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IRANIAN NUCLEAR DECISION MAKING
UNDER AHMADINEJAD

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DRAFT

THIS PAPER REFLECTS THE OPINIONS OF ITS AUTHORS ONLY

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Preface

Iran's drive to acquire a military nuclear capability precedes the current Iranian administration or even the Islamic regime. In its present stage, this drive is motivated, on the strategic level, by Iran's strategic and conventional inferiority vis-à-vis Iraq's WMD capabilities and programs in the Saddam Hussein era, the challenge of the US and Israel as Iran's strategic nemesis since the revolution, Iran's regional ambitions to become a local superpower and the nuclear capabilities of Pakistan and India. The fact that the United States attacked Iraq despite its having chemical and biological weapons only strengthens the Iranian resolve to achieve a nuclear capability, which presumably is the only non-conventional capability which can effectively deter the United States.

The Iranian motivation for developing a nuclear capability is however not purely strategic; it is also seen as compensation for Iran's humiliation at the hands of the West during the last centuries and as a "membership card" to an exclusive and respected club of nuclear powers, to which Iran feels it is worthy of belonging. The international acceptance of other nuclear states in Iran's neighborhood (India and Pakistan as declared nuclear powers and Israel as an undeclared power) exacerbates the Iranian sense of discrimination in the international demand for Iran to forego its own nuclear program. Foreign attempts to deter Iran from achieving this goal are seen as an affront to national pride and have aroused patriotic support for the regime's policy of defiance.

The election of President Ahmadinejad in Iran has both coincided with and contributed to the acceleration of the conflict over Iran's nuclear program. The apocalyptic overtones of Ahmadinejad's public discourse raise the question whether he – and the leadership surrounding him – may actually be interested in a confrontation, what steps on the part of the international community might influence the Iranian leadership and to what extent it is susceptible to deterrence/ compellence.

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Describe the role of the nuclear program in Iran's defense doctrine and to analyze the Iranian motivation in acquisition of a military nuclear potential.
2. Analyze the influence of public opinion on Iran's nuclear policy.
3. Identify and rank key actors and groups within the Iranian decision-making elite relevant to the nuclear program.
4. Analyze the Iranian regime's goals in negotiating with the West and to extrapolate from that behavior to the decision making process.
5. Identify points of leverage that are most likely to affect Iran's cost-benefit analysis regarding its nuclear program (e.g., personal economic holdings).
6. Identify specific potential escalatory political and economic actions against Iran by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and describe the possible efficacy of those actions for affecting the Iranian cost-benefit calculation for this issue.
7. Suggest potentially effective actions by other than UNSC and possible negative consequences (e.g., Iranian retaliation) for the potential actions described above.

The Nuclear Program in Iran's Defense Doctrine

The Leadership

The Iranian leadership is acutely aware of its strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis any of its actual or potential enemies: the US, Israel, Iraq (if and when it resolves its domestic crisis, though clearly, Iraq no longer poses a strategic threat to Iran today), Turkey, Pakistan and Russia. This sense of strategic inferiority was exacerbated by the conclusions that the Iranian defense establishment drew from the war in Iraq: the US “knew” that Iraq had long range missiles, BW and CW agents, but all of these did not deter it. The only weapon that could conceivably deter the US from a military operation against Iran would be nuclear.

While Iran officially denies having any form of WMD capabilities or programs, this is presented as a conscious yielding of Iran's national right to such weapons for the sake of regional confidence building and stability. Iran has signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) from 1997, which allows for relatively intrusive inspection. Upon signing, Iran owned up to a chemical weapons program that was developed towards the end of the Iraq-Iran war, and later dismantled it. It claims that it has no further R&D in this field.¹ The present Iranian regime's acceptance of the NPT derives from its having been inherited from the Shah's regime. The discriminatory nature of the treaty, and the fact that Israel, India and Pakistan are not signatories, would probably have been enough for Iran not to sign the treaty were it brought up today. The importance that Iran accords to international legitimacy, however, created constraints that require it to remain within the treaty's bounds.

Iranian defense theoreticians rarely comment on the place of nuclear weapons in their country's strategic outlook. A significant departure from this custom was remarks by former Minister of Defense, Ali Shamkhani, which can be interpreted as legitimization for acquisition of a military nuclear capability. Such a capability, according to Shamkhani would be “the natural reaction of the Islamic Republic of Iran to achieving its national and regional security...” Iran, in essence, “ignores parts of its security concerns ... for the sake of broader security goals for all countries... despite the fact that threats to the national security of the Islamic Republic all point to a security imbalance.” This imbalance, according to Shamkhani is epitomized in the list of Iran's potential nuclear threats: Israel, India and Pakistan, Russia, NATO and the US naval fleets deployed in the region that are carrying atomic weapons.”²

¹ Geoffrey Kemp, “Iran's Nuclear Options,” Geoffrey Kemp, et al., Iran's Nuclear Weapons Options, Issues and Analysis, The Nixon Center, January 2001, pp. 1–17.

² *Jam-e Jam*, 3, 638 & 639, 2002. See translation in: <<http://www.netiran.com>>. See also Ali Akbar Velayati to *Qods Daily*, 10-15 February 1998: “[Iran's] neighbors have all sorts of weapons, missiles, armored weapons, air, chemical and biological weapons. They have everything. From Israel to Iraq, from Pakistan to India, from Russia to China, and from Turkey to European countries. They have all sorts of weapons or some of the conventional weapons which form a part of the weapons of mass destruction.” <<http://www.netiran.com>>.

Shamkhani has been credited with floating the concept of “nuclear defense” in the Iranian strategic context, but this concept has remained ambiguous.

Along with this essentially defensive and deterrent view of the potential of nuclear weapons, there exists another attitude – particularly popular in IRGC circles and among radical clerics identified with the Haqqani School in Qom – which views such weapons as part of Iran’s arsenal for enhancement of its regional status. Thus, Hossein Shariatmadari, the Supreme Leader’s representative in the Kayhan Institute, and Chief Editor of the Kayhan Daily wrote, “...Iran's transformation into a nuclear power contains a powerful and wide-ranging message... the Europeans and the Americans made various and diverse excuses ... they expected us to ... accept that they are a master cult and race, and that the rest of the world ...must ... enslave itself... Either we ...throw up our hands, and slaughter at their feet the 'daring' and the 'will' that are the foundations for building civilization, honor, and progress – or we do not give in to blackmail, and value and preserve the rare pearl for which we have labored greatly... If our country wants to attain glory in the world, it has no choice but to lay out a strategy in this direction, and to prepare the appropriate means for this strategy... We must make the enemies understand that it is inconceivable that instability, insecurity, and shock will be our lot, while theirs will be stability, security, and tranquility.”³

Since Ahmadinejad’s rise to power, Iranian spokesmen – particularly the president himself – have begun to speak of Iran as a “nuclear power” or having “joined the nuclear club”. The introduction of these terms into the Iranian political lexicon alludes to a military potential (which these terms traditionally relate to) without spelling it out and while maintaining Iran’s official stance that its nuclear program is for peaceful ends. This terminology serves two ends: towards the domestic theatre, the leaders allude to Iran being on the verge of a quasi “Super-Power” status; whereas towards the international community they maintain a constructive ambiguity.

Deriving from the above Iran’s strategic imperative in the nuclear negotiations has been, first and foremost to buy time⁴ and to incrementally accustom the international community to a nuclear Iran, while its military nuclear option takes shape. There is evidence that Iran aims at the Japanese or the German model, i.e. enrichment of fissile material to a level just below weapons grade material which is approximately two months short of the level necessary for a nuclear device. This option was raised by the Iranians in the February talks with the EU.⁵

³ *Kayhan*, 12 June 2004 (trans.: MEMRI, Inquiry and Analysis, No. 181, 2004).

⁴ See SNSC member Hossein Mussavian: in August 2003: “We needed another year to complete the Esfahan (UCF) project, so it could be operational. Because of [the IAEA] 50-day [ultimatum], we should have kept [the UCF] in Esfahan incomplete. [We] adopted a twofold policy here: working intensively with the IAEA, and also conducting negotiations on international and political levels. The IAEA gave us a 50-day extension to suspend the enrichment and all related activities. But thanks to the negotiations with Europe we gained another year, in which we completed (the UCF) in Esfahan.” Iranian TV, Channel 2, 4 August, 2005, <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=iran&ID=SP95705>.

⁵ *IRNA* (Iran), 17 February 2005.

Iran has close ties with North Korea and there is much evidence that it has been learning lessons from the Korean case study and imitating that case: to attempt to gain security guarantees and international support for the civil nuclear program in return for ostensibly freezing an illicit military program, while stalling on demands for a roll-back of the military program. The logic behind this goal would seem to be to maintain international legitimacy as a signatory to the NPT, and at the same time to be able to blackmail the West with the threat of withdrawal from the NPT and renewal of the enrichment to military levels.⁶

Such a route, if it succeeds would allow Iran –when the time is ripe – to announce terminating its adherence to the NPT (giving the three-month notice and the justification of extraordinary events that jeopardize the supreme interests of the country, as stipulated in the treaty, and thus not being in formal contravention of the treaty, even when withdrawing from it), and using the installations to prepare nuclear weapons.⁷

There is no evidence to the effect that Iran has already crystallized its future nuclear doctrine. There are however four basic paradigms of nuclear posturing, which Iran may learn from and implement individually or successively:

1. **Premature Posturing** – This model fits Iran’s present stage of nuclear development and would be similar to the Iraqi model before the first Gulf War. Iran may attempt to create the impression that it already has a military nuclear capability, even when some of these capabilities are not operational yet. As the conflict with the West escalates, it seems that Iran is moving towards such a paradigm.
2. **Nuclear Ambiguity** – similar to the model which is attributed to Israel and to South Africa and Pakistan in the 1980s. This paradigm would be the optimal one from the point of view of traditional Iranian international relations and the ideological opposition among the clergy to nuclear weapons. It would allow for a level of deterrence and regional status based on the perception of Iran’s nuclear power, without having to forego

⁶ See Ali Larijani, Iranian TV, 20 September 2005: “You have pressured North Korea for two years and consequently, it withdrew from the NPT and IAEA. What did you do after these two years? You accepted North Korea’s nuclear program. ... You could have achieved this from the start. ... Western countries should learn a lesson from the experience of the North Korean nuclear dossier...” <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=iran&ID=SP99405>.

See Hossein Mussavian in: [“There is a belief that if we adopted the North Korean model, we could have stood much stronger against the excessive demands of America and Europe.”] Musavian: “During these two years of negotiations, we managed to make far greater progress than North Korea. North Korea’s most important achievement had to do with security guarantees. We achieved the same thing a year ago in the negotiations with the Europeans. They agreed to give us international guarantees for Iran’s security, its national rule, its independence, [and] non-intervention in its internal affairs, [as well as] its national security, and for not invading it.” Iran also gave prominence to a study by the International Crisis Group that claimed that Iran was imitating North Korea. *IRNA*, 11 March 2006, <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0603118811180122.htm>.

⁷ Ahmadinejad in his second press conference after being elected raised the question “what have thirty years of adherence to the NPT given us?” <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=1886557&page=2>.

international legitimacy. The present stage of confrontation between Iran and the international community makes such a model difficult to implement.

3. **Early Posturing** – similar to India’s detonation in 1974 of a nuclear device (i.e. not a bomb)even before it had real delivery capabilities. This model seems to be more and more relevant. Nationalistic considerations and Ahmadinejad’s propensity towards challenging the international community may push Iran towards exposing its nuclear capabilities. From the domestic point of view, it would be virtually impossible for the reformist camp to oppose such a step and the tension with the West that such a step would probably generate would play into the hands of the regime in its struggle against the reformists.
4. **Maintaining ambiguity pending a credible nuclear strike capability** with a reliable delivery system – this would be similar to the Pakistani model. Under the present circumstances, it would seem that Iran would find it difficult to bide its time until it achieves a credible nuclear weapon.

