

What Strategy would you Pursue when Dealing with Iran in 2007? Why?

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, DEC 3 2007

Since the turn of the century, Iran has emerged as an increasingly powerful actor in the Middle East. However, Tehran's Islamist regime is seen to pose a number of political and security challenges to both neighbouring and 'western' states. The question of how to respond to the assertive and confrontational policies of the hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has therefore proved to be a hot topic for the media, academics and politicians alike. This essay will consider what strategy western states should pursue with regards to Iran's nuclear ambitions, an issue of central importance for regional and global stability. Whilst this is merely one of many Iranian policies that needs 'dealing with' from a western perspective, it is widely considered to be the most significant threat and, thus, is a useful case study through which to consider relations between the West and Iran more generally.

First, Iranian motivations for a nuclear programme will be explored together with the concerns and interests of western and regional powers. Having illuminated the rationale behind the key actors' postures and located the crisis within the context of the wider political situation in the Middle East, two potential policy directions for western states will be considered. One is a strategy characterised by coercion, sanctions and possibly a preventative military strike; the other requires unconditional negotiations, inducements and engagement.

The essay will argue that western states (and particularly the USA) have leant towards a coercive policy at the expense of diplomatic efforts. However, Iran is in a strong bargaining position and is unlikely to yield to western pressure. A foreseeable outcome of escalating tensions is a military confrontation with potentially disastrous consequences. The essay will therefore conclude that serious engagement and the normalisation of relations with Iran is the most prudent policy for 2007. In the long-term, this may contribute to processes of regime reform from within.

The Iranian Nuclear Programme in its Wider Context

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In 2003, US President George Bush declared that the invasion of Iraq would herald a 'democratic revolution' in the Middle East. However, many academics believe that Washington's post-9/11 foreign policy has had a serious unintended political consequence: the empowerment of Iran's Islamist regime (Rubin, 2006; Nasr, 2006). It is widely accepted that Tehran is now key to determining the success of US operations in neighbouring Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as developments further a field in Palestine and Lebanon. In this context, there is increasing alarm at the prospect of Iran also gaining nuclear weapons.

Ahmadinejad has stated that Iranian nuclear ambitions are peaceful; something which John Bolton argues 'strains credulity' given the country's huge oil and natural gas reserves (2004). However, recent research suggests that Tehran's 'claim to need nuclear power might be genuine' (Stern, 2006:377). Oil money is currently sustaining a weak economy: it accounts for over 80 percent of export revenue and 45 percent of the total annual budget (Economist, 2006; Sahimi, 2003). Yet since the 1979 revolution, production has dropped by almost a third whilst 'the population has more than doubled to 70 million' (Tarok, 2006:650). Some estimates predict that Iran could be 'a net oil importer' as early as 2010 (Sahimi, 2003; also Stern, 2006). In light of this, the benefits of a civilian nuclear programme are clear. In the short-term, nuclear reactors will 'substitute for power now generated by petroleum' thereby freeing it for export (Stern, 2006:380-381). In the long-term, it is estimated that a nuclear programme could 'produce as much electricity as 45 billion barrels of oil'; this would go some way to supporting a population which is predicted to hit 100 million by 2025 (Sahimi, 2003).

In order to guarantee the security of its power supply Iran has declared that it intends to become self-sufficient in nuclear fuel production, a right which it holds under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, Condoleezza Rice has stated that, for the USA, 'it is not a question of rights', but rather one of trust (AFP, 2005). 'A fully indigenous nuclear power programme involves all the dual-use technologies necessary to produce military fissile materials' (Crisis Action, 2007:2, 7). Western states are therefore concerned that Tehran is using its civilian nuclear programme as a cover for the development of nuclear weapons. This distrust has been amplified because Iran initially sought to conceal its actions, which were only exposed in 2002. Furthermore, it has since failed 'to disclose some of its nuclear activities' and has misled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors (Arms Control Association, 2006). Joschka Fischer, former German Foreign minister, has asserted that 'there can no longer be any reasonable doubt that Iran's ambition is to obtain nuclear weapons capability' (in Fitzpatrick, 2006:5). Most estimates suggest that this will become a reality sometime between 2008 and 2010 (Crisis Action, 2007:7).

