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A military vehicle carrying an Iranian Ghased smart bomb, drives past a picture of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, during a parade to commemorate the anniversary of army day in Tebran, April 18, 2009. | Reuters

THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: THE GULF STATES AND THE PROSPECT OF A NUCLEAR IRAN

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The issue of Iran has become a central preoccupation for the international community in recent months, thanks to the intersection of the historic changes in the region, an American presidential election, sharpening rhetoric from Israel, and Tehran's relentless determination to advance its nuclear capabilities. The focus of policymakers in Washington and around the world remains fixed on the options for forestalling Iran's determined march toward a nuclear weapons capability. This is the appropriate objective; the best possible outcome for maintaining peace and security in the Gulf and avoiding a deeply destabilizing nuclear arms race remains a credible, durable solution that curtails Iran's nuclear ambitions. And while achieving such an outcome remains profoundly problematic, largely as a result of Tehran's intransigence, preventing Iran from crossing the nuclear weapons threshold—either through persuasion, coercion, or some combination of the two—remains fully and unambiguously within the capabilities of the international community.



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The shadow cast by Tehran has created a particularly intense sense of existential anxiety for the smaller Gulf states, including Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman. After all, these are the same states whose civil orders were repeatedly disrupted by Iranian subversion and sponsorship of terrorism during the first decade after Iran's Islamic revolution, and whose thriving economies rely on unimpeded access to the global commons. The events of the past decade have only exacerbated the smaller Gulf states' endemic sense of insecurity. Iran has achieved a synergistic, sometimes even parasitic, relationship with the leadership of post-Saddam Iraq that, together with Tehran's longstanding relationships with Syria and Lebanese Hizballah, greatly enables its bid for predominance in the heart of the Middle East. Today, the uncertainties surrounding the implications of regional flux have left Tehran simultaneously weakened and emboldened—a particularly dangerous combination for this particular array of Iranian leaders.

With Iran's nuclear program advancing by the month and its efforts to tilt the regional balance in its favor growing more forceful, the small states of the Persian Gulf must face the distinct dilemma of preparing for the possible worst-case scenario of the nuclearization of their neighborhood, while participating ever more robustly in the international efforts to preclude that very possibility. In some respects, the Gulf states' situation is unique. Unlike Israel, another small state that perceives an existential threat from Iran, the Gulf states cannot fall back upon either a presumptive nuclear deterrent or a primordial bond to the body politic of the world's only remaining superpower. And in contrast to Iran's other neighbors, the vast resources and history of ideological and territorial disputes between the Gulf states and Tehran significantly intensify the stakes. Even before the Gulf became the vital transportation corridor for global energy, the fault line in the regional balance of power had always run between the northern states and their southern rivals. The mere possibility that the north may gain a nuclear advantage

is reshaping the security environment for Iran's neighbors in the Gulf.

Because the threat of Iran looms large, the exigency of considering the widest possible array of alternative prospects for the evolution of this protracted crisis is important. This paper tackles the scenarios that successive American presidents have deemed unacceptable—an Iranian development or acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability or of nuclear weapons themselves—and the implications that such scenarios would have for the global nonproliferation regime and regional security, with a particular focus on the special challenges faced by Iran's southern neighbors. To protect against threats along their borders, the Gulf states have traditionally hedged their bets by seeking balanced relations with their more powerful neighbors while cultivating extra-regional allies. That formula is already changing, as evidenced by a new assertiveness in Gulf states' postures toward Tehran and a new creativity in deploying strategies for deterring and mitigating Iran's efforts to extend its influence and/or destabilize its neighbors. The Gulf states must transform this tactical innovation into a full-fledged new hedging policy: one that deploys every possible tool to prevent a nuclear Iran while taking every possible step to prepare for such an eventuality.

An explicit test or declaration of Iranian weapons capability would also shake the credibility of American intelligence and deterrent capabilities.

Scenarios for a Nuclear Future

The conditions under which Iran's nuclear ambitions move from aspirational to actual has direct implications for the responses of its neighbors and the international community. The most important distinction is whether Tehran opts to make its capabilities explicit, either via a test of a nuclear device and/or an announcement by the regime, or whether its capabilities are discovered via detection and disclosure by Western intelligence services. The issue of acknowledgement is not a minor one: the readiness of the Iranian regime to affirm a weapons capability will have a make-or-break impact on the response of the international community. Moreover, the status of the program would also offer important insight into the disposition of the Iranian leadership and its susceptibility to diplomatic and coercive efforts to shape its cost-benefit assessment.

A declared Iranian program amplifies the threat, particularly for Iran's immediate neighbors. It would cast a dramatic shadow over the sense of security and prosperity that are essential to the smaller Gulf states' strategies for economic growth (and, ultimately, state survival). An explicit test or declaration of Iranian weapons capability would also shake the credibility of American intelligence and



deterrent capabilities because as the crisis over Iran's nuclear program has deepened, U.S. officials have sounded increasingly confident notes about American ability to detect and expose a race across the finish line.¹ President Barack Obama has sought to clarify any ambiguity in the American posture toward a prospective Iranian weapon, declaring in March 2012 that "Iran's leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And as I have made clear time and again during the course of my presidency, I will not hesitate to use force when it is necessary to defend the United States and its interests."² Given these forceful positions on detection and preemption, a declared Iranian capability would indicate either an epic failure of Western intelligence, or a tacit willingness by Washington to tolerate at least the early phases of Iranian nuclear weapon rather than preventing it.

Despite these manifest trepidations and consequences, confirmation of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability would entail some advantages with respect to the likely international response. Should Tehran choose to embrace and proclaim its nuclear status, Washington would have a much easier time in mobilizing international institutions, including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as well as worldwide public opinion. Widespread censure and even more severe sanctions would prove more quickly forthcoming, and Iranian leaders would find themselves deprived of their preferred and much-valued appeal as victims at the hands of unjust world powers, which has some resonance in the developing world.