There are certain signs of thinking in Iran regarding the incorporation of a military nuclear capability in its general force doctrine. There are indications that Iran believes that the goal of a “first strike” capability against Israel is feasible, due to Israel’s size and population density.⁸ Such a capability, once achieved, would clearly offset Israel’s present strategic superiority. Although Iran is aware of Israel’s “second strike” capabilities, they assess that these would cause tolerable damage to Iran, whereas Israel will be totally destroyed.⁹

Public Opinion

Iran’s right to nuclear technology enjoys wide consensus among all Iranian factions. In “right to nuclear technology” most Iranians would include the right to build nuclear power plants and to have total control over the fuel cycle for those plants as well as to maintain nuclear research. This is not to say that there does not exist a wide consensus over Iran’s right to nuclear weapons as well. Most Iranians – like many other publics in the “third world” – would probably subscribe to the view that the monopoly of nuclear weapons by the great powers is discriminatory and colonialist in nature, though most would also advise that Iran, given its geo-political conditions – not rebel against this world order.

This consensus, notwithstanding the price that various parts of the Iranian public are willing to pay for both goals – “nuclear technology” in general, and a military nuclear capability – varies. While it is difficult to gauge Iranian public opinion in a reliable manner, there are indications that much of the Iranian public may be willing to suffer sanctions and international displeasure for their right to civilian nuclear

⁸ The conventional wisdom in Tehran is that Israel is a “one bomb” country and that in case of a first strike, there would either be no Israeli second strike or such a strike would be sustainable for Iran. This has come out of a number of sources with access to clerical circles in Iran.

⁹ See Rafsanjani. A senior Iranian cleric claims that Ahmadinejad is convinced that it is possible to destroy Israel with minimum non-conventional retaliation against Iran (private communication. SB)

technology, however this may not be the case were it clear that the issue was Iran's right to develop nuclear weapons. This may be one of the reasons that the regime has consistently downplayed the fact that the conflict with the West is not over Iran's right to nuclear technology as such but over the claim that Iran is clandestinely involved in developing nuclear weapons and the reason for the directive of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) in February 2007 to refrain from any public debate over the nuclear issue.

The nuclear policy of Iran is among the most opaque facets of Iranian strategic thinking. Nevertheless, the debate over acquisition of nuclear weapons has occasionally slipped into the public realm, evidence of discussion within the regime regarding the pros and cons and the ramifications of "going nuclear." The discussion broke out from behind the scenes again in the wake of the Pakistani nuclear test in 1998 which emboldened the pro-nuclear lobby to speak out, and in response to the IAEA demand that Iran sign and ratify the additional protocol to the safeguards agreement (93+2) and later Iran's open conflict with the IAEA. The arguments against the regime's nuclear policy include:

1. Accusations by reformists that the regime has unnecessarily exposed Iran to international pressure and undermined its international legitimacy.¹⁰ Reformist politicians who criticized the regime for having reached the point where Iran was put under pressure (for not having signed the protocol from the beginning) were again attacked by the conservatives for abusing their right of speech, since the issue should be decided by the Supreme National Security Council alone.¹¹
2. The political-strategic arguments against such a policy state that having nuclear weapons would lead the Persian Gulf states to strengthen their ties with the United States and even provide the pretext for further projection of US power in the region, and see a net loss for Iran in choosing the nuclear option.¹²
3. Arguments raised by the scientific community, pointing to the cost-effectiveness of a military nuclear program and Iran's technological deficiencies, which make an attempt to achieve a nuclear balance with Israel prohibitive.¹³

¹⁰ The reformist M.P. for Esfahan, Ahmad Shirzad, claimed (24 November 2003) that contrary to its claims, the regime is secretly preparing to produce weapons of mass destruction, believing that the program would not be discovered. By doing so, he accused, the regime had undermined its position as a peaceful member of the international community. His comments were met with counter-accusations that he was parroting the allegations of "America and Israel." *Iran Report*, RFERL, 6, 47, 2003. <<http://www.rferl.org/reports/iran-report/2003/12/47-081203.asp>>.

¹¹ *Iran Report*, RFERL, 29 September 2003, <<http://www.rferl.org/reports/iran-report/2003/09/39-290903.asp>>.

¹² The reformist journal *Farda* observed, "Deploying such weapons cannot solve any problems for Iran; it will only add to our problems." "Azmayesh-haye hasteyee hend va pakistan va chalesh-haye siasat-e khareji-ye iran" (Nuclear Tests in India and Pakistan and Challenges for Iran's Foreign Policy), *Farda*, 101, 1377/1999. *Farda* was run by Ahmad Tavakoli, a former conservative presidential candidate.

¹³ See article by the Iranian physicist Reza Mansoori in *Payam-e Emrouz*, quoted in Farida Farhi, "To

The strategic argument taking place in the public domain in favor of nuclear weapons is basically one of deterrence;¹⁴ Iran lives in a dangerous neighborhood and is surrounded by nuclear or potentially nuclear neighbors.¹⁵ Another argument justifies acquisition of nuclear weapons on the basis of national honor and achieving the means to impose Iran's world view on the region.¹⁶ According to this viewpoint, Iran should formally withdraw from the NPT in light of the IAEA decision to report it to the Security Council. Such a step would be compatible with the guidelines of the Supreme Leader for the states principles: expediency, honor and wisdom.¹⁷

Alongside the "strategic" rationale for Iran to acquire a nuclear capability, Iranians widely perceive such a capability as a "membership card" to an exclusive and respected club of nuclear powers, a status that Iranian national pride considers to be much deserved. This motivation stands on its own. However, the existence of other nuclear states in Iran's neighborhood (primarily Israel and Pakistan) exacerbates the Iranian sense of discrimination in the international demand for Iran to forego its own nuclear program.¹⁸ Foreign attempts to deter Iran from achieving this goal are seen as an affront to national pride and have aroused patriotic support of the nuclear program, even if it is not overtly declared. The fact that the United States attacked Iraq despite having ostensibly believed that it had chemical and biological weapons only strengthens the Iranian resolve to achieve a nuclear capability, which presumably is the only non-conventional capability which can effectively deter the United States. The alternative explanation for the American invasion of Iraq – that the administration and the US military knew that Iraq had no WMD but used the claims of WMD to justify the invasion for wider strategic goals (including pressure on Iran and taking control of the oil in the region) also lends itself in Iran to the conclusion that Iran is in dire need of a strategic deterrent against the US. Therefore, while Iran officially denies any form of existing WMD capabilities or programs, it is presented as a conscious yielding of a national right to obtain nuclear weapons for the sake of regional confidence building and stability.

According to one version, Iran "allowed" inspectors to come across the incriminating evidence that instigated the present stage of the crisis, out of an assessment that the US, bogged down in Iraq, does not have either the willpower or the international support required to take effective action and that this was the time to enter into negotiations to legitimize its activities. The evidence does not bear out this version. It appears that the regime was not expecting the discoveries and did not have a "game plan" for the escalation of the conflict at the time. The Iranian plan at the time was to continue to buy time.

Have or Have Not: Iran's Domestic Debate on Nuclear Options," in Geoffrey Kemp, et. al., Iran's Nuclear Weapons Options, Issues and Analysis, The Nixon Center, January 2001, pp. 35-53.

¹⁴ For example, reformist politician Mustafa Tajzadeh said, "It's basically a matter of equilibrium. If I don't have them, I don't have security," and conservative Amir Mohebian, "The Americans say, in order to preserve the peace for my children, I should have nuclear weapons and you shouldn't have them."

¹⁵ "Pasokh beh yek soal" (Answer to a question), *Farda*, 101, 1377/1999. Quoted in Farida Farhi, 47.

¹⁶ See Hossein Shariatmadari, quoted above, note 3.

¹⁷ *Kayhan*, 9 March 2006.

¹⁸ See Ali Akbar Velayati, quoted above, note 2.

The Decision Making Elite

The Iranian leadership recognizes that the nuclear program is both a foremost strategic asset and a major stumbling block in Iran's relations with the international community. As such the decision making group which is privy to all the relevant information and determines Iran's nuclear policy is extremely restricted; it avails itself of additional "advisors", public relations and diplomatic personnel. However, it would be incorrect to assume that the public prominence of an individual in the nuclear negotiations with the E3 (UK, Germany, France) or the IAEA is indicative of his status in the actual decision making process.

The importance of the nuclear issue for Iran's strategic posturing and foreign relations has moved it to develop a decision making process which is even more centralized and controlled than the decision making process regarding other aspects of Iranian domestic or international policy decision making. Furthermore, an assessment of the Iranian decision making process on this issue should distinguish between different phases and aspects of the issue: the decisions on the pace and directions of the technological R&D towards acquiring a military nuclear potential are evidently heavily influenced by the technocrats and scientists dealing in this highly professional area. The assessments of these individuals and institutions regarding their capacity to achieve the goals they have been set certainly will influence the political negotiation process and the net assessment of the regime leadership regarding Iran's ability to withstand western sanctions until it achieves its goal. However, once the capacity is reached – or even near achievement – the input to the leadership will most probably pass on to the military-political strategists, primarily the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Iran initiated a nuclear program prior to the rise of the present regime and certain elements of that effort have been inherited. The power structures and decision making processes in the Shah's regime and that of the Islamic Republic however are substantially different and therefore knowledge about the nuclear program of the Shah's era sheds little light on corresponding issues in the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, whereas the power structure under the Shah was relatively stable until the fall of the monarchy, the Islamic Republic has undergone modifications since its inception: from the absolute power of Khomeini, as the venerated spiritual leader and founding father to the lesser spiritual and temporal authority of Khamene'i.

The nebulous networks of decision making in Islamic Iran have reflected this fact as have the fluctuating relative influence of the various factions in control of the regime: the president, the IRGC and others. Thus, the relatively short period of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini (1979-1987), was dominated by his personal attitude on matters of national security; other institutions of the revolution (such as the IRGC, the SNSC and the Office of the Supreme Leader (*daftar-e Rahbar*) itself) evolved gradually to their present positions. At the same time, institutions that were inherited from the Shah's regime, such as the AEOI (Iranian Atomic Energy Organization) and the Iranian military in general, were suspect and were held at first at arms length from the centers of decision making.

Even the balance of power within the clerical world of Qom has undergone changes since the revolution. For example, for most of Khomeini's era, Ayatollah

Montazeri, who had issued an unequivocal *fatwa* against the use of nuclear weapons, was at that time recognized as the Supreme Leader's successor, and hence was expected to become the most senior religious authority in the post-Khomeini era. Undoubtedly, the positions of senior Ayatollah's who are viewed by key figures in the other decision forming bodies mentioned above have played a role in the decision-making regarding nuclear weapons.

The changes in the relative strength of the presidency under different Presidents (since Khomeini's death – Rafsanjani, Khatami and Ahmadinejad) and in the relationships of these presidents with the other bodies has also determined the weight of those persons in issues of national security and of nuclear development in particular. The rise to power of Ahmadinejad, and his clique of IRGC veterans, appears to be a new phase in the balance of power within the regime. During the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies, conventional wisdom saw the Iranian regime as a “two-headed” entity: an ideological clerical regime headed by the Supreme Leader and supported by the IRGC, which was dominant in the strategic issues and in domestic affairs; and a non-clerical (though not “secular”) government which handled the day to day affairs of the Islamic Republic, including its international relations. The ascendancy of Ahmadinejad has changed this equation. The president now is more ideologically outspoken – if not more religiously committed – than many of the representatives of the clerical establishment, many of whom have even criticized him for endangering the vital interests of the regime by his confrontational rhetoric.¹⁹

One may distinguish between four main “camps” in Iran regarding this question in descending order of their influence in the decision making process and their willingness to take risks to achieve these goals:

1. **The second generation revolutionary camp** – particularly the President and his close advisors – who see the conflict with the West over the nuclear issue as a return to revolutionary values and a vehicle for roll-back of the negative policies of the former administration, which as the present administration sees it, encouraged the West to pressure Iran. For this camp, the price of political and economic sanctions – and even a limited military confrontation – is not too high to pay. It perceives the relationship of Iran and the West as one of conflict, in any case. An open conflict would also have side benefits: consolidation of the power of the radicals, virtually eliminating the reformists (who could not place demands on the regime at a time of conflict with the West), proving the inadequacy of the West in acting against Iran (assuming that the economic consequences for the West would be so harmful that the sanctions would be limited in time) and, finally turning Iran into a nuclear power. Members of this group have gone on record advocating punitive counter-sanctions against “unfriendly” nations and raising of oil prices as pressure against the West. Among this group one may even find open supporters of acquiring nuclear weapons.²⁰

¹⁹ See for example Hasan Rowhani, who complained that the US has been trying to drag Iran to the UNSC for decades and Ahmadinejad accomplished this within months.

