



Can a Nuclear Iran Be Contained or Deterred?

By Michael Rubin

The development of an Iranian nuclear program continues apace. While Iran's true intentions are a mystery, the Bush administration's posture has been inconsistent and lackluster. The administration made little serious effort to upgrade facilities in the region or rally our allies. The absence of a clear strategy to deter Iran will give that nation a free hand in the region to pursue conventional aggression and, what is worse, a nuclear attack.

As Iran's nuclear program has developed, the Bush administration appeared to draw a red line: a nuclear weapons-capable Islamic Republic would be unacceptable. On August 8, 2004, for example, then-national security adviser Condoleezza Rice told NBC News that the United States "cannot allow the Iranians to develop a nuclear weapon" and that President George W. Bush would "look at all the tools that are available to him."¹ In an October 27, 2006, Oval Office meeting with NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Bush remarked, "the idea of Iran having a nuclear weapon is unacceptable."² A year later, Bush declared that "Iran will be dangerous if they have the know-how to make a nuclear weapon."³ If Bush's statement was a red line then, today it appears to have been more a rhetorical flourish than a policy truth.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has said that if the Iranian nuclear program continues apace, the Islamic Republic can become a nuclear weapons-capable state.⁴ While Bush remains enigmatic on how far he will go to prevent Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons if diplomacy and economic sanctions fail, top administration officials hint that the Pentagon is not prepared to use

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military force, even as a last resort.⁵ Though strategic bombing of Iranian nuclear targets is off the table in the waning weeks of the Bush presidency, top U.S. military officials like General John Abizaid, former commander of Central Command, and Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argue that the United States can contain or deter a nuclear Iran. On July 21, 2008, for example, Abizaid explained, "I don't believe Iran is a suicide state. . . . Deterrence will work with Iran."⁶ Whether deterrence and containment against a nuclear Iran deserve the faith Abizaid and Mullen hold in them, the options are unclear.

Will Iran Use Nuclear Weapons?

Should the Islamic Republic possess nuclear weapons, the nightmare scenario is that it would use them in a first strike, most likely against Israel. Elimination of Israel remains a cornerstone of Islamic Republic ideology. Despite revisionist questioning about whether Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad really promised to "wipe Israel off the map,"⁷ both University of North Dakota law professor Gregory S. Gordon and Joshua Teitelbaum, senior research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center at the University of Tel Aviv, have chronicled well over a dozen recent

Iranian statements promising Israel's destruction. As Teitelbaum notes, "What emerges from a comprehensive analysis of what Ahmadinejad actually said—and how it has been interpreted in Iran—is that the Iranian president was not just calling for 'regime change' in Jerusalem, but rather the actual physical destruction of the state of Israel."⁸

There is reason to take the worst case scenario seriously. While giving the official state sermon at Tehran University on December 14, 2001, for example, former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, current chairman of the powerful Expediency Council, argued that it might not be far-fetched to envision use of nuclear weapons against the Jewish state. Amid chants of "Death to Israel," he declared, "The use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. . . . It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality." Even if Israel responded with its own nuclear arsenal, the Islamic Republic has the strategic depth to absorb and withstand the retaliation, and so the price might be worth it. "It will only harm the Islamic world," he argued.⁹ When it comes to Iranian desires to possess nuclear weapons rather than simply a civilian nuclear energy program, Rafsanjani's statements have become the rule rather than the exception.

As long as the messages remain mixed and covert nuclear activities unexplained, realists must treat Iranian intentions with suspicion.

On February 14, 2005, for example, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer Kharrazi, secretary general of the Iranian Hezbollah, declared, "We are able to produce atomic bombs and we will do that. We shouldn't be afraid of anyone. The United States is not more than a barking dog."¹⁰ And, on May 29, 2005, Hojjat al-Eslam Gholam Reza Hasani, the supreme leader's personal representative to the province of West Azerbaijan, declared possession of nuclear weapons to be one of Iran's top goals. "An atom bomb . . . must be produced," he said. "That is because the Quran has told Muslims to 'get strong and amass all the forces at your disposal.'"¹¹ The following year, Mohsen Gharavian, a Qom theologian close to Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, one of the Islamic Republic's staunchest ideologues, said it was "only natural" for Iran to possess nuclear weapons.¹²

Not every Iranian religious figure has been so bellicose. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has said, "We do not need

a nuclear bomb. We do not have any objectives or aspirations for which we will need to use a nuclear bomb. We consider using nuclear weapons against Islamic rules."¹³ His statements, especially in the context of evidence of Iranian nuclear developments, should not be taken at face value. They may be *taqiya*, religiously sanctioned dissimulation meant to lull an enemy. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, not only spoke repeatedly of the necessity to engage in *taqiya*,¹⁴ but he also practiced it, telling the Western audience in the weeks before his return to Iran, for example, "I don't want to be the leader of the Islamic Republic; I don't want to have the government or power in my hands."¹⁵

Of course, Western policymakers should not take bellicose statements as fact and dismiss automatically more conciliatory approaches. As long as the messages remain mixed and covert nuclear activities unexplained, however, realists must treat Iranian intentions with suspicion. At the very least, Western policymakers should not base their approach to Iran on a single statement by the supreme leader, contradicted as it is by evidence of a sometimes covert and continuing nuclear program.

