

TEHERAN'S NUCLEAR RECKLESSNESS AND THE U.S. RESPONSE

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Governmental Affairs Committee Subcommittee on
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Senator Coburn, distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

It is an honor and a pleasure to be here. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions and the policy options available to the United States.

This hearing comes at a crucial time. Next week, the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will meet to once again consider the possibility of referring the Iranian nuclear "file" to the United Nations Security Council. The outcome of that meeting will have ramifications for the safety and security of the United States, and for the future of American strategy in the greater Middle East.

IRAN'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS

Since August 2002, when an Iranian opposition group disclosed information about two previously-unknown clandestine Iranian nuclear facilities, the world has woken up to the frightening possibility that the radical regime now in power in Tehran may soon possess a nuclear arsenal. More than three years later, much is still unknown about Iran's nuclear program. Yet compelling evidence suggests that Iran's efforts are much more than simply an attempt to develop an additional source of energy.

- Iran's atomic endeavor is massive in scope, encompassing as many as two-dozen sites scattered throughout the country, and focusing on both

uranium enrichment and plutonium conversion. This represents a far greater effort than is necessary simply for the generation of supplemental electricity, the avowed goal of Iran's nuclear program.

- Like its chemical- and biological weapons programs and its expanding arsenal of ballistic missiles, Iran's nuclear program has been placed under the direct control of the regime's clerical army, the *Pasdaran*.¹ This strongly suggests that Iran's atomic effort is intended for distinctly military applications.
- Iran has engaged in a pattern of diplomatic obfuscation and deception designed to prevent full oversight of its nuclear processes. Tehran has managed to circumvent its December 2003 decision to sign on to the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which permits snap inspections and invasive monitoring of segments of its nuclear sector by the IAEA, and has "sanitized," moved and otherwise hidden suspect sites from international inspectors, preventing effective oversight of its nuclear efforts.²
- Iran has rejected proposals that would have provided it simply with sufficient nuclear capabilities for energy development. These include a February 2005 European offer to supply the Islamic Republic with light-water nuclear reactors suitable for electricity generation, but not for the production of weapons-grade uranium.³

To date, the international response to this nuclear challenge has been woefully inadequate. Since mid-2003, when the IAEA first found that Iran had failed to meet its obligations under the NPT, the European Union has been engaged in a complicated, halting set of diplomatic negotiations with the Islamic Republic. These talks, spearheaded by the "EU-3"—Great Britain, France and Germany—have unsuccessfully attempted to secure a lasting Iranian freeze on uranium enrichment in exchange for economic and political incentives (including accession to the World Trade Organization and the provision of aeronautical components for Iran's aging fleet of airliners.)

Since February 2005, the Bush administration has thrown its weight behind this diplomatic initiative, engaging in nuclear dialogue with Iran via the EU-3. It has done so despite President Bush's declaration that the United States "will not tolerate" a nuclear-armed Iran⁴, and notwithstanding serious structural flaws with the scope and objectives of the negotiating process itself.

REGIONAL IMPACT OF A NUCLEAR IRAN

Iran's atomic endeavor holds the potential to dramatically alter the strategic balance in the Middle East. Already, Iranian advances have begun to change the political climate in the Persian Gulf. Over the past five years, in an indicator of mounting concern over Iran's expanding nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, a number of regional states have signed bilateral military agreements with the Islamic Republic.⁵ Over time, such pacts can be expected to make the Persian Gulf less and less hospitable to the United States, as regional nations seek a *modus vivendi* with a nearly-nuclear Iran.

Likewise, Iran's atomic advances hold the potential to touch off a dangerous regional arms race, as neighboring states accelerate their efforts to acquire a counterweight to Iranian capabilities. The beginnings of such a trend are already becoming visible; In October 2003, the *Washington Times* revealed details of a secret agreement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan granting Riyadh access to Pakistani nuclear technologies in exchange for cheap, steady supplies of Saudi crude.⁶ Similarly, discoveries of trace plutonium at Egyptian nuclear facilities have deepened international suspicions about the nuclear aspirations of the government of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.⁷

A nuclear Iran can also be expected to pose a major proliferation threat. The *Pasdaran* is the Iranian regime's principal point of contact with terrorist groups such as Hezbollah. Its control of the Iranian nuclear program raises the possibility that Iran's nuclear advances could translate into substantial terrorist gains. Indeed, the Islamic Republic's provision of large quantities of indigenously-made "Fajr-5" short-range missiles and artillery rockets to Hezbollah over the past three years⁸ suggests that this represents a very real danger. Compounding such worries, Iran's new, hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, recently confirmed publicly that his government is prepared to provide nuclear technology to any number of other Muslim states.⁹

The greatest casualties of Iran's nuclear progress, however, are likely to be internal forces opposed to the current Iranian regime. Armed with atomic weaponry, Iran will have far greater ability to quash domestic dissent with impunity, without concern over decisive international retaliation—much the same way China did in its brutal, bloody suppression of student protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. A nuclear capability therefore can be expected to substantially dim prospects for internal transformation within the Islamic Republic, and to provide the Iranian regime with a new lease on life.