Conversely, an implicit Iranian weapons capability will put a much greater onus on Washington and its allies. They will have to make a compelling case to an international community that, while largely unified in opposition to a nuclear Iran, has historically proven reluctant to acknowledge and confront breaches of law and security by the Islamic Republic. Making a public case will require a substantial investment of time and political capital, coordination with allies and other relevant international actors, and a willingness to risk exposure of the intelligence sources and processes that underpin the conclusion. The specter of previous U.S. intelligence failures, particularly the notorious misjudgments of Saddam Hussein's nuclear capabilities, would undermine even the most compelling evidence and arguments. For Iran's neighbors, the residual uncertainty and ambiguity would complicate their capacity to adopt explicitly confrontational policies toward Tehran.

However, an implicit weapons capability or a covert arsenal may mitigate some of the challenges that would come with Tehran explicitly articulating its nuclear position. As Ambassador James Dobbins notes, "Uncertainty regarding Iran's actual capacity, while itself a source of anxiety, would be less provocative than certainty of such a capacity. The region has lived with an unacknowledged Israeli nuclear arsenal since the late 1960s, and could conceivably do the same with a similarly discreet Iranian capacity."³ The rhetoric of the current Israeli leadership, which has compared the Islamic Republic to Hitler on the eve of the



Holocaust, may make it difficult to envision that that such a scenario would in fact be tolerable to the Israeli strategic or political psyche. Still, Tehran's track record of pursuing enrichment in defiance of stated U.S. and Israeli policy as well as a series of increasingly punitive UNSC resolutions suggests that the regime has some confidence, and justifiably so, in its ability to move the goal posts and induce acceptance of objectionable activities. Without casting doubt on the veracity and sincerity of U.S. and Israeli pledges to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold, recent history makes clear that an Iranian nuclear ambiguity represents a realistic future scenario.

Many analysts contend that Tehran would prefer an undeclared "turn-key capability" – meaning mastery of the technology and acquisition of the materiel to produce a nuclear weapon with little delay or new investment – precisely because it might enable the regime to evade the penalties and recriminations associated with weapons status. In addition, such an eventuality is more consistent with the history of opacity and deception that has surrounded the Iranian nuclear program since the regime resurrected it in the waning years of its long war with Iraq. Moreover, a careful reading of the history of nuclear weapons development demonstrates that the strategy of "nuclear hedging" has been frequently deployed by other nuclear aspirant states.⁴ Mark Fitzpatrick, director of the Non-proliferation and Disarmament Programme at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, has suggested that "it is very possible, even likely, that Iran will stop short of actually building a nuclear weapon, while striving to achieve the capability to do so in a short time... I say this because Iran surely knows that if it starts to build a weapon and this leaks, Israel and probably the U.S. too will launch a preemptive military attack.... For the time being, until Iran has sufficient enriched uranium to make breakout worth the risk, there is little practical difference between striving for a capability and striving for a bomb."⁵

As the standoff between Tehran and the international community has escalated to crisis proportions, Iranian officials have sought to emphasize their doctrinal rejection of nuclear weapons.

While Iranian leaders regularly engage in atomic pageantry – President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad makes a habit of celebrating the milestones ostensibly achieved in the program – they have also placed a premium with respect to both their domestic legitimacy and their international credibility on their professions that the program is designed for purely civilian purposes. Indeed, as the standoff between Tehran and the international community has escalated to crisis proportions, Iranian officials have sought to emphasize their doctrinal rejection of



nuclear weapons—possibly as a mechanism for facilitating some degree of reversal while appearing to save face.⁶

Turn-key capability is hardly a reassuring prospect. First and foremost, according to one analysis, such a status “is inimical to the objectives of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty” and the security concerns that hedging provokes among Iran’s neighbors and adversaries will eventually erode regional and global commitment to restraining the spread of nuclear technology and weapons.⁷ Even if it can be established that Tehran is engaged in “nuclear hedging” rather than an inevitable progression toward an explicit weapons capability, there are nonetheless several factors that might prompt a shift in this posture, as outlined below. Alone or in some combination, these issues might drive Tehran to embrace its entry into the nuclear weapons club. And even if the current strategy in Tehran is to approach the threshold of weaponization without actually crossing it, “no one can be sure that it will not, once it has enough fissile material and confidence in its weaponization and delivery, simply break out of the treaty by denouncing it on some pretext or other,” according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Shahram Chubin.⁸

- **Provocation:** It is widely presumed that an American or Israeli preemptive attack to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities would precipitate a decision by the regime to formally renounce its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and explicitly embrace the objective of reaching a weapons capability. Indeed, since the 2002 revelations of Iran’s efforts to develop an enrichment program and the pressures exerted first by the International Atomic Energy Agency and eventually by the UNSC to compel Tehran to abandon enrichment, various Iranian political figures have hinted broadly that pressure will trigger withdrawal from the NPT.⁹ These threats contain some element of bluff, and they are designed to reinforce the reluctance of Moscow and Beijing to embrace sanctions. Still, the recurrent discussions among Iran’s political elite around the value of retaining NPT signatory status highlight the potential domestic political value of such a move in response to aggressive action from the international community.
- **Politics:** Iran’s domestic dynamics have regressed dramatically in recent years, with the wholesale elimination of the reformist faction from decision-making responsibility and the marginalization of leading pragmatic conservatives such as former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Isolation and repression have become mutually reinforcing, and the dogmatic leadership of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has emerged as a central actor in both the domestic political competition as well as in the country’s economic management. Iran’s domestic evolution retains the capacity for unpredictability and surprise, but it is certainly possible for conditions to worsen before they improve. The ascension of even more hard-line ideological and nationalist political figures from the



IRGC could sway Iran's supreme leader toward adopting a more explicitly confrontational stance that potentially includes advocating for the militarization of the nuclear program.