Can Iran Be Deterred?

Should achievement of nuclear weapons capability make such debates moot, then what policy options short of military strikes would the West have? Alongside any diplomatic or economic strategy, the United States and its allies would have to rely on deterrence or containment. Both are military strategies. Successful nuclear deterrence requires two conditions: First, the Iranian leadership must prioritize the lives of its citizenry above certain geopolitical or ideological goals. Second, the deterring power—in this case, the United States—must be willing to kill hundreds of thousands of Iranians should authorities in Tehran or their proxies ever use nuclear weapons. On both questions, there is a disturbing lack of clarity.

At its heart, the Islamic Republic is an ideological regime. Many visitors to the Islamic Republic may be rightly impressed by Tehran's vibrant political culture, but when push comes to shove, the Iranian leadership believes sovereignty derives from God and must be channeled through the supreme leader. The ambitions and values of ordinary people are subordinate to the will of God as interpreted by the supreme leader and the apparatus established to serve him. Hence, the Council of Guardians constrains any outlet for ordinary Iranians

by disqualifying any potential political leaders whose governing philosophy does not conform to Khamenei's narrow views. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), its associated paramilitary Basij, and assorted state-sanctioned vigilante groups exist to enforce ideological discipline and punish those who fail to conform.¹⁶

Is Abizaid correct when he argues that the Islamic Republic is not suicidal? It is a crucial question. During the Cold War and after the Soviet Union's nuclear breakout, the United States had no choice but to deter. An ideological clash may have driven the Cold War, but neither Moscow nor Washington believed the other side to be suicidal. Each superpower pursued its interests but checked its own ambitions so as not to provoke a nuclear war that would destroy its home country. Despite mutually assured destruction, deterrence almost broke down on several occasions, bringing the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war: the Berlin crisis, the Cuban missile crisis, and the downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 each nearly escalated beyond control. In retrospect, deterrence brought neither the security nor the stability to which some historians and many current policymakers ascribe it. At the very least, nuclear deterrence is a highly risky strategy.

The Soviet leadership was not suicidal, but how does the Iranian leadership approach questions of mass death? If Western politicians project their own value system onto their foes when calculating opponent decision-making, then they would assume that their Iranian counterparts would not be willing to absorb a nuclear attack. Such reasoning, however, ignores the role of ideology in the Islamic Republic.

Regardless of what most Iranians think, the Islamic Republic ascribes to a set of values far different from our own. Ahmadinejad shocked the West when, soon after taking office, he called for Israel's destruction; dismissed the Holocaust as a fabrication; and hinted that he channeled the Hidden Imam, also known as the Mahdi, Shia Islam's messianic figure.

Mahdism is not new to the Islamic Republic. After the first parliamentary elections in May 1980, Khomeini instructed the victors to offer their "services to the Lord of the Age, May God speed his blessed appearance."¹⁷ Nevertheless, most parliamentarians at the time rooted themselves in the more pragmatic policy debates swirling around construction of the new system. Ahmadinejad, however, heightened emphasis on apocalyptic thought when he argued that Mahdism is "the defining strategy of the Islamic Republic" and that human action could

hasten the Mahdi's return.¹⁸ Indeed, it is this aspect of Ahmadinejad's thought that is especially dangerous because it suggests that Ahmadinejad believes that he and his fellow travelers could perhaps hasten the Mahdi's return by precipitating violence, setting the stage for the return as prophesied in some readings of Islamic texts.

Ahmadinejad is not alone in such beliefs. Mesbah-Yazdi, his religious mentor, argues that the "superiority of Islam over other religions is stressed in Qur'an, which calls on believers to wage war against unbelievers and prepare the way for the advent of the Mahdi and conquering the world."¹⁹ In his study of apocalyptic thought in Iran, Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy who trained for fourteen years in the seminaries of Qom, noted, "Ahmadinejad appears to be influenced by a trend in contemporary apocalyptic thought in which the killing of Jews will be one of the most significant accomplishments of the Mahdi's government."²⁰ Certainly it is plausible that Ahmadinejad might, like Rafsanjani, believe Islamic interests make Iran's weathering a retaliatory nuclear strike worthwhile. If this is true, and the interpretation is certainly plausible, then traditional deterrence becomes impossible.