If Iran is indeed seeking nuclear weapons (or at least the capability to produce them) its motivations are likely to be rooted both in domestic politics and international security fears. At home 'the nuclear issue has been used to

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cultivate nationalist feeling' – to rally support for the leadership in a context of economic decline and political unrest (ibid:7). However, regional instability and the 'constant military threat' posed by the US are also key factors (ibid:8). Following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 the US declared that Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, was part of 'an axis of evil'. Condoleezza Rice asserted that these states had been 'put on notice' (2002). Since then, Iraq has fallen to US-led forces whilst nuclear-armed North Korea has won considerable concessions; the lesson appears clear. From a geo-political perspective, Iran sits between two nuclear powers: Israel, which has an open first-strike policy, and Pakistan, which is 'trying to contain a large number of Sunni fundamentalists' (Forster and Owen, 2006:2). The EU is slowly expanding towards its northern borders and it 'is encircled by [hostile] US military forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey, Kuwait, Qatar and Kazakhstan' (Crisis Action, 2007:7-8). Sagan summarises that 'Iran is, mostly, a classic case of a state that wants nuclear weapons to dissuade an attack. It sits in a perennially unstable region... and now wants to stand up to Washington's calls for regime change in Tehran' (2006:47). Thus, Halliday argues that 'the reason Iran wants a nuclear capability, or at least to be in [a] position of "nuclear ambiguity"... is not to launch the missiles against its foes the day after it acquires them, but to strengthen its political and diplomatic hand' (2006:2). The US's misadventure in Iraq has simultaneously empowered and threatened Tehran; 'Ahmadinejad and his allies view the acquisition of nuclear weapons as critical to consolidating Iran's position' (Takeyh, 2007).

Western states fear the heightened Iranian influence which nuclear weapons would herald. Specifically, the US is concerned that it would be unable to deter Iranian support for militia in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Palestine. More broadly speaking, 'a nuclear-armed Iran would certainly aggravate tensions and uncertainties across the strategically critical Middle East' and Huntley warns that 'nuclear arms racing' could be set off across Central Asia (2006:731-732). Israel, which Ahmadinejad has declared should be 'wiped off the map' (Aljazeera, 2005), is understandably alarmed, whilst Sunni Arab regimes including Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf monarchs wish to limit the potential for destabilising Iranian influence amongst their Shi'a populations. The prospect that Tehran might be able to dictate the Middle East's 'security and oil policy' has left the region's rulers urging Washington to contain their increasingly dominant neighbour (Nasr, 2006). The question of how to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions is therefore pressing, yet the solutions are far from clear.

Coercion, Sanctions and Preventative Military Action?

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, 'the US government has had no direct diplomatic relations with Iran and has applied unilateral economic sanctions' (Crisis Action, 2007:10). Recently, tensions have increased further in light of the deteriorating situation in Iraq: US hawks view Iran as the 'reason for current failures' and, in response, are

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taking a 'progressively more hardline' stance, both with regards to the nuclear issue and Iranian backing for Shi'a militia (Rogers, 2007; also Halliday, 2006:2; Thomson, 2007:1). Amirahmadi has argued that a 'spiral conflict' has developed whereby each party is escalating the 'other's extreme positions to new heights' (2006). This dynamic has seen the US and its allies take a number of steps aimed at increasing the pressure on Tehran, including sanctions and the threat of military action.

In March 2006 The EU and USA 'persuaded, some say coerced', the 35 IAEA members to refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for its nuclear activities (Tarok, 2006:649). In December of the same year the UN adopted resolution 1737, which placed sanctions on all materials and technologies that could directly contribute to the Iranian nuclear programme (UNSC, 2006:2). These were tightened in March 2007 to additionally prohibit the transfer of conventional arms (UNSC, 2007). The US has also passed the 'Iran Freedom Support Act' which extends its unilateral sanctions to hit foreign firms trading with Iran (US Congress, 2006).

The logic behind the Iranian sanctions is simple. Ahmadinejad was elected on a mandate to rebuild Iran's ailing economy and create 'a stronger, independent Islamic state' (Saikal, 2006: 194). Yet the economy remains vulnerable and his policies have, if anything, exacerbated problems. The job market is unable to 'absorb the 700,000 young people' entering it each year and GDP per capita remains 30 percent lower than it was in the 1970s (Clawson, 2007). A recent IMF report suggests that, regardless of high oil prices, Iran will fall into deficit by 2010 (2006). Voters have already expressed dissatisfaction at Ahmadinejad's economic failings during the December 2006 council elections, where his coalition was the 'clear loser' (Underwood and Afshari, 2007). Western policy makers believe that sanctions will increase pressure on the Iranian economy and Ahmadinejad himself; the hope is that Iranians will then 'challenge the regime [and eventually the entire Islamic Republic] from within' (Tarok, 2006:649).