- Technical decisions: Precedent suggests that technical factors may have some bearing on the course adopted by a would-be proliferator. The scientific community in Iran that is attached to the nuclear program has gained prestige over the years, and it is credible that these technocrats may have some influence over the course of the regime's nuclear politics, particularly as the program has progressed and its underlying motivations have inevitably evolved.¹⁰ While it seems unlikely that technical considerations would override the broader political and strategic advantages of nuclear ambiguity, the exigencies of the program itself could tip the balance toward testing if other conditions warrant.
- Prestige: Some analysts argue that ideological considerations will eventually impel Tehran to make its nuclear achievements explicit.¹¹ According to this line of reasoning, Iran's regional appeal is grounded in its forceful rejection of an American-imposed order, and there would be no more powerful mechanism for asserting Iranian independence and immunity to U.S. influence than a visible demonstration of its nuclear program. For an embattled regime contending with economic sanctions that have hit the broader public with unprecedented speed and vigor, a nuclear test could provide a useful rallying point.
- Desperation: Finally, it is possible that Tehran may find itself boxed in by its own maximalism on the nuclear issue. Having tied the legitimacy of the regime to the perpetuation of enrichment and to the nuclear program more broadly, the Iranian leadership may now simply be unwilling or unable to submit to the concessions demanded by the international community, irrespective of the cost. Ray Takeyh has argued that Iran sees sanctions as ultimately endurable and temporary in nature, and that "the Islamic Republic perceives it can reclaim its international standing better with the bomb than without one."¹² According to this logic, Tehran may have already made the determination to press forward as quickly as possible to explicit weapons capability. As one study notes, in the aftermath of the nuclearization of South Asia, the sanctions imposed in reaction to the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests began to be relaxed within a matter of months. "Would-be proliferators no doubt took notice of the mild international consequences for breaching the nuclear ramparts," the report concluded.¹³

Legal Implications of a Nuclear Iran

From the earliest revelations surrounding Iran's covert nuclear activities, the international effort to address and constrain Iran's nuclear program has been grounded in international law, particularly the terms of the 1968 Nuclear Non-



proliferation Treaty, to which Iran is a signatory. This is both appropriate and necessary, as Iran's leaders have consistently pointed to the NPT provisions that permit peaceful uses of nuclear technologies as delineated in Article IV, paragraph 1 of the treaty. Iran's position has been repeatedly refuted by the International Atomic Energy Agency, beginning with the November 2003 resolution adopted by its Board of Governors that asserted Tehran had failed to fulfill its NPT obligations, and in subsequent resolutions and periodic reports. It should be noted that the 2003 resolution did not contend Iran's enrichment activities themselves constituted a violation of the NPT—the treaty is not intended to impinge on the right of non-nuclear weapons states to develop civilian power generation programs—but rather asserted that “Iran has failed in a number of instances over an extended period of time to meet its obligations under its Safeguards Agreement with respect to the reporting of nuclear material, and its processing and use, as well as the declaration of facilities where such material has been processed and stored.” (The resolution noted Iran's enrichment “with gravest concern”; at the time, Tehran had agreed to suspend enrichment and reprocessing as a confidence building measure.)¹⁴ Still, it was only in September 2005 that the Board of Governors passed a resolution that formally declared Iran to be in “non compliance” with Article XII.C of the IAEA statute,¹⁵ and another year would pass before the IAEA referred the matter to the UNSC.

Although the legal dimensions initially centered around Tehran's historical failures to disclose its activities as required by the NPT, the question of enrichment has loomed in the background because of the concern that while legal, a large-scale domestic enrichment program would provide Tehran with the facilities, expertise, and experience needed to achieve a weapons capability. This equivocality is precisely the factor that has complicated international efforts to constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions. Suspending enrichment was demanded first by the three European states that set out to negotiate with Tehran, and eventually by the International Atomic Energy Agency, but always in the guise of a confidence-building measure rather than under accusations of a violation of Iran's Safeguards Agreement or other legal obligations.

Moving the Iranian nuclear file beyond the IAEA into the Security Council resolved this legal ambiguity. The IAEA Board of Governors' decision in 2006 to refer Iran's case to the Security Council shifted the central legal issue from lack of transparency to ongoing enrichment, by ordering Tehran—through UNSCR 1696—to suspend enrichment on the basis of Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Until the case moved to the UNSC, Tehran was under no legal obligation to suspend its enrichment activities, and Iranian leaders faced no penalties except for international censure for its refusal to do so. The sanctions and associated measures undertaken by the international community are a direct result of Tehran's violation of UNSCR 1696 and the demand for an enrichment suspension.¹⁶ Since the referral, the IAEA has reported on several occasions about Iranian activities that are inconsistent with its Safeguards Agreement and/or NPT



obligations, and has raised concerns about others, but there has been no new formal finding of noncompliance since the original 2005 declaration.

The distinction between an overt and covert weapons program matters tremendously in terms of the legal basis of the international response.

An acknowledgement or discovery of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability would shift the parameters even more dramatically. Once again, the distinction between an overt and covert weapons program matters tremendously in terms of the legal basis of the international response. A formal announcement by the Iranian leadership, a weapons test, or some other explicit and official embrace of a weapons program would put Iran in direct conflict with its basic obligations under the NPT, specifically Article II, which states that non-nuclear weapons states commit “not to receive ... manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.”

Rather than violating its basic NPT responsibilities, Tehran could withdraw from the treaty as provided in Article X, which authorizes members to do so when “extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country.”¹⁷ The treaty does require a three-month notice, notification to all member states as well as the United Nations Security Council, and a written justification of the “extraordinary events” that precipitated the decision to withdraw. It should be noted that during the periodic NPT reviews, several states have argued the position that those that have been found to be out of compliance with the NPT should not be allowed to withdraw, while others have maintained that materials and/or knowledge acquired as a result of NPT membership should no longer accrue to a state that has withdrawn from the treaty. For these reasons, an Iranian attempt to dodge the NPT by withdrawal might be contested, and might well draw specific legal penalties.¹⁸

Ultimately, however, a declared weapons program would make Tehran’s NPT status irrelevant, at least from a security perspective; the locus of responsibility and diplomatic response would be the United Nations Security Council, irrespective of Iran’s status under the NPT. In such a case whereby Tehran was fully transparent about its intentions and weapons capabilities as a result of a test or a policy declaration by the leadership, Washington and its allies would have a reasonably compelling case that an overt nuclear weapons program constituted a threat to peace and security under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. In fact, Chapter VII is precisely the basis for the successive rounds of UN sanctions imposed on Iran in response to lesser provocations. To date, though, none of the UN sanctions resolutions have invoked Article 39 of Chapter VII, declaring Iran’s



noncompliance with its NPT obligations a “threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression.” However, a declared program would certainly meet that threshold, and on that basis UNSC authorization of the use of force under Article 42 of the UN Charter would clearly be in the mix.