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Within the convoluted power structure of the Islamic Republic, however, the presidency is more about style than substance. Ahmadinejad may embody a heterodox ideology, but would he control nuclear weapons? Herein lies the difficulty with assessing a nuclear Iran's behavior: very little is known about the Islamic Republic's nuclear command and control. Ahmadinejad may not have direct power, but his accession to the high-profile presidency shows the acceptability of his views within the Islamic Republic's power circles. Ahmadinejad derives his power from the IRGC and may reflect significant ideological strains within the force. It is not likely that the Islamic Republic will establish safeguard mechanisms until it has acquired nuclear weapons technology. This can create a very dangerous situation. In 1999, Western officials scrambled to avert a nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan over the Kargil district in Kashmir. As generals pushed their armies and governments to the brink of all-out

hostility, neither Delhi nor Islamabad had established the mechanism of control to prevent accidental or rogue use of their atomic arsenal.

What is known about Tehran's command and control does not inspire confidence. The IRGC has, over the past decade, expanded its dominance over all aspects of Iranian politics, economy, and security.²¹ The same hard-line clerics—Mesbah-Yazdi and Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, for example—to whom Ahmadinejad and his IRGC compatriots turn for religious guidance promote the most radical exegesis. Mainstream Iranians may not subscribe and, indeed, may even ridicule Ahmadinejad's messianism, but those who control the weapons may feel differently and embrace the idea that nuclear weapons can and should be used in a holy struggle against Israel or other enemies.

For Western advocates of a deterrence strategy, chain of command and control over weaponry should not simply be a theoretical concern. Indeed, there has already been a close call caused by a rogue commander within the Revolutionary Guards. In 1991, as the Pentagon amassed forces in Saudi Arabia as part of Operation Desert Shield, a mutinous IRGC unit allegedly sought to launch a conventional missile attack against the assembled U.S. troops. Had such an attack occurred, it would have likely initiated a far wider conflict. IRGC loyalists, however, averted the missile launch when they seized control of the rogue base.²² It is certainly ironic that the same Western commentators and officials who ascribe adversarial Iranian behavior to rogue IRGC elements rather than the central government also appear to place the greatest faith in the efficacy of nuclear deterrence against the Islamic Republic.

Can Iran Be Contained?

An Iranian nuclear first strike might be the nightmare scenario for U.S. policymakers, but it is not the most likely one. Should Tehran acquire nuclear arms, the Iranian leadership may feel itself so immune from consequence that it has no obstacles to conventional aggression, whether direct or by proxy. While Western officials may think that the United States can deter Iran, Iranian officials may believe that their nuclear capability will enable them to deter the West. Indeed, in September 2005, the hard-line monthly *Ma'refat* opined, "Deterrence does not belong just to a few superpowers," and cited the Quranic verse declaring, "Against them [your enemies] make ready your strength

to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into the hearts of enemies of God and your enemies."²³

Many analysts say that a nuclear Iran need not be dangerous. Author and essayist Glenn Greenwald, for example, argued—falsely—that Iran "has never invaded another country."²⁴ Putting aside the nineteenth-century Iranian invasion of Afghanistan, Iran's 1971 occupation of Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands (claimed by the United Arab Emirates), and its 1982 drive into Iraq (after beating back the 1980 Iraqi invasion), the Iranian military has often acted irregularly or by proxy, sparking insurrections in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and perhaps the Palestinian Authority as well. On May 3, 2008, former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami acknowledged as much. Speaking at the University of Gilan, he argued that the current Iranian strategy of exporting revolution by means of "gunpowder and groups sabotaging other countries" was inconsistent with what he argued was Khomeini's preference for soft power.²⁵

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It is irresponsible to argue, as former nuclear-inspector-turned-peace-activist Scott Ritter has, that Iran does not pose a strategic threat to the United States and its interests.²⁶ At its core, the Islamic Republic is an ideological regime with a mission to export its revolution embedded both in its constitution and in the IRGC structure.²⁷ The preamble to the Islamic Republic's constitution, for example, states that "the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps . . . will be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country, but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world."²⁸

It also includes reference to a Quranic verse urging, "Terrify thereby the enemy of God and your enemy . . . and whatsoever you expend in the way of God shall be repaid you in full; you will not be wronged."²⁹ The IRGC has taken this mission to heart. In the three decades of its existence, it has supported terrorism from Baghdad to Buenos Aires and has conducted assassinations in the United States, France, Germany, Austria, and Denmark.³⁰