²⁰ Mohammad Javad Ardehshir-Larijani – Brother of SNSC Secretary, Ali Larijani, member of the Expediency Council member, and head of the Center for Research on Theoretical Physics – was

2. **Hardliners** who favor concealment of the nuclear program and criticize both the former and the current administrations, for not concealing the nuclear program enough – the former for being too open in its diplomatic ties with the IAEA and the EU, and the latter for its provocative declarations and populist nuclear exhibitionism.²¹
3. **Old Guard** technocrats and representatives of the previous government, who believe in the natural right of Iran to develop the fuel cycle, but support continuing the conciliatory tone of the former administration that staved off conflict, thus granting sufficient time to allow for advancing nuclear development. This group favors continuing negotiations and rejects taking pro-active steps to raise the temperature of the conflict.
4. **“Pragmatists”**, who also believe that it is within Iran’s right to have control over its own fuel cycle, but not at the price of conflict with the world. The goal of acquiring a *military* nuclear capability would be, in the eyes of this group, even less worth conflict with the international community.

The nuclear decision making group of the Islamic regime in Iran is composed of seven interlocking sectors within the Iranian regime, presented below, roughly, in descending order of their current weight in the decision making process:

1. The Supreme Leader, Khamene’i, and his court (*daftar-e rahbar*).
2. The President, his cabinet and his close advisors.
3. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC – *Pasdaran*).
4. The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC).
5. The Iranian Atomic Energy Organization (AEOI).
6. The Iranian Military (including the civilian level – the Minister of Defense – and other senior officers).
7. The clerical establishment – The Council of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregan*), the Guardians’ Council (*Shoura-ye Nagahban*) and the Expediency Discernment Council of the System (*Majma'-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*) under former president Rafsanjani. The clerical establishment includes senior Ayatollahs who have ruled on the issue of the legality of acquisition and use of nuclear weapons.
8. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

The decision making bodies relating to the nuclear issue have undergone significant changes over the last three years. Initially, there were three committees that dealt with the issue:

quoted: “From a defensive point of view it makes no sense for our enemy to have nuclear weapons while we deprive ourselves of these weapons. . . . We have a certain and indisputable right to possess nuclear weapons. . . . Israel possesses nuclear weapons, and because of this, no one has the right to deprive us of the possession of these weapons.” *Sharq*, 20 September 2004.

²¹ An example of this camp is Ali Falahian, former Head of the Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS) and a hard-line official in the Supreme Leader’s office. Falahian criticized the former government for having had too close ties with the Europeans, who are “worse than the Americans... cunning and insulting”, and the Ahmadinejad government for having prematurely declared the nuclear breakthrough before having achieved the full nuclear cycle.

1. **The Council of Heads** in which the cardinal decisions were made in consultation with the Supreme Leader. The chief negotiator and Secretary of the SNSC, Hasan Rowhani was a member of this committee.
2. **The Policy Making Committee**, led by the Foreign Ministry, which included cabinet members, the director of the Atomic Energy Organization (Gholamreza Aqazadeh-Khoi, and Reza Amorallahi before him) and two representatives of the Supreme Leader. Ali Larijani filled this position until he was replaced on 20 October 2007 by Sa'id Jalili who took over as SNSC Secretary and Chief negotiator on nuclear issues. The second representative former Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Velayati (now in the Office of the Supreme Leader).
3. **The Experts Committee**, also led by the Foreign Ministry but operating separately from the Policy Making Committee.

After the IAEA's board of governors meeting in September 2003 and the escalation of the conflict between the IAEA and Iran, Iranian policy making, at least in regard to the negotiations with the West, became more centralized. The Secretary of the SNSC, Hasan Rowhani was selected to head the Iranian effort and the SNSC itself became more involved in the issue.²² The negotiating process – or the public relations and diplomatic aspects of the crisis – however should be clearly distinguished from the decision making process regarding the actual development of nuclear weapons and – in the future – the possible testing and using such of such weapons. In these areas, there is no doubt that the Foreign Ministry and most of the figures in the SNSC are not privy to the strategic decision making process, and that the final say lies in the hands of the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, with the president's weight deriving not from his ex officio status but from his relationship with the two other.

The regime has gone to some effort to demonstrate continuity and consensus on the nuclear policy. For example the decision to renew nuclear activities in Isfahan was reported openly to have been made in a meeting between Khamene'i, President Khatami, President-elect Ahmadinejad, and former Prime Minister Mir-Hussein Musavi and Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani.²³ The line up was intended to prove that the decision was agreed upon by all factions – the “reformist” Khatami, the “conservative” Rafsanjani and the radical Ahmadinejad.

The Supreme Leader

The decision-making process on the nuclear program – like all other issues of political importance in Iran – is both political and theological. The position of the Supreme Leader embodies both these considerations. Upon achieving power in 1979, Khomeini ordered the suspension of the Shah's nuclear program on the basis of his legal opinion regarding the Islamic illegality of nuclear weapons. He has been quoted

²² Rowhani to *Kayhan*, 23 July 2004.

²³ See SNSC official Ali Aqamohammadi in an interview to *Sharq*, 27 July 2005, and to *IRNA*, 1 August 2005.

as having ruled, albeit orally, that "Atom(ic power/ weapons) is a thing of the Satan". There is however no written record or official ruling by Khomeini on the issue of nuclear power or nuclear weapons. Be the historic truth of that statement as it may, Khomeini's position against acquisition of nuclear weapons was short-lived. As time – and the war with Iraq - went on, his attitude apparently changed and he is reputed to have given the religious justification and policy directive to renew the efforts to acquire a military nuclear potential. The fact that the nuclear program was revived while Khomeini was still alive is of cardinal significance not only for historic reasons.

While there is no official record of a ruling by Khomeini on this matter, the power structure of Iran at the time of the renewal of the Iranian program precludes the possibility that the program was initiated without his legal and moral dispensation. The nature of this legal dispensation though is unknown. Similar to fatwas of other Shiite and Sunni scholars on the question of WMD, it may have been limited to addressing the need to develop a nuclear military capability to counter the Iraqi nuclear efforts, or it may have extended to questions relating to the Islamic legality of use of nuclear weapons. If and when Iran achieves a military nuclear potential, Khomeini's unpublished rulings may emerge both as a key element in the internal debate within the regime and in order to provide Islamic justification of the highest level to whatever decision is made.

Khamene'i lacks his predecessor's status as an almost infallible religious scholar and came to power by collegial choice. Nevertheless he remains at the center of the decision-making process on the issue of nuclear power. During the decade and a half of Khamene'i as Supreme Leader, there has also been no substantiated official ruling on nuclear weapons by him or by any other cleric associated with him and perceived as ruling on his direction. On the eve of the crucial discussion in the IAEA on Iran's military nuclear program, the spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Ministry Hamid Reza-Asafi released the "news" (10 August 2005) that the Supreme Leader had issued a *fatwa* declaring the use of nuclear weapons as "*haram*" – forbidden by Islamic law.²⁴ His statement was clearly timed to assuage the fears of the international community; surely if the highest religious authority of Iran had forbidden nuclear weapons it would be inconceivable for Iran to be developing them. During the negotiations with the E3 (UK, Germany and France) the Iranian side reiterated as proof of its good intentions that there is a *fatwa* by the leader against nuclear weapons.

Khamenei's purported *fatwa* however was not published by the Office of the Leader and its exact wording is nowhere to be found in the Iranian media or in official records of the Supreme Leader's religious edicts, which are assiduously updated and published. The closest declaration by Khamene'i that can be interpreted as such as *fatwa* could be a statement he made (22 May 2005) that "We are not after producing the atomic bomb, because Islam does not even allow us to treat our enemy in such a manner."²⁵ Such a statement does not amount to a *fatwa*. Given the role of the

²⁴ <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/menu-236/0508104135124631.htm>.

²⁵ IRNA, 22 March 2005.

Supreme Leader in the Iranian regime, this raises serious questions regarding its very existence. It is noteworthy, though, that even if such a *fatwa* had been issued, the wording, as presented by the Foreign Ministry spokesman, would not imply prohibition of development or manufacturing of nuclear weapons, rather only of their stockpiling and actual use.

Khamene'i's relations with Ahmadinejad are a pivotal issue for the understanding of the decision making process. Some evidence has come to light that while Khamene'i reiterates his open support of Ahmadinejad, he and clergy affiliated with him are concerned about the growing power of Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi (Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor) and the possibility that the important power base of the IRGC may support him and the president against Khamene'i. According to various reports, Khamene'i has been approached by representatives of the "old guard" of clerics who are concerned about the growing power of Ahmadinejad and petitioned the Supreme Leader to restrain him, but his responses have been lukewarm. There is however no evidence that these concerns have affected the core consensus in the Iranian leadership regarding the goal of developing a military nuclear capability.

In any case, it is the Supreme Leader who will be the highest authority as far as the authorization to deploy or use nuclear weapons, if and when Iran were to acquire them. It is, therefore, of imperative importance to attempt to gauge the extent of his acquaintance with nuclear weapons issues, such as deterrence, the operational capabilities of all sides in a conflict, and the consequences of wielding nuclear threats, or of carrying them out – or whether he would view his religious or ideological knowledge as sufficient to base critical decisions upon.

While there is no good information on this question, one may draw some conclusions from the way he filters information and makes strategic decisions in other areas. Khamene'i does not speak foreign languages (except for Arabic), and is not a direct recipient of information from foreign media (though it is said that he listens occasionally to BBC in Persian and Arabic and to Israeli Persian broadcasts, as well as reading translations of the foreign press in Iranian newspapers).²⁶ While the Iranian press on its own is informative enough to provide a relatively good picture of public opinion and domestic developments, for assessment of foreign powers, Khamene'i is almost totally dependent on his "gatekeepers" for both raw information and its interpretation. Under the Khatami administration, Khamene'i seems to have received information that encouraged a more cautious approach from the reformist government sources, while the sources of information which are directly subordinate to the Supreme Leader's Office tended to be more radical and revolutionary in their worldview – many associated with the IRGC. This equation has now lost whatever balance it had and now both the government sources and Khamene'i's own associates may tend to feed each other's self confidence and underestimate of Iran's (American and Israeli) adversaries.

²⁶ An informed Iranian religious source.

The President and his Advisors

During the terms of office of President Khatami, the conventional wisdom was that his authority on issues of national security, including the acquisition of nuclear weapons was limited. This however was not necessarily due to the nature of the position of president but rather the result of the personal status of the incumbent. Thus, during his term in office as president, Rafsanjani was a central figure in the defense and security decision-making process. After Khatami was elected, Khamene'i transferred the control of internal security forces to his own line of command, and effectively neutralized the president in this area. It is not clear whether he took similar steps towards the various elements involved in developing nuclear capabilities. However, since the IRGC was, in any case, subordinate to the Supreme Leader, the president did not even have formal control over those elements. While the President holds the position of Chairman of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), its Secretary is appointed by the Supreme Leader.

