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Iran

**Iran's Nuclear Ambitions:
Motivations, Trajectory, and Global Implications**

Robert Reardon

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter assesses Iran's potential to develop nuclear weapons, the nature of its nuclear decision-making, and the possible consequences and policy implications of Iran's nuclear choices.

MAIN ARGUMENT:

Iran may already possess the ability to produce nuclear weapons, but for the time being Tehran appears content to continue gradually advancing its nuclear program while remaining within the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran's nuclear decision-makers are guided by three principal considerations: the security of the regime, Iranian international prestige and influence, and their own particular interests. The U.S. and its partners will need to address all three of these factors to convince Iranian leaders to agree to verifiable limitations on Iran's nuclear program.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- Any successful negotiating offer by the P5+1 countries will have to accept Iran's limited possession of the fuel cycle and provide a clear path to lifting sanctions.
- Iranian leaders are unlikely to support any deal unless the U.S. can effectively reassure them that it does not seek regime change. As a result, military threats and covert attacks can reduce the chances for a negotiated settlement.
- Air strikes can set back Iran's program by years but cannot destroy it. An attack against Iran's nuclear facilities could provoke retaliation, trigger regional unrest, and convince the regime to double down on its nuclear efforts.
- A nuclear-armed Iran would be most likely to use nuclear weapons if the leadership were to believe a direct attack against the regime is imminent.
- Major Asian states, especially China and India, have interests in Iran that diverge from those of the U.S. and complicate nonproliferation efforts. The U.S. must work to address the security concerns of these states, specifically over energy security, to maintain their support for U.S. policies.

Iran's Nuclear Ambitions: Motivations, Trajectory, and Global Implications

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This chapter assesses Iran's potential to develop a nuclear weapons arsenal, the factors that shape its nuclear decision-making process, and the likely regional and global consequences of Iran's nuclear choices. Tehran likely already possesses the technical wherewithal to produce nuclear weapons if it chose to do so. Over the long term, the central issue is not whether Iran can develop nuclear weapons but whether it will opt to do so.

For the next year, and possibly longer, it is unlikely that Iran will develop a nuclear arsenal.¹ But although currently limited by the inability to produce uranium fuel for a bomb quickly enough to avoid detection, Iran is working steadily to shorten the time it would need for a nuclear "breakout." For the time being, Tehran appears content to slowly advance its nuclear capabilities while remaining within the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, it is unclear what the regime's ultimate intentions are—that is, whether Tehran intends to acquire weapons or would be content to remain just below the threshold of weaponization. It is additionally unclear what the

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¹ President Barack Obama recently stated, "We think it would take over a year or so for Iran to actually develop a nuclear weapon." See Michael D. Shear and David E. Sanger, "Iran Nuclear Weapon to Take Year or More, Obama Says," *New York Times*, March 14, 2013. This statement is consistent with the 2007 and 2010 National Intelligence Estimates. See "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate, November 2007; and James R. Clapper, "Unclassified Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," statement presented before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 31, 2012.

capabilities and force posture of Iran's arsenal would be if the country were to acquire nuclear weapons.

Iran faces complex strategic trade-offs in any nuclear future it may choose to pursue. Over the long term, its nuclear status will depend on how Iranian decision-makers view the nuclear program in the context of the country's regional and global interests, and even more importantly its security and domestic stability. If Iran is intent on acquiring nuclear weapons, the United States and its allies may delay but likely cannot permanently prevent Iran from doing so.

The Iranian nuclear issue therefore presents more a long-term problem than a short-term crisis and will require effective policymaking on the part of the United States. Even if Iran forgoes nuclear weapons, it will likely retain the knowledge and technical base to make them. Long-term confidence about Tehran's nuclear intentions will require comprehensive safeguards and assurances, likely more than the regime is currently willing to provide. If Iran develops either nuclear weapons or a virtual nuclear capability, an international effort will be required to maintain regional stability, prevent further proliferation, uphold the integrity of the international nonproliferation regime, avoid miscalculation and unintended conflict, and contain Iranian regional ambitions.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first section outlines Iran's nuclear decision-making process and identifies the principal drivers of its nuclear choices. The next section describes the history of the Iranian nuclear program, its major elements and achievements to date, and the conditions that could convince Iran to remain below the weapons threshold. The subsequent two sections look, first, at the potential regional and global impact if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons and, second, at how the United States and its allies might either prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or, failing to do so, effectively contain a nuclear-armed Iran and maintain regional stability. The final section concludes by arguing that regardless of the nuclear path Iran takes, the United States and its allies will be faced with long-term challenges to their efforts to promote regional stability and maintain the international nonproliferation regime.

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