An undeclared Iranian nuclear weapons capability would prove much more problematic, for the reasons expressed in the prior section: in order to forge international consensus, Washington and/or its partners would have to exhibit persuasive evidence that Tehran had engaged in the acquisition or manufacture of nuclear weapons. As suggested, this would require an investment of time, intelligence sharing, and political capital. Moreover, Iran could point to the technicalities replete in the imperfect language of the NPT, such as the vagaries of the word “manufacture” which even American diplomats have acknowledged could give an NPT member states the prerogative to “have manufactured an entire mockup of the non-nuclear shell of a nuclear explosive, while continuing to observe its safeguards obligations on all nuclear material.”¹⁹

There would be other legal ambiguities to resolve as well. Views differ within the international community as to the relevance of the “apparent purpose” of the nuclear activities in question; while Washington has argued that intentions matter, “this interpretation is not shared by all experts,” according to Paul Kerr.²⁰ On this basis, an Iranian government that continued to claim civilian intent for activities with an incontrovertibly military dimension might be able to fashion a legal case for its posture. If this occurred, the United States or other parties would have to weigh the value of pursuing UNSC authorization for the use of force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter on the basis of available evidence, or responding to Iran’s activities without recourse to the UN. Opposition to an Iranian nuclear weapons capability is already fairly widespread, based upon sanctions enforcement and other mechanisms states have for signaling their preferences to Tehran. However, the effort to persuade the international community to support the use of force against a presumptive rather than declared Iranian nuclear weapons program would invoke uncomfortable parallels with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and would require an intense debate on the permissibility as well as the desirability of preemptive action, an issue that remains hotly contested among the international legal community. Notably, the International Court of Justice has ruled that even violation of the NPT or even acquisition of nuclear weapons does not, on its face, constitute a violation of the UN Charter or international law—and some states would surely fall back on the most narrow pretexts.²¹

With respect to the legal implications, a nuclear Iran would surely entail an array of complications and setbacks for the global nonproliferation regime, but the conventional wisdom that it would represent or foreshadow its collapse is probably exaggerated. NPT member states abide by their obligations because the advantages of doing so conform to their leaderships’ national-interest calculations and vastly outweigh the disadvantages of rogue nuclear activities. Iran’s exploitation of the grey areas of the NPT and failure to fully abide by its treaty



commitments would not alter that presumption for most regimes, just as the capabilities of a recalcitrant and isolated North Korea have not persuaded its neighbors to initiate unsanctioned nuclear programs. In fact, it is reasonable that Iranian malfeasance might strengthen the determination of world powers to reinforce the relevance of the NPT.

Iranian foreign policy has always been the subject of intense factional competition among the diverse components of the revolutionary coalition.

Security Implications of a Nuclear Iran

Assessing the likely implications that a nuclear weapons capability would have on Iran's approach to its neighbors and the rest of the world requires a baseline understanding of the major components of Iranian foreign policy today. Despite the regression in its internal political dynamics in recent years and despite the tendency for Iran's many critics to depict its worldview and behavior in absolutist terms, Iran's leadership remain a complex and dynamic regime, whose policies both at home and abroad reflect an amalgamation of ideology, interest, and opportunity. Certain elements can be discerned with some consistency over the course of the past thirty-four years. These include religiously-inspired messianism, Persian nationalism, and a radical resentment of the established order that is a legacy of the state's revolutionary inception. While national interests matter to Iran's leadership and to its foreign policy, just as they do for any other state, in Iran, they are perceived through the lenses of these countervailing prisms. Complicating this picture is the reality that Iranian foreign policy has always been the subject of intense factional competition among the diverse components of the revolutionary coalition. As a result, Iranian foreign policy has been erratic and mutable, evolving from the early sentiment that exporting the revolution was essential for its own survival to a more variegated but equally determined opportunism that characterizes Iran's hard-liners today.

Recent trends in Iran's domestic politics have strengthened the hand of the hard-liners, with a predictable impact on Iran's relations with its neighbors and the rest of the world. The ascension of the younger generation of conservatives with the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency and the internal upheaval that followed his disputed 2009 reelection have sidelined the reformist and pragmatic elements that had played a moderating role on Iranian foreign policy. As the Islamic Republic edges closer to the nuclear precipice, its levers of power are dominated by two groups—the conservative stalwarts of the theocracy and their equally dogmatic younger counterparts. For this latter cohort, the war with Iraq in the 1980s was the crucible in which their approach to the world was



forged. Its effects manifested in several ways: the resurgence of, and reliance on, nationalism; the conviction that the world is inherently antagonistic to the Islamic Republic; the mistrust of international laws and institutions; and the presumption that hardships can be endured and that survival against a more powerful adversary represents victory.

The ascendance of the hard-liners only underscores the trepidations with which the world, and the Gulf states in particular, views the prospect of a nuclear Iran. Iran's acquisition of a weapons capability will almost certainly exacerbate the assertive tendencies of the current leadership. Furthermore, Iran's historic focus on the Gulf—as its foremost strategic rivalry and economic lifeline—suggests that its southern neighbors will be on the frontlines of a reassertion of Iran's bid for regional primacy. At the very minimum, it seems reasonable to anticipate that the leadership of a nuclear Iran would be more prone to nationalist grandstanding and attempts at intimidation, along the lines of Ahmadinejad's controversial April 2012 visit to the island of Abu Musa. Emboldened by a sense of nuclear invulnerability—and further alienated by the increasing willingness of the Gulf states to align against Iran's nuclear program—Tehran might be tempted to revive the tactics that it deployed during its early zealous era, when it helped to incite a 1981 attempted coup in Bahrain and supported a 1983 bombings in Kuwait targeting the U.S. embassy and other American interests, a 1985 assassination attempt against Kuwait's emir, provocative anti-Saudi and anti-American rallies during the annual Hajj pilgrimage, and other subversive actions against its neighbors.