The balance of power – and the relevance of the President to the nuclear decision making process – seems to have changed with the election of Ahmadinejad. His election can be described as a “counter-counter-revolution” of the IRGC against the “reformist counter-revolution” which never really emerged. This “counter-counter-revolution” has facets relating to both domestic and foreign and defense policy. In both these realms, Ahmadinejad, unlike his predecessor, Khatami, represents the IRGC elite and is party to their strategic Weltanschauung. He is a founding member of the *Jamiat-i Isargaran-i Inqilab-i Islami*, (Islamic Revolution Devotees Society) usually referred to as simply “Isargaran.”. This group is comprised mainly of Iran-Iraq War veterans and represents a second generation of the Islamic revolution, which mourns the loss of revolutionary zeal and calls for an Islamic “cultural revolution” to restore the regime to its original goals. While the *Isargan* did not support Ahmadinejad openly during his campaign, it remains a potent force for influence over his policies.

A major element in Ahmadinejad’s Weltanschauung is his “intimacy” with the “Hidden Imam”²⁷ and his belief in his imminent reappearance. Belief in the eventual reappearance of the “Hidden Imam” is one of the core tenets of Shiite Islam. According to Shiite eschatological thought, this “last day” will be preceded by cataclysms and great sacrifice of the Muslims. However, at the end, the Imam will appear, punish the oppressors and reward the believers. However, to most Shiites the hidden Imam is no more than an eschatological idea with little immediate relevance to the actual life of society. Traditional “quietist” Shiite scholars have usually embraced pragmatic positions towards external forces, based on their understanding that until the Imam appears, the Shiites are in the minority and “the oppressed upon earth” by definition. They must bide their time and maintain their beliefs. A leader who

²⁷ The Twelfth Imam in the line of the founder of the Shiah, the Imam Ali, who is believed to have disappeared, remains in the world in “occultation” (*ghayba*) and will eventually reappear to meet out justice, to reward his believers (the Shiites) and to punish the oppressors.

subscribes to the former belief would naturally be less perturbed or deterred by the prospects of a nuclear war or any other wide-scale use of force against his country.

Ahmadinejad – though not a cleric himself – has elevated the eschatological expectation of the reappearance of the Hidden Imam to the level of a central principle of the regime’s political, cultural, economic and social life. As mayor of Tehran in 2004, Ahmadinejad instructed the city council to build a grand avenue to prepare for the Mahdi. As president, he allocated US\$17 million for a renovation of the mosque in Jamkaran (the well where the Mahdi is assumed to appear) and directed the building of a Tehran-Jamkaran railroad line. Moreover, he initiated the deposition of oaths of allegiance to the Hidden Imam in the well by his cabinet ministers.

More significant is the fact that Ahmadinejad has a “timeline” for the reappearance of the Imam. He has declared that the Imam will emerge within two years to bring about the “last day” and claims to engage in regular “*khalvat*” (audiences) with Him. The president’s supporters have spread the claim that he himself is one of the 36 nails (*owtad*) which hold the world together pending the return of the Imam. Ahmadinejad attributes his running and winning the presidency to this personal link with the Imam and hence sees himself as the agent of the Imam, bound to perform his mission, more than the representative of his constituency. Accordingly, he has taken concrete steps to prepare for the Imam: rebuilding the shrine at Jamkaran where the Imam is expected to appear and “depositing” his government’s platform in the well at the shrine where Shiites place messages for the Imam (the well is where the Imam is believed to have disappeared).

The ideological movement that appears to be behind this worldview of Ahmadinejad and his colleagues is frequently linked to the Hojjatiyeh Association. This link though is tendentious. The Hojjatiyeh Society was established in 1953 by a preacher from Mashhad, Sheikh Mahmud Halabi who first supported Prime Minister Mosadeq and then the Shah. The essence of the Hojjatiyeh doctrine is that true Islamic government must await the return of the Hidden Imam. Therefore, the Hojjatiyeh Association opposed Ayatollah Khomeini’s theory of Islamic government and *velayat-e faqih*, called for collective leadership of the religious community, and opposed religious involvement in political affairs. While the movement was essentially “quietist” and eschewed political involvement, it believed that only when the situation would be intolerable and absolute chaos will reign, will the Imam feel obliged to reappear and to save the believers.

After the Islamic revolution the Hojjatiyeh supported *velayat-e faqih* in the December 1979 referendum and many Hojjatiyeh members or sympathizers succeeded in integrating into the regime.²⁸ The association came under attack of

²⁸ These included Ahmad Azari-Qomi, Ali-Akbar Parvaresh, Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani, Abolqasem Khazali, and Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, Kamal Kharrazi (former Foreign Minister), Ne’matzadeh (former industries minister) and Haddad Adel (Head of the Academy of Language and

Khomeini and announced its dissolution in July 1983. Both conservatives and reformists accused their rivals of Hojjiyeh tendencies. The former claimed that the latter believe, like the Hojjiyeh, in separating government and religion and in tolerance of “vice” (un-Islamic behavior) until the appearance of the Imam; the latter claimed that the former represent the obscurantism and apocalyptic tendencies of the movement. In addition, clerics of the Qom Howzeh claims that the Hojjiyeh are followers of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Najaf (thus posing a threat to the institutional interests of Qom) and point at his rejection of *velayat-e faqih* as proof of his association.

Ahmadinejad and his circle vehemently deny any link to the Hojjiyeh.²⁹ The denial should be seen in the context of what is commonly viewed as the primary tenet of the association – rejection of any Islamic regime or government – including *velayat-e faqih* – until the appearance of the Imam. In any case, since such a large number of the Iranian clerical oligarchy (particularly those from Mashhad) were connected in their youth with the Hojjiyeh, such a history does not necessarily suggest an present ideological propensity. Be that as it may, the expressed goal of the ideologues of the faction that Ahmadinejad represents is – like that of the Hojjiyeh – to hasten the appearance of the Hidden Imam. This is to be accomplished through the precipitation of a clash of civilizations between the Islamic world and the West.

Ahmadinejad’s apocalyptic inclinations are not without worldly side benefits. The commitment to hasten the coming of the Imam encourages a hard-line confrontational attitude vis-à-vis the international community on the nuclear issue. By escalating the conflict with the West, Ahmadinejad effectively neutralizes the reformist opposition, which can be accused of identification with the West at a time that the latter is threatening Iran, and silences criticism of his policies by his immediate rivals – the more pragmatic elements within the conservative camp (e.g. Rafsanjani and the *Musharakat*). The confrontational policy would therefore appear to be a “win-win” policy: as long as there is a feeling in the Iranian public of impending confrontation, Ahmadinejad can exploit it to gain the upper hand in his domestic strategy; if the West does not take action, he can point to the fact as justification of his policy, as opposed to the policy of avoiding confrontation that his predecessors attempted; if the West does take action, the regime assesses that the Iranian people would then stand behind it and that would weaken the reformist movement.

Ahmadinejad’s close circle of advisors reflects the more radical elements in the regime. First and foremost among them are the more radical Ayatollahs in Qom: Ayatollah Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati (Head of the Guardians'

Literature) Ali Akbar Velayati (former foreign minister) and Ali Akbar Parvaresh (former education minister). Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, for example, became the speaker of the fifth parliament and currently serves on the Expediency Council and as an adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Ali-Akbar Parvaresh served as Deputy Speaker of Parliament and Education Minister. Ayatollah Ahmad Azari-Qomi-Bigdeli served as Public Prosecutor, represented Khomeini during a parliamentary review of the constitution, represented Qom in the legislature, served on the Assembly of Experts, and headed the Resalat Foundation (the regime eventually put him under house arrest for questioning the system of *velayat-i faqih* and questioning the qualifications of Supreme Leader Khamene'i; he died in 1999).

²⁹ Head of Presidential Office Gholamhossein Elham to *Iran Daily*, 2434, 24 November 2005.

Council), Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi, Ayatollah Haeri-Shirazi, Ayatollah Mohammad Fazel Lankarani, Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani and Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli.

Ahmadinejad's cabinet is made up chiefly of representatives of the second generation of the Revolution, who were young activists in the revolution but were not leaders. They recruited to the IRGC and MOIS and, in contrast to their more intellectual clerical "armchair revolutionary" elders, were actively involved in revolutionary violence – arrests, torture and murder – and in the Iraq–Iran war. This group also includes members of Ahmadinejad's radical Islamist organization "*Abadgaran-e Iran-e Islami*" (Developers of an Islamic Iran), individuals who were affiliated with him as mayor of Tehran and former IRGC officers, radical clerics associated with the Haqqani Madrasa in Qom, which has been one of the main bastions of the revolutionary regime and the provider of a great many of the senior officials in the IRGC and MOIS.³⁰

The domestic "game plan" of the IRGC and Ahmadinejad seems to include the following elements:

1. Gaining control over the main levers of power and purging the reformists.
2. Implementing a "cultural revolution" among the Iranian population to root out what Ahmadinejad and his camp view as the reformist "post-revolutionarism".
3. Taking control over the clerical institutions, particularly the Experts Council (*Majles-e Khobregan*) that elects and deposes the Supreme Leader.
4. Electing Mesbah Yazdi as Supreme Leader, either through deposing Khamene'i or after his demise.
5. Changing the quasi-democratic elements of the regime and replacing the "Islamic Republic" with an "Islamic Administration" more heavily based on velayat-e faqih (the rule of the scholars).³¹

On issues of defense and foreign policy, while Khatami based his concept of

³⁰ Prominent alumni of the Haqqani School include: Ali Fallahian, (former head of MOIS, now in the Supreme Leader's office); Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, Ali Younesi (Head of MOIS), Gholamhossein Mohseni Ezhei (MOIS), Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, (former deputy head of MOIS and IRGC official, now Interior Minister), Ali Larijani, Gholamhossein Karbaschi, Ali Razini, Hojjat al-Islam Raieesi, Hojjat al-Islam Abbas Alizadeh (head of the Tehran judiciary), Gholam Reza Naghdi, General Zolghadr (Deputy commander of IRGC), General Allah Karam, Hossein Shariatmadari, Hasan Shaynafar, Mojtaba Zonnour, Hojjat al-Islam Izad-Panah, Hojjat al-Islam Meravi, Hojjat al-Islam Rahbar, Mohammad Rayshahri, (former head of MOIS), Hojjat al-Islam Neeiazi, Hojjatal-Islam Nezam-Zadeh, Hojjat al-Islam Mohammadi-Eraghi, Hojjat al-Islam Moalla, Sadeq Ziarati, Mohsen Mohammadi Eraqi, Hojjat al-Islam Mir-Sepah, Hojjat al-Islam Faker, Ahmad Khatami, Ayatollah Seyyed Hasan Taheri Khorramabadi, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, Ayatollah Dr. Ahmad Ahmadi

³¹ The debate over the democratic features of the Iranian regime flared up in Qom in January 2006 when Hojjat al-Islam Mohsen Gharavian, a professor at the Imam Khomeini Institute and a disciple of Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, claimed that Khomeini was opposed to an Islamic Republic and called for an Islamic Administration. Similar views have been aired by Mesbah Yazdi himself in the newsletter, Parto, which is published by the Institute. These positions have been rejected by other senior clerics such as Ayatollah Tavasoli, Ayatollah Montazeri, Ayatollah Mousavi Boujnardi and Ayatollah Sadouqi. See Shervin Omdivar, *Rooz*, 7 January 2006, <http://roozonline.com/english/013158.shtml>.