TOWARD AN AMERICAN APPROACH

How should the United States respond to this challenge? The fundamental problem is that Iran's "nuclear clock" is ticking much faster than its "regime change" clock. Altering that equation should be the starting point for any serious American strategy.

Fortunately, the United States has several tools by which it can delay Iran's nuclear ambitions, and mitigate their impact on the Middle East:

International cooperation – For the moment, U.S. and foreign intelligence services are in agreement that Iran's nuclear program has not yet reached a "point of no return" (although there are substantial differences of opinion over exactly when Iran will cross that threshold). And because Iran still depends on foreign assistance for its nuclear endeavor, the United States can work with its international partners to influence the pace at which Iran progresses toward the "bomb." As part of this process, Washington can and should pressure countries in Europe and Asia to: impose stricter monitoring on sales of potential dual-use technologies to Iran; create greater domestic penalties for WMD-related exports to Iran, and; more stringently enforce existing domestic legislation prohibiting WMD-related trade.

Counterproliferation – Since its establishment in May 2003, the Bush administration's most important counterproliferation effort—the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)—has emerged as a major strategic success. Today, the PSI encompasses more than 60 countries in one form or another, and can be credited with successfully curtailing much of North Korea's missile trade with the Middle East. So far, however, the PSI has not been adapted to comprehensively address the contemporary threat from Iran. The White House should make it a priority to do so. Through closer cooperation with likeminded states in the Persian Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean on intelligence-sharing and interdiction, the United States has the ability to complicate Iran's acquisition of WMD and ballistic missile technologies from foreign suppliers, and to simultaneously stem the onward proliferation of these capabilities to rogue states or terrorist groups.

Gulf defense – Over the past several years, fears of Iran's expanding capabilities have begun to drive many of the Persian Gulf states toward accommodation with the Islamic Republic. Preserving U.S. coalition solidarity in the region requires the provision of local antidotes to the Iranian strategic threat. Robust deployments of American theater missile defenses among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, for example,

will help blunt Iran's ability to engage in nuclear blackmail against those nations. A deepening of Washington's bilateral military dialogue with individual Gulf states likewise might lessen regional dependence on Iran. So would the creation of a formal American security architecture capable of providing countries currently threatened by Iran with concrete mutual defense guarantees.

It is important to recognize, however, that while these steps may help to complicate Iran's efforts (and mitigate their regional impact), they cannot end them. Iranian policymakers have embraced the idea of nuclear weapons as central to ensuring regime stability, and to "preempting" the possibility of military action on the part of the United States. Moreover, the Iranian nuclear endeavor actually appears to enjoy broad support among ordinary citizens, irrespective of their attitudes toward the ruling regime in Tehran.

The ultimate question, therefore, revolves around regime character. The danger of a nuclear Iran does not stem from the Iranian nuclear program itself. Rather, it comes from the nature of the regime that will ultimately wield those weapons. Iran's intimate relationship with international terrorism, and its potential for catastrophic proliferation, suggests that an Islamic Republic armed with nuclear weapons would constitute a truly global threat.

As a result, the United States must do more simply deter and contain Iran. It must also focus its energies upon means by which it can spur a fundamental transformation of that regime.

NOTES:

¹ See, for example, David R. Sands, "Army Takes Control of Iran Nukes," *Washington Times*, October 5, 2005; See also Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran Under Khatami: Weapons of Mass Destruction, Terrorism, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Near East and South Asian Affairs, May 14, 1998, <http://www.iranwatch.org/government/US/Congress/Hearings/sfrc-051498/us-sfrc-eisenstadt-051498.htm>.

² Conversations with U.S. government officials, Washington, DC, June and July 2004.

³ "Iran Refuses EU Nuclear Reactor Offer," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), February 13, 2005, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/39DB0CFD-B58B-484D-BF50-A8146C9498E4.htm>.

⁴ David E. Sanger, "Bush Says U.S. Will Not Tolerate Building of Nuclear Arms by Iran," *New York Times*, June 19, 2003.

⁵ In the year 2000, the government of Oman reportedly signed a sweeping agreement on military cooperation with Iran. See *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1* (Tehran), April 10, 2000; Saudi Arabia followed suit in 2001, coming to terms with the Islamic Republic on a long-awaited agreement regarding security cooperation, narcotics interdiction, and terrorism. See “Iran, Kuwait Sign Agreement on Military Cooperation,” Xinhua (Beijing), October 2, 2002; In 2002, officials in Kuwait did the same, formalized a similar deal with Iran covering bilateral military security. See Ali Akbar Dareini, “Iran, Saudi Arabia Sign Landmark Security Pact,” Associated Press, April 17, 2001.

⁶ Arnaud de Borchgrave, “Pakistan, Saudi Arabia in Secret Nuke Pact,” *Washington Times*, October 22, 2003.

⁷ “Traces of Plutonium Found Near Facility,” *Jordan Times* (Amman), November 7, 2004.

⁸ See, for example, “Hezbollah Amassing Weapons in Southern Lebanon,” *Aerospace and Defense*, September 30, 2002; See also Michael R. Gordon, “Hezbollah’s Rocket Arsenal Worries Officials,” *Edmonton Journal* (Alberta), September 27, 2002.

⁹ “Iran Offers Nuclear Technology to Islamic States,” *Associated Press*, September 15, 2005.