The current political context is replete with opportunities for Iranian-sponsored subversion, thanks to the continuing upheaval and repression in Bahrain, the dysfunction and disruption in Kuwait's governing institutions, and the ongoing sense of unresolved grievances in a number of other states. However, it is also important to consider whether a nuclear-armed Iran would prove more prone to the use of conventional force (this memo accepts the premise—one that is occasionally questioned or refuted—that the Iranian regime is not suicidal). Disparate lessons can be drawn from the advent of a nuclear South Asia. On the one hand, since the Indian and Pakistani tests, a region that has long been on the precipice of conflict has not experienced a full-fledged military engagement between the two adversaries despite repeated provocations and tensions. Conversely, as French analyst Bruno Tertrais has noted, within a few months of its declaration as a nuclear power, Pakistan embarked on a dangerous series of attacks in Kargil intended to take advantage of its newfound capabilities and tip the balance of power in its favor.²²

Both the troubled history between the Islamic Republic and Gulf states, and the current political context imply that the mere suggestion of any newfound Iranian activism in the Gulf states would prove deeply unnerving for their leaderships. The presence of an amped-up Iranian threat would cast a shadow over the region and its ability to continue to attract international capital. And while the epic



resources of the Gulf offer some measure of insulation, the tragic history of the Lebanese Civil War and its aftermath demonstrates that violence, or even the threat thereof, will erode even the most established centers of finance and investment and encourage alternatives to assume their place.

This pall cast by a nuclear Iran would have direct impact on the entire global economy. A nuclear Tehran need only indulge in the language of threats—that is in fact the stock and trade of the hard-liners—in order to make its influence felt on global oil prices, and consequently affect stability of most of the developed world’s economies. Iranian leaders have already used his tactic to frequent effect already as a tool of deterring pressure or preemptive military action against its nuclear activities. And while Washington is quietly confident about the ability of the United States to ensure the secure transit of oil supplies through the Strait of Hormuz, a confidence that is shared by oil markets, based upon the muted response to recent bluster from Tehran, a nuclear Iran would almost surely produce a sustained security premium for oil prices that could undermine the global economic recovery and energy-poor states.

An Iran that had achieved nuclear weapons capability would likely see itself as even less constrained by international law or the possibility of reprisals against aggression.

In addition to the effect a nuclear-weapons capable Tehran would have on the Gulf and the global economy, Iran would surely amplify its support to proxy organizations and its reach across the broader Middle East. An Iran that had achieved nuclear weapons capability would likely see itself as even less constrained by international law or the possibility of reprisals against aggression. Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon would likely experience an intensification of Tehran’s materiel support to non-state actors; Iranian meddling in the unsettled situations of Yemen and Bahrain might also well expand. Moreover, Iran’s crossing of the nuclear weapons threshold might decisively alter the risk calculus for its clients; Massimiliano Fiore has argued that the support of a nuclear state sponsor might encourage groups such as Hizballah to “take the nuclear umbrella for granted and be more inclined to escalate minor conflicts with or without encouragement from Tehran.”²³ A nuclear Iran could also intercede more strenuously on behalf of embattled allies such as Bashar al-Asad in Syria, deterring other states from supporting the opposition and ensuring the survival of a brutal regime.²⁴

But perhaps the most unnerving dimension of an Iranian nuclear capability would be the prospect of transfer of a nuclear weapon or fissile material to a non-



state actor, either deliberate or inadvertent. The world currently knows nothing of Tehran's nuclear doctrine, nor the controls that might be established to ensure the security of a nuclear weapon—if either yet exists.

However any nuclear breakthrough might shape Iran's own foreign policy decision-making, though, it certainly would pose a negative impact for the strategic perceptions of its neighbors, by raising the prestige value of this and other weapons of mass destruction in the broader Middle East. The leaderships of Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf emirates might well interpret an explicit Iranian nuclear weapons capability as a prerequisite for developing nuclear programs of their own. The global non-proliferation regime might collapse if the security advantages of acquiring weapons appear more persuasive than adherence to the NPT.

As Eric Edelman, Andrew Krepinevich, and Evan Braden Montgomery have written, the expansion of the nuclear weapons club around the Middle East would almost surely create conditions of greater instability, particularly at its inception when Iran may not yet have a credible second-strike capability.²⁵ This situation could precipitate a persistent sense of crisis and recourse to violence. An Israeli strike would loom as an inevitability. Israel and Iran, according to Matthew Kroenig, "lack nearly all the safeguards that helped the United States and the Soviet Union avoid a nuclear exchange during the Cold War—secure second-strike capabilities, clear lines of communication, long flight times for ballistic missiles from one country to the other, and experience managing nuclear arsenals."²⁶

Finally, the prospect of a nuclear Iran would have direct and diversified consequences for the longstanding cooperation between Washington and the smaller Gulf states. While any U.S. strategy of deterring and containing a nuclear Iran would inevitably rely upon a strengthened strategic relationship with America's regional allies, as outlined below, the precipitating condition would surely prompt some reassessment of the value and credibility of Washington as a partner. There is no ready replacement for the U.S. strategic role in the Gulf; at this time, neither China nor Russia appears interested in assuming a substantial role in preserving regional security. Still, the frustration that has already been exhibited by Iran's neighbors over the failure of the United States to blunt the theocracy's growing sway and the perception that Washington's reliability will inevitably constrain cooperation and encourage hedging, either in favor of Iranian imperatives or in search of an alternative external security guarantor.