Iranian national security on improved relations with the outside world – particularly with the West – and avoiding conflict in order to enhance Iran’s international legitimacy, Ahmadinejad shows a clear preference for instigating conflict and brinkmanship. Since the issue of Iran’s nuclear program is arguably the single most contentious subject on the table in Iranian–Western relations, Ahmadinejad has intervened in a way that his predecessor seems to have consciously avoided. There are conflicting reports regarding the degree of coordination of Ahmadinejad’s provocative statements on the nuclear issue with the other parts of the regime, and particularly with the Supreme Leader.³² Thus, for example, Ahmadinejad’s announcement of 11 April 2006 on renewal of uranium enrichment served his own populist interests but precipitated an escalation of the conflict with the West.

While the nuclear issue has become a major element in Ahmadinejad’s international politics, there is no single figure in his cabinet or among his close advisors who can be said to be an “expert” on matters of nuclear proliferation, NPT or nuclear strategy.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

The elite of the IRGC is traditionally affiliated with the Supreme Leader and appointed by him directly. Nevertheless, the affiliation of many of this elite with the Haqqani School in Qom (see above) and the Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi is the source of a new alliance between the IRGC and the president.

The IRGC has been identified since the mid 1990s as the main body in Iran which controls the Iranian WMD program. It is not known which department in the IRGC is responsible for the nuclear program, however, there is no doubt that the more sensitive aspects of the program are under IRGC control.

The IRGC establishment is firmly in favor of keeping the nuclear option viable. The more prominent figures in the IRGC who seem to have a say in the nuclear issue include:

1. Former Commander of the IRGC, **Yahya Rahim Safavi**, presented a case against all international conventions on WMD as far back as 1998, and it may be assumed that he has not changed his mind since then.³³ Safavi is widely considered to be extremist, radical and activist in his defense doctrine. Immediately after Ahmadinejad was elected, he declared that the IRGC and Basij all stand behind him and will support him. This was in sharp contrast to the warnings that the IRGC issued after Khatami was elected. Saffavi was replaced on 1 September 2007 by Muhammad Ali Jafari
2. Former Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Brigadier General **Mohammad-Baqer Zolqadr** (now deputy Minister of Interior).

³² On other issues it is clear that there has been no coordination and the Leader has even vetoed steps taken by the President, such as lifting the ban on participation of women in sports events.

³³ Farida Farhi, p. 35.

3. Commander of the IRGC (former Head of the IRGC “Center for Strategy”), Brigadier General **Mohammad-Ali (Aziz) Jaafari**
4. Head of the “Center for Strategic Studies” of the IRGC, Dr. **Hassan Abbasi**. Abbasi is also behind the “Centre for Recruiting Suicide Volunteers”. He is said to be affiliated with Mesbah Yazdi. He is seen as a supporter of the Hojjatiyeh³⁴ and of Ahmadinejad. Abbasi is considered one of the main contributors to Ahmadinejad’s strategic thought.

The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)

The Defense issues – including nuclear issues – are discussed in the framework of the **Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)**. According to Article 177 of the Constitution, the responsibilities of the SNSC are as follows:

- To determine the national defense/security policies within the framework of general policies laid down by the Leader
- To coordinate political, intelligence, social, cultural and economic activities in relation to general defense/security policies
- To exploit material and non-material resources of the country for facing internal and external threats

The SNSC is a consultative rather than a decision-making body, its composition and the fact that the President heads it, and that its membership is functional rather than personal (with the exception of the Secretary) precludes any real authority. The members of the SNSC include:

- Heads of the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judiciary)
- Commander of the IRGC
- Chief of the Supreme Command Council of the Armed Forces (SCCAF)
- The official in charge of the Planning and Budget Organization (PBO)
- Secretary and one more official nominated by the Leader
- The Chief of the Secretariat of the Council nominated by the President
- Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Minister of the Interior
- Minister of Information and Security (MOIS)³⁵

The SNSC deepened its involvement in the nuclear issue in September 2003, apparently in the wake of the growing conflict with the IAEA. The new SNSC which

³⁴ Abbasi has been quoted as calling to “Wipe liberal democracy off the face of the earth in order to prepare the ground for the appearance of the Hidden Imam” and to “Cut down the roots of Anglo-Saxon civilization for good.” http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/FF26Ak03.html.

³⁵ Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran – Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 96–97.

<http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/Supreme-National-Security-Council.html>;
<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/08/065ead0a-2594-4635-9157-dbc783556c7b.html>.

was formed after the election of Ahmadinejad changed the structure of the Council which had been based on advisory committees. The new structure set up three “directorates”: internal security; strategy; and political Affairs.³⁶

The SNSC is a major link in the chain of decision making on nuclear issues by virtue of its involvement in the negotiation with the IAEA. Thus, the personal authority of the Secretary of the SNSC was evident in the fact that Hasan Rowhani, who held the post for sixteen years during the Rafsanjani and Khatami’s administrations but was considered a nominee of Khamene’i served as the main negotiator with the IAEA. Khamene’i himself has singled out the SNSC and Rowhani in praising them for its “performance” in the nuclear negotiations.³⁷ Rowhani has remained on the SNSC and is identified as affiliated with both Khamene’i and Rafsanjani (he also serves on the Expediency Council under Rafsanjani). Since his election, Ahmadinejad has strengthened his influence and that of the IRGC within the SNSC. Members of the SNSC who are allies of Ahmadinejad and/or identified with his clique within the IRGC include:

1. Deputy Commandant Brigadier General **Mohammad-Baqer Zolqadr** – former Deputy Commander of the IRGC– new Deputy Minister of Interior and Deputy Head of the SNSC.
2. Commander of the IRGC, Brigadier General **Mohammad-Ali (Aziz) Jaafari** served even before his promotion to IRGC Commander as head of the SNSC’s new Directorate for Internal Security.
3. Major General **Yahya Rahim Safavi** – Commander of the IRGC, was a member in the previous SNSC.
4. Brigadier General Dr. **Seyyed-Ali Hosseinitash** – Head of the Directorate for Strategy. Hosseinitash was instrumental in the negotiations with Russia when he replaced Javad Va’idi as head of the Iranian delegation. Hosseinitash was the deputy Minister of Defense under Khatami and was reported to have been involved on the military side in the nuclear program.
5. **Seyyed Ali Monfared** – Head of the Directorate for Political Affairs and chief negotiator in Iran’s nuclear talks with the IAEA and Western governments. Monfared was a founder of MOIS and a senior officer in the IRGCC.
6. **Manouchehr Mottaki** – New Foreign Minister and new member in the SNSC. Joined the IRGC shortly after the fall of the Shah’s regime, was implicated in instigating terrorist activities in Turkey where he served as ambassador and later served as Vice President of Islamic Cultural and Communications Organization, an agency created by the Supreme Leader for export of Islamic revolution to other parts of the Muslim world.
7. **Hojjat al-Islam Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi** – was Deputy Minister of Intelligence and Security and Head of the Special Department for Security and Intelligence in MOIS responsible for assassinations. He has been in charge of security and intelligence in the office of the Supreme Leader since 2003.
8. **Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar** – Defense minister, veteran commander of

³⁶ <http://www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/print.php?storyid=3841>.

http://www.ncr-iran.org/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=410.

³⁷ <http://www.khamenei.de/news/news2005/aug2005.htm>.

IRGC. He has been implicated in the suicide bombing of the US Marine compound in Beirut airport in October 1983, which killed 241 Americans.

9. **Javad Va'idi** – former MOIS official who was involved in the serial murders of reformists in the 1990s (which was sanctioned by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi). His predictions regarding the reactions of the West towards Iranian positions have been extremely optimistic and this may have caused a decline in his own status.
10. **Hossein Entezami** – Spokesman of the SNSC – former editor of the newspaper *Jam-e Jam* and a former IRGC officer.

The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI)

The Atomic Energy Organization (*Sazeman-e Energy Atomi*) – AEOI – is the professional level of the Iranian nuclear arms program. As such it is intimately involved in the decision making process regarding the red lines for acquiescence to IAEA demands. Nevertheless, it has not been openly involved at a high level in the negotiations themselves. The AEOI reports directly to the President. The main figures associated with the decision making process are:

1. The present head of the AEOI, former Minister of Oil, **Gholamreza Aqazadeh-Khoi**, was appointed in August 1997 by the then newly elected President Khatami, replacing Reza Amrollahi, who was widely regarded as incompetent. He was re-appointed by Ahmadinejad after his election in August 2005.
2. The Deputy Director **Mohammad Saeedi** who has also remained in office.
3. **Mahmud Jannatian** – a senior official involved in negotiations with Russia.

There are, of course, numerous installations of the AEOI where nuclear R&D are being performed. There is no evidence that the technological level of the AEOI is in any way involved in substantial deliberations regarding the policy towards the negotiations or that they have a say regarding the decision to develop nuclear weapons. Their influence however does lie in their presentation to the leadership of their ability to achieve progress in their research. Ahmadinejad's declarations on a nuclear breakthrough in the area of enrichment may reflect a tendency of the technological level to present an optimistic forecast of their work. Such a tendency tends to render the position of the leadership – which assesses that it is on the verge of a quantum leap in its WMD capabilities – less flexible and less susceptible to outside pressure.

The Military

The regular Iranian military has been traditionally excluded from the more sensitive areas of Iran's strategic weapons program. Iranian non-conventional capabilities (the missile and chemical programs) have been placed under IRGC control and not under the regular military. There is no reason to assume that the Command and Control of a nuclear capability – when it is achieved – will be different.

The military persons known to be affiliated with the nuclear program include:

1. Defense Minister **Mostafa Mohammad Najjar**

2. **Dr. Ferydoon Abbasi** – Director of Nuclear Research of Ministry of Defense and Head of the “Center for Readiness and New Defense Technology”.
3. IRGC Brigadier General (now a member of the SNSC) **Seyyed Ali Hosseinitash** – Head of the “Institution for Training and Research” in the Ministry of Defense.

The Clerical Establishment

The clerical establishment influences the nuclear decision making process in various channels. A prime example of the way that input from the clerics of Qom enters the nuclear decision making process was in January 2006 when Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (ex officio as Head of the Expediency Council) was asked by Khamene’i to hold meetings with the major Ayatollahs in Qom.³⁸ One important channel is the “Expediency Discernment Council of the System” chaired by former President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. This positions him as the second most important person in the regime. The EDCS was tailored to serve as a power platform for its incumbent head and has received the Supreme Leader’s backing as a counter-balance to the presidency. Rafsanjani was widely perceived before the elections as the most likely successor to Khamene’i and after the elections as Ahmadinejad’s most potent rival.

Rafsanjani remains in opposition to Ahmadinejad and is well aware of the threat that the latter poses. The nuclear issue is not, therefore, exempt from their rivalry. An example of this is Rafsanjani’s attempts to contact the US before Ahmadinejad’s famous letter to president Bush through Iranian expatriates and academicians. It appears that Hassan Rowhani’s letter to Time Magazine immediately after Ahmadinejad’s letter was written in conjunction with this attempt on the part of Rafsanjani. This does not imply that Rafsanjani is less committed to the nuclear program than Ahmadinejad, but that he supports a less provocative and blatant approach.³⁹

Khomeini's suspicious and negative attitude towards "the Atom" quoted above remained in force among many of the traditional “quietist” clerics and actually do reflect a strong religious case that exists among Shiite clerics. This position was expressed in a *fatwa* by conservative ‘*ulama* in Qom (September 2003) to the effect that “Nuclear weapons are un-Islamic because they are inhumane.” This *fatwa* was instrumental in providing religious justification for a controversial Realpolitik decision that was seen by many in Iran as capitulation to American demands – Iran’s conditional acceptance of the Additional Protocol in December 2003. Since then no *fatwa* can be found emanating from any of the about thirty senior Ayatollahs in Qom relating to nuclear weapons.⁴⁰

³⁸ He reportedly met with Ayatollahs Fazel Lankarani, Mosavi Ardebili, Makarem Shirazi, Safi-Golpaygani, Nouri-Mamedani, Mohammad-Taghi Behjat, Mirza Javad Tabrizi, Yusef Sanei, Meshkini, Javadi-Amoli and the representative of Ayatollah Sistani. <http://roozonline.com/english/013792.shtml>.

