter Iran's malign influence. Others may be in tension. Efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Iran would threaten the rule of Iran's theocratic leaders, and this could lead them to be less cooperative in other areas, including in their support to terrorist groups or on the nuclear issue itself. Washington must continually monitor and calibrate the results of its efforts to ensure that it prioritizes the mitigation of the most important threats when policies are in tension.

Keeping Iran from the bomb is necessary but not sufficient for protecting US interests in the Middle East. An Iran with a latent nuclear capability is certainly preferable to a nuclear-armed Iran, but it is still deeply problematic in many ways. The United States must, therefore, properly anticipate the possible negative consequences of a latent nuclear Iran and work now to mitigate them.

²⁴ Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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