However, Halliday writes that whilst 'much is made of the supposed instability of the Iranian regime... the reality is that [it] is as strong as it ever has been'. Ahmadinejad 'strikes a note of Iranian nationalism and defiance that has a strong popular resonance... [and] one of his great allies in this project is George W Bush's confrontational' stance (2006:2-3). Iran's history provides little indication that sanctions will be successful (Stern, 2006:382); to the contrary, it suggests that Iranians will 'rally around the government that stands for defence of the nation's sovereignty and independence' (Tarok, 2006:649; Eland, 2007). Thus, the Iranian public is likely to perceive that nuclear energy, Iran's right under the NPT, is 'a prize worth suffering... sanctions to achieve' (Takeyh, 2007). Similarly, for the regime itself, long-term national security, which nuclear weapons are widely seen to provide, is likely to be considered worth the economic costs of sanctions. Thomson concludes that 'the present western policy is probably not going to work... and the consequences of it not working are very serious' (2007a).

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If, as expected, sanctions fail, many thinkers predict US and/or Israeli military action. Whilst a full invasion is unimaginable in light of the debacle in Iraq, there have been calls for air strikes and even the threat of tactical nuclear weapons (Zaborski, 2005; Hallinan, 2007). Mossad is already said to have begun covert military operations (Baxter, 2007) and the Israeli government has purchased 500 bunker-busting bombs from the USA (La Guardia, 2004). Washington recently sought to signal its resolve by sending a second carrier battle-group to the Gulf for the first time since the Iraq invasion (International Herald Tribune, 2007). Seymour Hersh, quoting a Pentagon insider, wrote that Bush is convinced he must do 'what no Democrat or Republican, if elected in the future, would have the courage to do' (2006). Despite claims from the White House to the contrary, some thinkers believe 'a direct military confrontation with Iran is now seriously likely' in 2007 (Rogers, 2006).

The success of military action is far from assured however, and the consequences could be disastrous. It is expected that strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities would provoke the Islamic regime to withdraw from its NPT commitments and continue its programme covertly (Crisis Action, 2007:13). Furthermore, Sagan writes that 'even if US intelligence services were confident that they had identified all major nuclear related sites in Iran (they are not) and the Pentagon could hit all targets' (which is also in doubt), then 'the United States would expose itself... and its allies, to the possibility of severe retaliation' (2006:54). This could take several forms. Leaked documents show that the Iranian navy has drawn up plans 'to stop trade' in the Strait of Hormuz through a 'massive assault on shipping' (Timmerman, 2006). Although the US has pledged to keep the strait open in any scenario (Ambroggi, 2006), this may require landing troops on the Iranian side, thereby potentially drawing the US into another ground war (Saikal, 2006:196). The strait is strategically vital because 40% of the world's crude oil shipments pass through it (Aljazeera, 2007); even if it was secured, 'the threat of attack could have a significant impact on oil prices' with major repercussions for the global economy (Crisis Action, 2007:15).

Perhaps the primary concern however, would be Iran's response in neighbouring states. 'Longstanding Iranian links to Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shi'a groups in Iraq, along with the presence of significant minority Shi'a populations in Saudi Arabia and other countries [most notably, Afghanistan], could lead to severe destabilisation' in the wider region (Crisis Action, 2007:13; also Saikal, 2007:197). Numerous studies have emphasised the importance of Iran to achieving stability in Iraq and beyond (Halliday, 2006a; Baker and Hamilton, 2006). As one Pentagon advisor put it, 'If [the US attacks Iran], the southern half of Iraq will light up like a candle' (in Crisis Action, 2007:14).

In sum, coercive policies (such as sanctions) are unlikely to deter Iran. Indeed, there are indications that they have caused a 'spiral conflict'. Ehsani warns: there is a danger that 'the cycle of threat and counter-threat could spin

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out of control' (2006); a foreseeable result is a military confrontation with potentially disastrous consequences. This study will therefore argue that serious diplomatic engagement is the prudent option for 'dealing with Iran' in 2007.

Engaging Iran: Inducements to Address Iran's Security Concerns

'We have much too much... of threats, sanctions and pre-emptive strikes and far too little of examining our own attitudes... it's time for a process of building trust with Iran' Jeffrey Sachs, *BBC Reith Lecture, 2007*

In June 2006 the five permanent members of the UNSC and Germany (the P5+1) submitted proposals to Iran which offered numerous incentives (although, notably, not security guarantees) in exchange for curbs on the Iranian nuclear programme. However, before negotiations could begin, it was stated that all enrichment activities should be suspended. Iran rejected the offer, seeing it 'as giving up leverage with no clear quid pro quo commitment on the part of the US or the Europeans' (Davis and Ingram, 2006:2). However, the Iranian delegation did indicate a willingness to negotiate 'provided there were no preconditions' (Peel and Smyth, 2006). Despite calls for unconditional talks from figures such as Henry Kissinger and Madeline Albright, the P5+1 has refused to change its stance and negotiations have come to an impasse (Crisis Action, 2007:19).