³⁹ From a senior cleric linked to Rafsanjani.

⁴⁰ This is the conclusion from checking the websites of the Qom Academy (Howzah) and those of the individuals considered today to be “sources of emulation” (*marja’ taqlid*).

The most prominent of those who oppose nuclear weapons on an Islamic basis are:

1. The oppositionist **Ayatollah Montazeri**⁴¹.
2. The reformist, though strategically hawkish, **Ayatollah Ozma Yousef Saanei**⁴² who claims that a consensus exists among the senior *'ulama* in Qom that the prohibition on nuclear weapons (as well as chemical and biological weapons) is “self-evident in Islam” and an “eternal law” that cannot be reversed, since “the basic function” of these weapons is to kill innocent people. According to Saanei, this was the position behind the Iranian decision not to make use of chemical weapons against Iraq during the war.
3. The reformist professor of Shari'a in Qom and protégé of Montazeri, **Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Ayazi**, who warns against “upsetting the international balance” with nuclear weapons. Ayazi represents an anti-Ahmadinejad faction in Qom which criticizes him openly.
4. **Ayatollah Sistani** and his disciples in Qom, while they have not made any direct statements on the issue are rumored to have supported the stance against nuclear weapons on an Islamic basis.

Another indication of the consternation with which the traditionalist clergy views the government's confrontational approach to the nuclear crisis was provided in a meeting between Khamene'i and the “Association of Clergy” (*Majma-e Rohaniyun Mobarez*) in Qom. The clergy asked Khamene'i to take full control over the nuclear issue.⁴³

On the other hand, there has been increasing support for acquisition of nuclear weapons and even justification of their use by radical *'ulama*. The most outspoken of them are:

1. The radical **Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi**. Yazdi himself has not gone on record on the issue. However, in April 2006 one of his prominent disciples, **Hojjat al-Islam Mohsen Gharavian**, a professor at the Imam Khomeini Institute in Qom, was quoted as having ruled that the use of nuclear weapons is legal in Islam as “One must say that when the entire world is armed with nuclear weapons, it is only natural that, as a counter-measure, it is necessary to be able to use these weapons. However, what is important is what goal they may be used for.”⁴⁴ Later, he denied having issued such a fatwa and claimed that he was misquoted. The incident itself is indicative of the high significance that the regime accords to statements by clerics – even middle ranking ones.
2. **Ayatollah Javadi Amoli** (in a meeting with whom Ahmadinejad told of the

⁴¹ Interview of Montazeri to *Die Welt*, 9 November 2003.

⁴² in an interview to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 October 2003.

⁴³ According to a report, the meeting was attended by the reformist Ayatollah Mousavi Bojnourdi and Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Tavasoli (former Chief of Staff to Khomeini).

⁴⁴ Safa Haeri and Shahram Rafizadeh, “Iranian Cleric Okays Use of Nuclear Weapons”, *Iran Press Service*, 20 February 2006. http://www.iran-press-service.com/ips/articles-2006/february-2006/iran_nuke_20206.shtml.

“light” that surrounded him when he spoke at the UN).

3. **Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati** (Head of the Guardians’ Council).

It is reported that this attitude is accepted among other teachers and alumni of the Haqqani School. While other clerics have not made open statements on the issue, it is rumored⁴⁵ that this position is also held by Ahmadinejad’s main clerical supporters: **Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi, Ayatollah Mohammad Fazel Lankarani, Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani** and **Ayatollah Javad Tabrizi**. There is however no confirmation of these rumors.

Between the two camps, there is a group of clerics and leaders within the clerical establishment who object to Ahmadinejad’s “outing” of the nuclear issue and to religious edicts on the very question of nuclear weapons. Foremost among these is the head of the Expediency Council, Ali Akbar Rafsanjani. It is of interest that Rafsanjani’s own position has evolved. As president he indicated that “the experience of the (Iran-Iraq) war showed the potential of WMD ... [therefore] ... We should fully equip ourselves in the defensive and offensive use of chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons.”⁴⁶ Later as Head of the Expediency Council he spoke out in favor of using a nuclear weapon against Israel.⁴⁷ Lately however Rafsanjani has been offered the position that in regards to the nuclear issue, silence is golden, and accuses Ahmadinejad of sabotaging the negotiations with the international community by his declarations. Apparently the negative reactions to his statement convinced him that such statements are counter-productive. Another figure who has gone on record as opposing Ahmadinejad’s policy of provocation is former Commander of the IRGC and present Secretary of the Expediency Council, Mohsen Rizai⁴⁸

The Foreign Ministry Establishment

The Foreign Ministry has been involved in the technical sides of the negotiation with the EU and the IAEA over the nuclear dossier. However, there is no evidence that any of the foreign ministry officials enjoy a senior status in the decision making group on this issue.

⁴⁵ Iranian sources – confidential.

⁴⁶ Quoted in: Abbas William Samii, “The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks,” *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2006, Vol. 59, No. 1.
<http://www.nwc.navy.mil/press/Review/2006/winter/art3-w06.htm>.

⁴⁷ Rafsanjani, Al-Qods Day speech, *IRNA*, 14 December 2001: “If one day ... Of course, that is very important. If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists’ strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality. Of course, you can see that the Americans have kept their eyes peeled and they are carefully looking for even the slightest hint that technological advances are being made by an independent Islamic country. If an independent Islamic country is thinking about acquiring other kinds of weaponry, then they will do their utmost to prevent it from acquiring them.”

⁴⁸ Rizai: “If I were president, I would change the model of Iranian simplistic diplomacy; we need cooperation in our diplomacy. In our struggling situation, negotiation is a kind of revolutionary diplomacy.” Quoted by Mehdi Khalaji, “Iran: International Pressure and Internal Conflict,” *Policy Watch* 1106, 24 May 2006.

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The positions of the foreign ministry have been traditionally more forthcoming than of the other elements in the regime listed above. Their recommendations have been, for the most part, to refrain from alienating the international community, and particularly the EU and to find a way to continue with the negotiations.

Sanctions and Possible Effects

Political-Economic Sanctions

Iranian leaders appear to believe that possible actions that the West may take could include a gamut of economic, political and diplomatic sanctions, ranging from relatively innocuous demonstrations of displeasure such as: cutting off of sport and educational relations; restricting the movement of Iranian diplomats abroad; restricting interaction with Iranian banks and even embargoes on Iranian oil and shipment of refined oil products to Iran. The primary sanctions that would affect the regime would include:

- 1) **Economic Sanctions** – To date, the conventional wisdom in Tehran has been that Europe (and China) needs Iran more than Iran needs them. The identity of the parties to political sanctions is therefore crucial. Sanctions which would include Russia, Germany, the UK and China would have a demoralizing effect within the regime, whether or not the entire EU was committed to the sanctions. In the short term, economic sanctions would reduce the regime's income and its ability to fund strategic programs. Obviously, this effect would be contingent on the scope of the sanctions and the countries party to them, on the one hand, and the regime's priorities for allocating what is left of its finances, on the other hand. If the regime's top priority is to fund strategic programs and the military, it will face discontent and possible unrest among the populace further down the road. Four major areas of economic sanctions relevant to Iran are:
 - a) **Oil sanctions** – these are significant in two areas: an embargo on Iranian exports and an embargo on imports of refined oil to Iran. Both sanctions would have short and long term effects on the Iranian economy:
 - (a) Sanctions on Iranian **export of oil** – would severely hamper the regime's ability to continue its nuclear program. In the short term – oil export sanctions would probably result in short term massive unemployment in the sensitive oil regions, since Iran lacks the storage facilities to store large amounts of crude oil that it cannot export.
 - (b) Sanctions on Iranian **import of refined oil** products – Import sanctions could – if maintained assiduously – bring the Iranian economy to a serious slow-down within two to four months.⁴⁹
 - b) **General trade sanctions** – An embargo on trade with Iran along the lines of the sanctions against Iraq would have a more severe effect. Without the cooperation of Arab and Central Asian countries, though and strict adherence to the embargo, the effect will take even longer than the Iraqi case.
 - c) **Freezing of assets** – an effective freezing of Iranian international assets would probably be one of the most crippling sanctions. It would severely damage the

⁴⁹ Iran is a net importer of refined oil products, including car petrol. It can produce 40 million liters per day and consumes 64.5 million liters per day with a growth rate of 5% per year. Petrol alone costs Iran \$4.5 billion in the March 2005–March 2006 fiscal year. See Gil Feiler, *Besa Perspectives*, March 2006.

ability of the regime to use those assets for acquisition of essential material for the nuclear program.

- d) **Banking sanctions** – secondary sanctions on banking institutions that cooperate with the Iranian banking system would virtually isolate the Iranian financial system. Such sanctions would severely hamper Iranian acquisition abroad and raise its prices (similar to the costs that Iraq entailed in its efforts to circumvent the sanctions).
- 2) **Political sanctions** – Iran attaches great significance on its “international legitimacy”. Political sanctions could include barring Iranians from travel, barring Iranian diplomats from movement, barring Iran from participation in cultural and sporting events, etc.
- 3) **Individual “targeted” sanctions** – the option to impose “targeted” sanctions on the regime without harming the population at large is limited. The main figures in the regime are deeply entrenched in the economy and any action against their own economic interests would have wide repercussions for the entire economy. A case in point is the economic infrastructure of the bonyads and the IRGC which represents today more than 30 percent of the business sector. The Iranian system of allocation of economic interests to family members leaves few – if any – areas of economic activity which are not part of the “portfolios” of the regime leaders or their immediate families. Although such sanctions would indirectly affect the population at large, because of the extensive involvement of top officials in the economy, they are likely to feel threatened and at least consider a course of action more favorable to their own private interests.
- 4) **Encouragement of ethnic or social rebellion** – The regime is particularly apprehensive regarding the possibility that the US may encourage ethnic separatism in Iran.⁵⁰

Targeted Sanctions

Economic and political sanctions would no doubt hurt the Iranian economic elite, to which the heads of the regime belong, mainly through the damage they would cause to the Iranian economy and incremental “after-shocks” of civil unrest and popular discontent. It is difficult to assess how long it would take for economic pressure to unleash wide enough civil unrest as to actually threaten the regime. In any case, the present government enjoys a higher deterrent image in the eyes of the populace than its predecessor; its special relations with the IRGC (which the Khatami government lacked), its revolutionary zeal and its apocalyptic worldview strengthen its image of willingness to go to great lengths to maintain power.