There are a range of alternative perspectives on the security implications of a nuclear Iran that, together, should serve as a caveat to some of the inevitable alarmism. Some analysts have suggested that an explicit nuclear capability might assuage Iran's persistent sense of insecurity and paradoxically cultivate a greater degree of responsibility and even a new capacity to arrive a modus vivendi with old adversaries such as the United States.²⁷ As Paul Pillar has noted, the presumption that a nuclear-armed Iran would dramatically alter the balance of



power is rarely analyzed with much precision. “The notion that a nuclear weapon would turn Iran into a significantly more dangerous actor that would imperil U.S. interests has become conventional wisdom, and it gets repeated so often by so many diverse commentators that it seldom, if ever, is questioned,” Pillar wrote this past spring.²⁸

In particular, there is no automaticity to the assumptions about likely regional proliferation in response to an Iranian nuclear weapons capability. Indeed, there are powerful factors that have mitigated against such an outcome. According to Etal Solingen, Mubarak’s Egypt “rejected ‘reactive proliferation’ since the 1970s” despite enjoying superpower patronage.²⁹ The precedents from other proliferators suggests some degree of skepticism about the inevitability of a nuclear arms race: Japan has voluntarily constrained its capabilities despite Chinese acquisition of the bomb, and most of the Middle East did not see itself compelled by a presumptive Israeli weapons capability to go nuclear. One analysis presented the possibility of self-imposed nuclear restraint by Iran’s adversaries in this way: “The Pakistanis were willing to ‘eat grass’ for the privilege of joining the nuclear club, as the Pakistani leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto once famously put it, but not everyone is.”³⁰

As these examples highlight, historical precedent in fact does not bear out the assumption that the acquisition of nuclear weapons inevitably prompts its neighbors and/or rivals to follow suit. In fact, the record also undercuts the presumption that possession of a nuclear arsenal conveys tangible benefits either in terms of security or prestige.³¹ That is, of course, the message that the international community hopes to communicate to Tehran, but should these efforts fail, the proximity and vulnerability of the Gulf states demands robust preparations for even an unlikely worst-case scenario.

The Gulf states’ newfound willingness to challenge Tehran directly is a product of both their accumulating concerns about Iranian policies and capabilities... and function of the deep sense of anxiety that has been provoked by the epic regional changes unfolding since the advent of the Arab Spring.

Policy Options for the Gulf

Whether a nuclear Iran is a merely a looming fear or an inevitable catastrophe, the possibilities must serve as impetus for the world—in particular, Iran’s neighbors—to develop a coherent strategy for dealing with the range of possible outcomes. While most of the policy literature emphasizes the natural tendency of Iran’s neighbors to avoid direct confrontation with Tehran,³² more recent developments suggest a historic shift is underway. The Gulf states’ newfound willingness to



challenge Tehran directly is a product of both their accumulating concerns about Iranian policies and capabilities on the part of many regional leaders, and perhaps even more so, a function of the deep sense of anxiety that has been provoked by the epic regional changes unfolding since the advent of the Arab Spring. In this sense, public pushback against Iranian influence has emerged as a politically and culturally viable response to the disquiet and disorder that has infected a region in which stability was until recently a familiar and prized commodity.

However, on its own, this new assertiveness does not represent a sufficient strategy for dealing with such a persistent and profound threat as a nuclearizing Iran. The Gulf must complement the newfound sense of urgency surrounding Iran with a clear-sighted plan for blunting Iranian influence and nuclear ambitions while preparing for the prospect that those ambitions may eventually be realized. Much work is already underway, including a multi-faceted program of stepping up the defensive capabilities of the regional states and demonstrating resolve to Tehran.³³ Each of the policy options outlined below could and should be initiated now, when Iran's nuclear ambitions remain subject to reversal; they would also retain salience to a strategy intended to deal with an Iran that has made it across the nuclear threshold.

- ***Step up sanctions enforcement:*** For better or worse, the international effort to stall Iran's nuclear progress is centered around a robust and increasingly wide-ranging array of sanctions to constrain Iran's economy. The Gulf states have adhered to the letter of the UNSC sanctions, but there has been an understandable hesitancy to go above and beyond the legal mandate. Sanctions have a vital role to play along the entire continuum of policy toward Tehran: in reducing the resources available to the regime and shifting its cost-benefit assessment toward moderation; signaling the coherence of the international community toward Iran's objectionable policies; and, should the nuclear impasse persist over the medium to long term, degrading the stability of the Iranian regime. Recent developments suggest a tougher stance in Dubai, notably a center of Iranian offshore finance and reexport options, but there is much more that could be done in this realm to underscore to Tehran that its avenues for evasion and mitigation of sanctions will be limited.
- ***Address domestic grievances:*** With important exceptions, Iran's modus operandi for projecting its power in the Gulf has typically not involved direct military maneuvers, but rather the agitation of restive minority populations—particularly Shi'ah—and support and funding to militants in neighboring states. In other words, Iran's capacity for mobilizing the disaffected communities within Gulf states is the primary threat facing these countries. For this reason, just as each of these states has invested considerable effort in reinforcing infrastructure security and other mechanisms to blunt any future effort by Tehran to wreak havoc on its economy and trade, the same governments ought to devote equal attention



to their potential social and political vulnerabilities.

The most glaring case is Bahrain. The persistence of popular dissatisfaction with power-sharing in Bahrain and the need for the direct engagement of Saudi and Emirati troops to maintain calm represents an invitation to Iranian troublemaking. There is simply no reason to believe that repression can provide a durable solution to the Bahraini public's grievances; Manama's allies need to underscore the importance of moving toward a process of reform. Similar, albeit less fraught, issues exist elsewhere in the region; additionally, the question of integrating expatriate worker populations into the social fabric of the Gulf in a more durable fashion should be addressed as well.

Tackling the internal dimension of the Iranian threat will also necessitate some recognition of the schism between the publics' and the governments' views of Iran. A number of public opinion surveys conducted over the course of the past decade suggest that Iran's nuclear program commands greater support among Arab populations than among their leaderships.³⁴ While the events of the past eighteen months have surely dampened this enthusiasm in many corners, the "nuclear apartheid argument" voiced by Iranian hard-liners undoubtedly still retains some resonance.

Beyond providing insulation from Iranian exploitation of domestic grievances, serious efforts to enhance domestic stability would prove useful for other dimensions of a new hedging strategy. For example, political reforms that strengthen representative institutions and civil rights and freedoms would help to mitigate the likely concerns that might arise within the U.S. Congress in the event explicit security guarantees come under consideration.

- ***Improve regional security cooperation:*** The three-decade history of the Gulf Cooperation Council has involved relatively slow progress toward the military as well as the political components of a common defense. GCC leaders themselves have pressed for just such an intensification of collaboration among the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, although internecine rivalries and divergent vantages of the range of regional security challenges has constrained the process to date.