Policymakers in Tehran believe that they have 'a strong negotiating position that has not been recognised by the US administration or European governments' (ibid:20). Moderates see 'an enormous opportunity for Iran to normalise its relations with the West and gain some significant economic and security guarantees' in exchange for concessions on the nuclear programme (ibid; also Arms Control Association, 2006a). In light of this, Leverett argues that a diplomatic solution is in sight if 'the United States is prepared to put security guarantees on the negotiating table, including a guarantee that the [US] won't use force to change the government or borders of Iran' (Harvard Gazette, 2006). As one former US ambassador to NATO puts it: 'if we refuse to give such a guarantee, then if I were an Iranian I would say, "Well, the United States is not serious"' (Council on Foreign Relations, 2007).

Underlying the current standoff is the US's unwillingness to provide security guarantees for Iran 'regardless of what it would get for it' (Leverett in Harvard Gazette, 2006). The Bush administration is determined to see the Islamic Republic replaced with a western-democratic model of government and sees engagement as counterproductive to this aim. However, if western governments continue their confrontational policies, they are likely to empower conservative agendas within the regime by stoking Iranian nationalism. Ultimately –given the Israeli and US insistence that Iran will not gain nuclear weapons– a foreseeable result of escalating tensions would be some form of military strike.

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In light of this analysis, the normalisation of relations with Iran would have a number of benefits. Offering meaningful carrots would create a context of goodwill amongst the Iranian population and 'go a long way toward facilitating productive discussions' (Takeyh, 2007). If the US provided security guarantees there would be less incentive for the regime to seek nuclear weapons; Iranian negotiators have already indicated 'that all aspects of Iran's nuclear programme [are] up for negotiation' if such guarantees are made (Peel and Smyth, 2006). The risk of the current tensions spiralling into a military conflict, which could potentially severely damage western interests in the region, would be limited. Simultaneously, wider talks could begin regarding stability in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, where Iranian support is widely accepted to be crucial. Furthermore, 'the US objective of regime reform' might even be partially achieved 'by puncturing Ahmadinejad's demonisation of the US through engagement' (Crisis Action, 2007:21). 'Relief from sanctions and diplomatic relations' would 'strengthen the hands of the pragmatists in Tehran' and possibly marginalise those radicals who seek confrontation with the West (Takeyh, 2007).

Almost twenty years of diplomatic isolation and pressure from the United States have achieved little; the Islamic regime does not appear susceptible to coercive measures from outside. A policy of serious engagement is not only the most prudent short-term strategy for dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions, but may also be the best chance of achieving regime reform (from within) in the long-term.

Conclusion

Iran is widely perceived to be a key player in determining the future of Middle East stability. Its nuclear ambitions are therefore causing alarm for actors with significant interests in the region. This essay has argued that the regime in Tehran has real incentives to seek both nuclear power and weapons. The pursuit of nuclear energy is occurring in a context of declining oil exports and an increasing population. Furthermore, the aggressive posturing of Washington combined with a multitude of other geo-political threats means nuclear weapons might be considered desirable to guarantee national security.

The 'West', pushed by the US, has taken a hard-line stance regarding Iranian nuclear ambitions. This has been characterised by increasingly harsh sanctions and the threat of military action. This essay has argued that sanctions are unlikely to deter Iran from seeking a weapon which could guarantee their national security in the face of constant US aggression. If tensions continue to spiral, military action is considered highly likely by some thinkers. In a context where Iran is ostensibly merely pursuing its rights under the NPT, (whilst, conversely, states such as Britain are contravening the agreement through the renewal of their own nuclear arsenals) military strikes would create a great

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deal of sympathy for the Iranian position throughout the Islamic world and beyond; the consequences for stability in the Middle East could be disastrous.

Serious engagement with Iran promises numerous benefits. In the short-term, there emerges the possibility of negotiations over the nuclear issue as well as cooperation in Iraq and the wider region. In light of the problems facing coalition forces in Iraq, and the potential for these to increase several fold in the event of an attack on Iran, it seems the prudent option. Furthermore, engagement might undermine hardliners in the Iranian regime, thereby contributing towards reform. There is little evidence that 25 years of coercive policies have made much headway on this front.

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