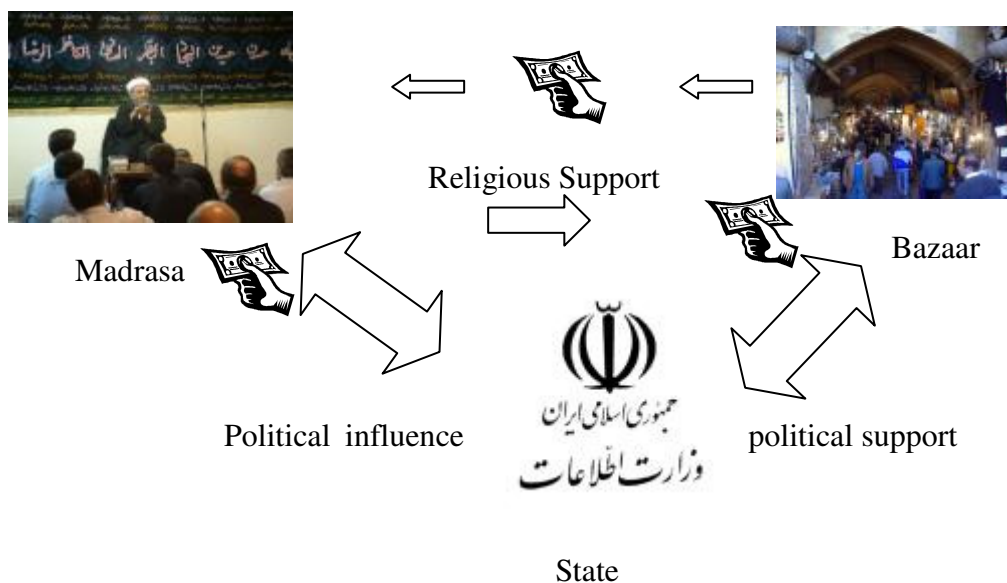
Economic sanctions would affect central pillars of the regime, which have built their power bases through economic interests which extend to assets outside of Iran and are dependent on Iran's access to international financial markets. The main official institutions in this category are the bonyads (foundations) with assets of over \$20 billion and which control an estimated 20-30 percent of the Iranian economy. As

⁵⁰ Iran is particularly concerned about such a possibility. See Ayatollah Mohammad Emami-Kashani, 19 May 2006, <http://www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=7271>.

economic entities which are dependent on international trade and the ability to bring in foreign capital, real economic sanctions would undermine their power base. The bonyads, which are officially "charities", also serve as conduits for transfer of bribes from foreign companies to senior officials for facilitating the affairs of those companies in Iran.⁵¹ Nevertheless, most of the bonyads have a strong base inside the Iranian economy itself and even comprehensive sanctions would take some time to affect them.

The link between clerics who influence the decision making of the regime and economic interests is epitomized in the Islamic Coalition Society (Jamiat Mo'talefeh Eslami). The society is associated with the Society of Combative Clerics (Jamiyat-e Rouhaniyat Mobarez) which is, in turn associated with Ayatollah Ali Akbar Rafsanjani. At the same time, the key members of the society are linked by marriage to senior clerical families and support the schools of those clerics. Sanctions that affect the business interests of the bazaar members of the society would therefore have an effect on their clerical allies as well. The Mo'talefe or ICS is also well connected with the IRGC. Therefore it is not clear to what extent the new power map has changed the loyalties of important figures in the ICS.

Another important financial network is that which pays the stipends to the 20,000 Islamic students in the *howzah* of Qom. The three most powerful Ayatollahs in the allocation of these monies are Mesbah Yazdi, Imami-Kashani and Hojati-Kermani. These Ayatollahs however do not disperse their own personal wealth in their schools but use their links with commercial bodies connected with key figures in the bazaar as conduits for financing the schools.



⁵¹ The VP of Statoil, Hubbard, held protracted talks with Mehdi Hashemi rafsanjani (Ali AKbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's son) in which Mehdi offered to transfer "success" bonuses to such charities. The dealings with Rafsanajani were exposed in the wake of litigation.

On the personal level, some sanctions would have a direct effect on certain members of the regime elite and their privileged offspring (known in Iran as the “Aqazadeh’s” or “sons of princes”). Many of the clerical oligarchy (senior Ayatollahs and lesser clerics) and members of the "old guard" that was represented in the Khatami government had personal wealth and investments abroad that made them susceptible to international economic sanctions. While much of their wealth derived from domestic markets and commissions (bribes), they have insured themselves by investing extensively in overseas real estate (mainly in the Persian Gulf counties) and foreign projects and keep sizeable accounts in offshore banks. Hence, they would have much to lose from sanctions that would cut them off from their financial bases.

It is evident from the above list that many of the regime's elite are susceptible to international sanctions. However, targeting individual interests should take into account the struggle within the regime and the balance of power between the old elite and the "young guard" supporting Ahmadinejad. Most of the more exposed figures within the elite are the "old guard" whose very exposure and wide range of business interests that can be targeted were the result of their having been in public office since the revolution. In contrast, the members of the revolutionary clique surrounding Ahmadinejad has not enjoyed the opportunities of high public office for a long enough time to build up personal economic interests that could be harmed by sanctions. Furthermore, this "young guard" came to power on an anti-corruption agenda and most of them have a reputation for public honesty and even ascetic life styles. Western actions to target the interests of the "old guard" would probably be exploited by Ahmadinejad to weaken them and to strengthen his own camp.

That said, the IRGC, which is at the core of Ahmadinejad's regime is itself an economic institution with wide economic interests through the network of the bonyads. Targeting the economic interests of those bonyads clearly identified with the IRGC would arguably have a greater effect on the regime and its decision making than targeting the general interests of the elite.

Military Action

A military strike against Iran could take various forms with different outcomes: a concentrated attack on all suspected nuclear sites; sustained bombing with the intention of crippling the regime and encouraging rebellion; invasion.

A military strike, if based on sound intelligence, would probably severely cripple the Iranian nuclear program, devastate the Iranian economy and raise the level of domestic unrest. The apocalyptic zeal of the regime notwithstanding, it does not seem interested in provoking a military clash at this point. Therefore, it will be cautious that its responses to economic sanctions not cross the red line that it perceives would be exploited by the US to justify a military blow.

Most observers agree that US military action would provoke a patriotic response on the part of most of the political factions in Iran – conservative and reformist – as well as on the part of the populace. From that point of view, while a military blow would also have economic repercussions with implications for domestic stability,

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these would probably be counter-balanced by massive public support for the government whilst subjected to foreign attack.

Iranian Assessment and Response Scenarios

Political Options

The Iranian assessment of the political option seems to be pessimistic. The swift rejection of the EU basket of enticements (defined by Ahmadinejad as “trading “gold” for “a few nuts and a chocolate,”) may have been the result of concern in Ahmadinejad’s circles that the “old guard” would demand to negotiate on that basis. Attempts to deal with the regime’s existential concerns (primarily the fear that the US would attempt to topple the regime) have also been rebuffed. A political option would have to be based on a certain level of mutual trust. The Iranian regime – almost across the board of its various factions – seems to assess that such trust is almost impossible to achieve. Putting aside the difficulty to achieve American trust in Iran, Ahmadinejad’s close advisors tend to project a deep mistrust not only of the US but also of the Europeans and particularly of the British. Any Western gesture therefore will probably be perceived by this group as part of a conspiracy to ultimately bring down the regime.

Nevertheless, there are proponents among the representatives of the former administration for engaging the West in further negotiations, albeit without making any concessions on the right to control the entire nuclear fuel cycle.⁵² Ali Akbar Velayati, (former foreign minister and presently foreign-policy adviser to Khamene’i), expressed the opinion (18 March), that the time is ripe for Iran to “haggle” with the United States, because Iran enjoys a stronger regional position, with friendly forces in power or key positions in neighboring countries.⁵³ Another proponent of engagement – arguably the most influential of these – is Rafsanjani. Since Rafsanjani is widely perceived as Ahmadinejad’s main adversary, it is reasonable to assume that the debate within the regime over engagement with the West and the IAEA or further escalation will be influenced by this internal struggle.

Economic Sanctions

Iranian spokesmen and leaders across the board have mocked the very suggestion that the US will succeed in imposing significant economic sanctions on Iran – let alone to gather a coalition of the willing for a military strike. The reasoning that they present is that the international community is aware that it will suffer more than Iran from sanctions due to the rise in oil prices that will ensue⁵⁴ and that the West knows

⁵² Iranian spokesmen reiterate this on a regular basis. The formula for successful negotiations, as far as Iran is concerned, must include, in the words of Foreign Ministry spokesman, Assefi: “the recognition of “Iran’s rights” and assurances of “the means of exercising those rights”. In other words: Iran’s right to all elements of the nuclear fuel cycle and free access to nuclear technology according to the NPT.

⁵³ *ISNA*, 128 March, 2006: “We have at no time until now had such powerful means for haggling [nor] the influence we have now in Iraq and Palestine,” he said. “Now that we have the power to haggle, why do we not haggle?”

⁵⁴ See Minister of Mines and Industry Alireza Tahmasbi, *IRNA*, 11 March 2006, <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0603112837184639.htm>; Interior Minister Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, *IRNA*, 2 May 2006, <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0605023199112228.htm>.

that such action will absolve Iran from all its dues to the international community, including in the area of WMD.⁵⁵

Iranian options to counter economic sanctions are limited. While spokesmen of the regime have alluded – usually obliquely – to the possibility that Iran would respond by an oil embargo on the West in order to raise prices and its own revenues from the oil it continues to market (to countries it is not boycotting), many observers see such an action as unlikely. Oil accounts for 85 percent of Iran's exports and is the main source of government income, including subsidies of public-sector (including military and IRGC) wages and gasoline prices. Hence, an oil boycott would be likely to raise the danger of domestic unrest.⁵⁶

It may be assumed that under sanctions Iran will step up its nuclear program, even “outing” it as a weapons program. The first step in such a response would be to withdraw from the NPT completely. Senior Iranians have already set the stage for such a step.⁵⁷ In such a case, the entire Iranian nuclear program will likely become more opaque.

At this stage, Iran apparently does not have the capability to explode a nuclear device. However, under sanctions – and certainly under constant military pressure – the regime will probably attempt to demonstrate a military nuclear capability at the earliest possible stage by exploding a device.

Economic sanctions will probably not have a major effect on Iran's ability to proceed with the program at this point as the allocation of funds is a matter of national priorities and there are but few components that the Iranian program now needs to import from abroad. Even if there are such components, they can be acquired by circumventing the sanctions. This would however raise the price and lengthen the time for any acquisition.

Other Iranian options in the face of economic sanctions are to initiate acts of terror against the US and its allies both in the region and in the West. Even in such circumstances though, Iran will probably attempt to maintain plausible deniability so as not to provide the *casus belli* for a military attack.

⁵⁵ Ahmadinejad: "Our policies on the nuclear activities have until today been within framework of regulations and if any sanction is issued, our behavior will change accordingly," IRNA, 5 May, 2006. <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0605054192181255.htm>; Larijani: "Iran will start covert (nuclear) activities if a military attack is launched on its nuclear facilities while these are currently under IAEA supervision. ", IRNA, 25 April 2006, <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0604253135115138.htm>.

⁵⁶ Gil Feiler, "Iran and the West: Who Needs Whom? A Look at the Consequences of Ahmadinejad's Economic and Foreign Policies," *BESA Perspectives*, March 2006. <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/perspectives14.html>.

⁵⁷ Larijani, *AP*, 25 April 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=1886557&page=1>.

Military Action

There are conflicting reports regarding how the Iranian regime assesses the resolve of the US to take unilateral military action or to act with a “coalition of the willing” against Iran. Most of the Iranian references seem to indicate that the common wisdom in Tehran is that the US is a “paper tiger”.⁵⁸ The reasoning behind this conclusion is:

1. There is coalition to attack Iran; even the closest ally of the US – the UK has been severely chastened in Iraq and would not embark on another military adventure.
2. The US itself is too deeply entangled in Iraq to open a new front against Iran.⁵⁹
3. President Bush’s approval rating makes such an act almost untenable. Larijani has been said to have boasted that Iran has made important inroads into the “opposition” in the US (most probably a boast which attributes to Iranian public diplomacy the trend in the US against further military entanglement in the Middle East – an attempt to draw a mirror image of US support of Iranian opposition).
4. The geography and demography of Iran which will make any military invader pay heavily is well known to the US.