Beyond developing capabilities for more coordinated defense planning and responses to the range of potential passive and/or active efforts a nuclear Iran might undertake to alter the status quo in its favor, Gulf leaders should continue to think creatively about mitigating vulnerabilities. The recent opening of the Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline (ADCOP) and the retrofitting and reopening of the Iraqi Pipeline in Saudi Arabia (IPSA) provide



alternative export routes to approximately 40 percent of the Gulf oil that transits the Strait of Hormuz each day. More powerfully, these measures underscore to Tehran that its neighbors and the world cannot be coerced by intemperate Iranian threats to jeopardize the free flow of energy resources from the Gulf.

- ***Jointly with Washington, develop and implement a policy of extended U.S. deterrence:*** Defending against the possibility of a nuclear Iran requires the articulation of a coherent strategy of deterrence. A deterrence regime must be designed not only to deter Iran, but also to avert other negative implications of further progress toward the nuclear threshold, including both the possibility of an Israeli strike and the temptation for the Gulf states to pursue their own independent nuclear options. While a detailed examination of the options for an extended regional deterrence regime intended to deal effectively with the prospect of a nuclear Iran is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that such a system requires extensive planning and coordination as well as clarity and consensus surrounding goals and instruments. Other elements of an appropriate deterrent regime include early warning systems, missile defense, enhanced infrastructure security, revised U.S. declaratory policy, coordination with NATO and other key stakeholders, and options for troop pre-positioning.

The cornerstone of deterrence must entail Washington clearly communicating “red lines” to Tehran via public declarations as well as private signaling and messages. This reflects one of the many ironies of the Iranian nuclear issue—preparation for managing a much more dangerous relationship with Iran must incorporate a greater reliance on diplomatic tools as much as, if not more so, than a purely coercive strategy. An ongoing mechanism for direct dialogue between the two major adversaries, whether it takes the form on a “hotline” or some other authoritative diplomatic channel, will almost surely be required. In this arena, the Gulf states can and should play a vital role in reinforcing the red lines through their diplomatic interactions with Tehran as well as in their actions.

For a deterrence regime to be optimally persuasive, it would have to incorporate mutual security guarantees on the part of the United States and Gulf States. Specific security guarantees would offer the benefit of clarity and credibility, both toward Tehran as well as toward skittish Gulf leaders. However, constituencies in both the United States and in the region would surely disapprove of a specific security guarantee, and the spectacle of public dissension over treaty commitments or other dimensions of a regional security pact would only advantage Iran. In addition, the extension of formal security guarantees may create as many problems as it resolves, by implying that those countries that lack such mechanisms



represent by default fair game for Iranian malfeasance. For these reasons, a formal treaty structure must be contemplated carefully by all parties.

- ***Help bring Asia on board:*** Iran's primary remaining trade and investment partners are located in Asia, and these ties give Tehran a false sense of insulation. The Gulf has superior economic leverage in the sense of more lucrative opportunities for investment and trade. In particular, efforts should be made to build upon the exchanges of heads of state visits in recent years and develop a joint GCC-China strategic dialogue that transcends the bilateral relationship and begins to draw Beijing into playing a "constructive stakeholder" role in a region that is so fundamental to its economic growth and security.
- ***Liaise with Israel:*** The quiet cooperation that is understood to have been ongoing between a number of regional states and the government of Israel represents an important step forward in terms of realistic security planning for dealing with any eventuality vis-à-vis Iran. Israel occupies a central place in American strategic thinking on Iran, and Israel's stance and policies will play a major role in shaping the ultimate outcome. Governments in the Gulf will have to develop meaningful, regular interfaces with Jerusalem, and will have to begin looking to move their own populations toward greater acceptance of the cooperation to avoid potential backlash if, or more likely when, these relationships are exposed.
- ***Work to strengthen global institutions and norms for counterproliferation and nuclear safety:*** The smaller Gulf states are members in good standing of the NPT, and their recent forays into civilian nuclear power generation, such as that undertaken by the UAE over the past three years, have raised the bar for adherence to best practices for counterproliferation and nuclear safety.³⁵ This would be a valuable arena for the Gulf states to apply the new diplomatic energy that has been demonstrated in recent months with respect to issues such as Libya and Syria. Thanks to its embrace of a pathway for nuclear cooperation that a State Department spokesman in 2010 described as the "gold standard"³⁶—renunciation of domestic uranium enrichment and reprocessing—the UAE in particular is well situated to lead a diplomatic effort to strengthen the various protocols for international nuclear security and safety. For example, the Gulf states should press for Tehran to join the Convention on Nuclear Safety and should lead efforts to enhance the transparency and enforcement dimensions of this regime, which is intended to forestall potential nuclear accidents, as well as the NPT itself.³⁷
- ***Revive diplomacy with Tehran:*** The Gulf need not treat its choices on Iran as binary; the alternatives for the states most immediately affected by Iran's nuclear activities should not be limited to avoidance or altercation. Rather, Gulf leaders should be encouraged to step up to the plate and advocate



directly on behalf of their own security interests. As scholar Matteo Legrenzi has noted, “GCC states undoubtedly prefer a non-nuclear Iran but they are unwilling to assume the costs of negotiations with Iran.”³⁸ While it is understandable that the provocative policies of the current Iranian leadership would make it politically unpalatable to conduct diplomatic business as usual with the regime, any lack of direct ties will ultimately work to the disadvantage of the Gulf states. A diversified diplomacy that blends active cooperation with an American-led system of deterrence and efforts to draw Iran into networks that reinforce a more responsible regional posture will serve the Gulf states’ interest and suit their historic preference for balancing vis-à-vis Iran.

As scholars such as Kenneth Pollack and Andrew Parasiliti have detailed,³⁹ a regional security forum that incorporates all the littoral states of the Persian Gulf and establishes a role for major external stakeholders such as the United States, China, India, Russia, and the European Union could provide a constructive mechanism for managing tensions at a time of increasing uncertainty and mistrust. The leaders of the Gulf have had ample, recent experience with the disastrous consequences of persistent regional conflict, which should underscore the utility of mechanisms that build trust, constrain escalation, and bind problematic states to global norms.