Some Iranian observers such as Hasan Abbasi, however have argued that a military blow is likely.⁶⁰ They argue that the present US administration is unique in its willingness to act; it is ideologically driven (in contrast to previous and presumably future administrations), none of the top-level decision makers are candidates for the presidency in the next term. It would seem that according to this assessment, Iran should attempt to bide its time until the end of the present administration. However, such an eventuality is seen by the same Iranian strategists as having a silver lining. In a lecture in October 2005 Abbasi described the global balance of power as in a state of flux, wherein the Western powers, led by the "Anglo Saxons" and particularly the United States, still hold immense military and economic power but are in decline and are unable to use that power because their populations have become averse to risk and hostile towards their governments. Hence, the US intervention in Iraq was the last of its kind. The US knows that the only power capable of and willing to challenge it is the Islamic Republic. In his opinion, even economic sanctions against Iran will fail due to opposition from Western public opinion and the refusal of most countries to implement them. Threatened by economic sanctions, Iran would be able to bring the price of oil to \$110 per barrel and in case of a military attack, to the \$400 mark and beyond. His conclusion therefore is that a military confrontation between Iran and the US would be brief and is even desirable as it would only serve to strengthen Iran.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ahmadinejad, *IRNA*, 24 April 2006, <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0605065812133421.htm>; 6 May 2006, <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0605065812133421.htm>; Rafsanjani: "An American attack on Iran is a 'hollow fantasy'," *IRNA*, <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0604185746174909.htm>, 18 April 2006.

⁵⁹ Safavi, *AFP*.

⁶⁰ See Hasan Abbasi, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 28 May 2004.

⁶¹ <http://www.iranvajahan.net/cgi-bin/printarticle.pl?l=en&y=2005&m=10&d=08&a=4>.

Possible Iranian responses to a US military strike have been outlined in numerous statements, mainly by senior figures in the IRGC. Obviously many of these statements are made for deterrence purposes and do not reflect existing Iranian capabilities or assessment of what they can accomplish. These options include:

1. Destroying the oil fields of the Persian Gulf countries.⁶²
2. Blocking of the Straits of Hormoz.⁶³
3. Attacks on US ships in the Persian Gulf. The Iranian test firing in April 2006 of Misaq and Kowsar missiles was presented as providing Iran a capability to hit ships deep inside the Persian Gulf.⁶⁴ The force building of the Iranian navy indicates missions of swift attacks on ships in the Gulf.
4. Attacks on US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.
5. Waves of suicide terrorism against US forces in the Gulf states.
6. Acts of terror against the US and the West in the US and its allies' territories.⁶⁵
7. Missile attacks against Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iranian spokesman have declared that Iran would retaliate against Israel in response to a US attack against Iran.
8. Hezbollah rocket attacks against northern Israel, aimed at drawing Israel into a conflict with Syria and Lebanon.
9. Attacks against Israel, including on the Dimona nuclear reactor and the installations in Beit Zecharia.⁶⁶

The actual Iranian options indeed include all the above but on a much smaller scale than the Iranian regime projects. The actual Iranian options may be analyzed as follows:

1. **Widening the scope of the military conflict** – If the US does not make use of its infrastructure in the Arab Gulf countries, Iran will probably not attack those countries directly (as did Iraq in the first Gulf War). There is however a high probability that, in case of an American offensive of any scope, Iran will attack Israel with conventionally-armed Shihab missiles. Iranian thinking in such a situation would be that any proportional and conventional Israeli response would not add significantly to the threat posed by the American offensive; however it would enhance Iran's standing in the Muslim and Arab world as a country which attacks Israel. At the same time, Iran could reasonably assume that as long as it is using conventional missiles and is being attacked by the US, Israel will refrain from any disproportional response.

⁶² See Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Zulqadr (9 February 2006)

<http://archives.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/02/09/iran.warning/index.html>.

⁶³ This option has been widely touted by the IRGC in manouevers held in 2006.

⁶⁴ Safavi, *IRNA*, 4 April 2006; <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/line-17/0604049859171922.htm>.

⁶⁵ This threat has been voiced at the level of Khamenei'i himself. "The Americans should know that if they assault Iran their interests will be harmed anywhere in the world that is possible," http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4946102.stm.

⁶⁶ See Rafsanjani, <http://www.breitbart.com/news/2006/04/15/060415084241.xdv0o3w3.html>; IRGC Commander Ibrahim Daqani, http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/050806Z.shtml. On the open threat to attack the nuclear reactor, see Hassan Abbasi (26 February 2006) <http://www.iranvajahan.net/cgi-bin/news.pl?l=en&y=2006&m=02&d=25&a=3>.

2. **Military actions through proxies** – Iran may direct Hezbollah in Lebanon to launch attacks against Israel, ranging from the existing model (attacks on the border in the Shab'a farm area) to strategic attacks with medium and long range rockets against targets deep inside Israel (including Israel's major civilian population centers and strategic targets such as the Haifa refineries).
3. **Encouraging acts of terrorism** against American and Israeli targets all over the world – Iran will most probably call on Muslims around the world to hit US and Israeli targets and will organize such attacks. However, it will continue to attempt to maintain plausible deniability vis-à-vis the countries in which those attacks take place.
4. **Attacks on US ships in the Gulf** – In case of an American military offensive (including air strikes), Iran will probably attempt to attack US and allies shipping and military ships in the Gulf by mining and missile attacks. Iran is aware that in such a conflict the US will have the upper hand. Nevertheless, by creating a situation of instability in the Gulf, Iran will reap the added value of rising oil prices and reducing the export of oil by the Arab Gulf countries.

Conclusions

During years of negotiation between Iran and the IAEA over the former's nuclear program, Iran has taken few – if any – strategic decisions in regard to the very existence of that program. Arguably, its declared willingness to subscribe to the 92+3 protocol may have been perceived as such, but it was never implemented, and it is reasonable to suppose that the Iranian regime never intended to ratify it and certainly not to allow it to be implemented. The “decision making” process, as such, was aimed more at achieving alleviation of international pressure in order to buy time for progress in the nuclear program and then to confront the world with a “fait accompli”. At no point has there been any evidence that the core issue at stake – Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons – was ever debated within the Iranian leadership.

The formal decision making process on the nuclear issue in Iran is centralized. It includes the leadership, the clerics as a barometer of sensibility in Qom to different policy options, the IRGC and strategic advisors as interpreters of the “Art of the possible” and the technological team who provide the leadership with estimates of how long is needed to achieve the desired goal. The decisions of the leadership are ultimately a blend of the assessments regarding the stage of the nuclear program, assessments of the capabilities of the US to severely damage Iran and even to prevent the goal to emerge, and the religious input.

The ascendance to power of Ahmadinejad has fundamentally altered the balance of power within the Iranian regime – including in the area of nuclear policy. His statements – most prominent among them his revelation that Iran had “mastered the entire nuclear fuel cycle from start to finish” – may not have been coordinated with other, more circumspect members of the leadership, who have traditionally preferred clandestine deeds to words.

1. First and foremost, the present elite surrounding the president are not fundamentalist pragmatists as their predecessors were but practical implementers of an ideology which has been developed and expounded by their spiritual mentors. This enhances the proclivity of the leadership towards non-pragmatic decisions based on advice from radical clerics outside of the circle of the Supreme Leader (where, their radical positions notwithstanding, they are more attentive to practical considerations).
2. Secondly, whereas former President Khatami had little or no say regarding the nuclear weapons program, Ahmadinejad has succeeded in imposing his agenda on the decision making process and the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program. His method of creating “faits accomplis” by declarations on the subject has also restricted the Supreme Leader’s maneuvering space towards the issue. Thus, his statements in and of themselves create Iranian policy, even if not as part of an established and orderly process of policy formulation. As long as Ahmadinejad’s confrontational attitude towards the international community appears successful (i.e. Iran does not lose one dollar of oil revenue due to this policy and the nuclear program continues unhampered), his personal stature in the public and in clerical circles will be enhanced and it will be more and more difficult for the pragmatic elements in the regime to check him.

The policy of Iran towards the nuclear issue will continue to be confrontational. At this point it seems that no “basket” of enticements will persuade Iran to give up what it has declared to be its inalienable right to control the entire fuel cycle. As the confrontation with Iran goes into a stage of UNSC sanctions and economic boycott, the decision making process will become more and more confined to a restricted circle, with Ahmadinejad and the hardliners of the IRGC having the upper hand. If the West – or the US unilaterally – impose sanctions, the regime may be expected to respond with counter-steps as described above.

The publication of the US National Intelligence Estimate is perceived in Tehran as vindication of the Iranian policy vis-à-vis the nuclear issue. The media interpretation of the NIE warrants a deeper analysis of the underlying facts from the Iranian side. The NIE emphasizes that the halt to the project took place at a time that Iran was under significant political pressure to stop its nuclear program. In fact, the **political** pressure on Iran was much less at that time than today. However, at the time of the reported dismantling of the weaponization program, if Iran did dismantle its weaponization program, it was due to the military pressure manifested by the fact that the United States had just toppled a neighboring regime (which, like Iran, was identified by the US as part of an “axis of evil”) and occupied its capital, a second “rogue” regime – Libya – had capitulated to Western pressure and its renounced its nuclear program. Indeed Iran acted with great caution during those first months of 2003, fearing that any excuse it may give the US would result in an “Iranian Freedom” operation.

Another important aspect which evaded the authors of the NIE is that the halt took place under Khatami. While the Supreme Leader has not been replaced, there is no doubt that his successor, Ahmadinejad has more weight in the decision making process on the nuclear issue and has made the nuclear issue a primary issue for his leadership. Ahmadinejad has indeed accused his predecessor of taking steps out of fear of the West that slowed down the nuclear program and has bragged that he has accelerated the program.

The weight accorded to the weaponization program in the NIE also begs a question. While it is true that without weaponization a country cannot become a nuclear power, it is also true that weaponization is the less time consuming stage of the nuclear program. Since Iran had already agreed at the time to a number of freezes in the enrichment program and was encountering (according to various reports) obstacles in the centrifuge array, the weaponization program became less urgent and could be put off to a time when Iran had already achieved a large enough stockpile of weapons grade or near weapons grade uranium. If Iran had already reached a certain level and realized that they are only about one to two years from weaponization, and then since such a program is a "smoking gun" they decided to put it into the mothballs until they achieve a satisfactory level of fissile material and then continue. Since the weapons program is only relevant if enough fissile material is available, all that may mean is that they assess that at the pace of production of fissile material, they can freeze the more problematic aspect in order to achieve international acquiescence for enrichment and then go on from where they ended.

Last but not least, the possibility that the current intelligence derived from Iranian uncovering of US intelligence assets and implementing a sophisticated disinformation

plan should be taken into account. It should be recalled that Iran developed its missile program in complete secrecy with North Korean help at a time that Western intelligence thought that North Korea had suspended the Nodong project and the deal with Iran. It should be taken into account that the Iranians realized that the existence of a weapons group was compromised and broke it up and reconstituted it somewhere else or even completed the main elements in the project and decided to freeze it until enough fissile material was collected, in order not to give the West a “smoking gun”?

Under these circumstances, and as long as the present regime is in power, it seems that economic sanctions or a limited military strike which the regime will be able to turn to its own domestic benefit will not bring about a change in Iran’s nuclear policy. Economic hardships will take a toll and indirectly affect the regime elite, which may, in turn, put pressure on the small decision making clique. However, such a development does not seem feasible in the time span of the present crisis.

The “nuclear issue” for Iran has been, until now, the nuclear program itself and the negotiations with the international community (IAEA, E3). Consequently, some of the individuals involved have come from the diplomatic field and have gained prominence. This however does not necessarily indicate that they will remain within the decision making process as Iran comes closer to a military nuclear potential. As Iran reaches its goal, it may be expected that the IRGC and Ahmadinejad’s close advisors will attempt to dictate Iran’s nuclear strategy. It is therefore noteworthy that no senior individual among this group has a background in western strategic thought and the complex area of control of nuclear weapons. The future Iranian doctrine for command and control of nuclear weapons and even use of such weapons would probably include elements which derive from the unique structure of the regime: the centrality of the IRGC and the senior clerics in the regime. Hence, the assessment that has come up in Iranian statements, that Iran may hold a “first strike” capability against Israel may in the future tip the scales in favor of a policy of use of nuclear weapons; if the regime believes that by such use it will generate a pro-Iranian revolutionary trend in the Arab and Muslim world, the threat of nuclear retaliation against Iran on a scale that would nevertheless leave the country and the regime intact may not suffice for effective deterrence.