Beyond Breakout: Implications and Options for the Gulf

The recent public rhetoric by American and Israeli leaders has sought to eliminate any uncertainty within Iran about the consequences of acquiring nuclear weapons. However valuable such signaling may be in clarifying the costs and benefits of its policies to Tehran, the explicit Israeli and implicit American pledges to use force to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold also carries an unfortunate side effect. It reinforces Iran’s tendency toward opacity and dissimulation—the sole consistent factors in the dozen or so cases of attempted and successful cases of proliferation that have confronted the international community in the post-war era. “Perversely, while all of these nations’ security situations dictated a pursuit of the ‘ultimate weapon’...the self-same geopolitical circumstances that made them insecure also put strong constraints on their proliferation behavior,” Michael Kraig has stated.⁴⁰ In other words, countries that eventually crossed the nuclear threshold, such as India and Pakistan, as well as those that were successfully turned back from weapons, such as South Africa, each sought to conceal their programs and avoid declaration or testing for fear of jeopardizing their diplomatic relationships and stature.

Iran’s persistent investments in its nuclear program and its unwillingness to compromise, even in the face of truly crippling economic pressure and the explicit warnings of the world’s remaining superpower, mandates a sober



acknowledgement of the prospects of a threat even more profound than simply an extension of the nuclear hedging that Tehran has engaged in for the past decade. And despite the American president's pledge, and the clear strategic and partisan exigencies for U.S. and/or Israeli action against any declared or de facto Iranian nuclear weapon, the fact that Tehran has succeeded in defying successive American and international ultimatums must give its neighbors pause about Iran's ultimate intentions. Historical precedent and Iranian behavior suggest secrecy will remain the regime's preferred path forward with respect to its nuclear program; however, as described above, there are a variety of scenarios that could provoke an Iranian shift from a strategy designed to achieve a break-out capacity to one that is bent on acquiring and deploying a nuclear arsenal.

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For the Gulf, the basic contours of a policy response to such a scenario do not differ substantially from the approach to dealing with an Iran that has amassed breakout capability but has chosen not to weaponize. Post-breakout, the dilemmas for Iran's neighbors and for the world as a whole are more acute, but they will entail a similar array of exigencies to enhance the existing framework for deterring Iran, only more urgent. The imperatives remain the same: devising a credible and sustainable security structure for the Gulf; deploying the appropriate balance of U.S. military forces to deter Iranian aggression or subversion while bolstering the integrity of local allies; establishing viable mechanisms for crisis management; and intensifying regional coordination as well as engagement with a broad array of stakeholders, including Israel, China, and Russia.

One crucial distinction between an implicit Iranian nuclear capability and an Iranian nuclear arsenal involves the question of ambiguity; acquisition and deployment of nuclear weapons would conclusively undercut Iran's preferred strategy of opacity and hedging. Whatever the limitations and failings of the intelligence services of the United States and the array of other countries that consider Tehran's nuclear activities a fundamental threat, there is simply no credible scenario in which Iran could maintain a covert nuclear arsenal. The end of opacity offers one distinct advantage—any explicit capability, which could be documented either through a test, declaration, or intelligence, would conclusively undermine Iran's preferred posture of denial and deception and would provoke fierce and almost universal international condemnations. Tehran would be unable to dodge rogue status or play to the remnant mistrust of world powers. The implications of this devolution of its stature and diplomatic and trade relationships would be profoundly problematic for a state already reeling from isolation and



economic pressure.

Moreover, since detection is unavoidable, so will be the impetus for a decisive response from the international community. For this reason, the primary strategic implication of confirmed Iranian weaponization for the smaller states of the Gulf would be the dramatically increased likelihood of military action along their borders. With this comes the corresponding need to engage far more seriously in preparation for direct engagement in this campaign, contingency planning and mitigation of potential retaliatory effects on infrastructure and civilian populations, and diplomatic and security provisions for dealing with a post-strike Iran. The latter is the area that has received the least considered attention to date; unlike Iraq, which at least was the subject of cursory consideration of the U.S. State Department prior to the 2003 invasion, the future of Iran in the aftermath of either a military or diplomatic resolution of the nuclear standoff has largely been overlooked. As the beneficiaries of proximity and a long history of interaction with the current regime, the Gulf states would be well positioned to lead an effort to plan for the next stage of Iran's unpredictable political evolution.

Conclusion

It is still possible for the international community to stop Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability, and it is certainly preferable to all the possible alternative futures to do so. However, Iran's dogged pursuit of its nuclear ambitions over decades and in the face of increasingly high costs, together with the historical precedents that suggest the likelihood that a leadership bent on crossing the nuclear threshold will do so, require that the states that would experience the most profound impact from a nuclear Iran engage in worst-case scenario planning. Ultimately, the history of the Cold War demonstrates the limited fruits of nuclear coercion. With the Gulf states emerging as the most dynamic and entrepreneurial in the region with respect to economic, social and cultural development, their resilience and capacity to thrive even in an uncertain security environment should not be underestimated.



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³ James Dobbins, “Coping with a Nuclearising Iran,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 53, no. 6 (December 2011–January 2012): p. 44.

⁴ See Ariel Levite, “Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Hedging Revisited,” *International Security* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2002/03): pp. 59–88.

⁵ Barbara Slavin, “How Reliable Is Intelligence on Iran’s Nuclear Program?” Atlantic Council Issue Brief, September 15, 2011, available at <http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/091511_ACUS_IranNuclear.PDF>.

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⁷ David Albright, Paul Brannan, Andrea Stricker, Christina Walrond, and Houston Wood, “Preventing Iran From Getting Nuclear Weapons: Constraining Its Future Nuclear Options,” March 12, 2012, p. 8. Institute for Science and International Security, available at <http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/USIP_Template_5March2012-1.pdf>.

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¹⁶ Daniel H. Joyner, “Why Less is More: Law and Policy Considerations on the Iranian Nuclear Issue,” *Harvard Law and Policy Review*, March 23, 2010.

¹⁷ International Atomic Energy Agency, Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” IAEA INFCIRC/140, April 22, 1970, available at <<http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infcircs/Infcirc140.pdf>>.



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