Too much reliance on containment should worry U.S. policymakers, given the mixed assessments of previous

incarnations of the policy at a time when the Islamic Republic was only a conventional power. The first concerted U.S. containment policy against the Islamic Revolution was initiated in 1993 when, in the face of both Iranian and Iraqi attempts to subvert stability and the regional status quo, the Clinton administration launched its dual containment strategy. “So long as we can rely on our regional allies—Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council], and Turkey—to preserve the balance of power in our favor in the wider Middle East region, we will have the means to counter both the Iraqi and Iranian regimes,” Martin Indyk, then–senior director for Near East and South Asian affairs at the National Security Council, explained in 1993. He conceded, however, that containing Iran would be more difficult than restraining Iraq. “When we assess Iranian intentions and capabilities, we see a dangerous combination for Western interests,” Indyk explained, citing Tehran’s support for terrorism, its violent opposition to the Middle East peace process, its attempts to subvert friendly Arab governments, its desire to dominate the Persian Gulf through military means, and its clandestine nuclear weapons program.³¹

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In a rebuttal to Indyk’s approach, F. Gregory Gause III, an associate professor of political science at Columbia University, wrote, “Dual containment requires the unlikely cooperation of a number of other nations. . . . Meanwhile, Europe and Japan have been unwilling to isolate Iran economically.”³² If Egypt and other regional allies like Turkey did not embrace containment fifteen years ago, they are less likely to do so today. Turkey especially has become a less reliable ally, and some of its politicians are more likely to sympathize with the Islamic Republic than the United States, if for no other reason than to maintain a “good neighbor policy.”³³ Germany remains resistant to economic sanctions. While German chancellor Angela Merkel has assured her Western allies that Germany would reduce trade with the Islamic Republic because of Tehran’s nuclear defiance,³⁴ her ambassador in Tehran assured Iranians that German companies would

not only maintain their trade, but would actually increase it, albeit through middlemen in the United Arab Emirates.³⁵

Containment is also expensive and, when challenged, can escalate into a shooting war. On March 7, 1987, as Iran and Iraq engaged in attacks on international shipping in the Persian Gulf, the Reagan administration offered to reflag eleven Kuwaiti tankers, an operation that was code-named Earnest Will. Between July 24, 1987, and September 26, 1988, the Pentagon deployed an aircraft carrier, four destroyers, a guided missile cruiser, three frigates, and several smaller boats. On the first day of operation, the reflagged supertanker *Bridgeton* hit a mine, the first of four mine strikes that month. As a result, the U.S. Navy began more intensive minesweeping operations. On September 21, 1987, U.S. forces seized the Iranian boat *Iran Ajr* as it mined international waters. In the ensuing fight, U.S. helicopters engaged with Iranian speedboats. The following year, in Operation Praying Mantis, U.S. forces struck Iranian oil platforms and forces after a mine crippled the guided-missile frigate USS *Samuel B. Roberts*.³⁶

It is difficult to assess the cost of any military action, but, conservatively, Operations Earnest Will and Praying Mantis cost hundreds of millions of dollars and required significant infrastructure and support networks. The attack on the *Roberts*, for example, necessitated not only force in the region to enable retaliation, but also support services in Dubai for its repair. Any containment strategy more expansive than protecting eleven tankers would be exponentially more expensive.

What Is Required to Contain Iran?

Any containment operation against a nuclear Iran would require more than the single battle group that participated in Operation Earnest Will. Should the Islamic Republic acquire nuclear weapons, it may become dangerously overconfident as it convinces itself that its conventional, irregular, or proxy forces can operate without fear of serious reprisal from the United States, Israel, or any other regional power. In order, therefore, to contain a nuclear Iran, the United States and its allies in the region will need to enhance their military capability to counter the likelihood of successful Iranian conventional action. There are two strategies that U.S. policymakers may pursue separately or in tandem. First, U.S. defense planners might examine what U.S. force posture would be necessary for the United States unilaterally to contain a nuclear Iran. Second, U.S. officials must gauge what investment would be necessary to enable neighboring states to do

likewise. Put more crudely, this requires calculating under what conditions and with what equipment regional states could successfully wage war against Iran until U.S. forces could provide relief. If the Pentagon has pre-positioned enough equipment and munitions in the region, this might take three or four days; if not, it could take longer.

If U.S. forces are to contain the Islamic Republic, they will require basing not only in GCC countries, but also in Afghanistan, Iraq, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Without a sizeable regional presence, the Pentagon will not be able to maintain the predeployed resources and equipment necessary to contain Iran, and Washington will signal its lack of commitment to every ally in the region. Because containment is as much psychological as physical, basing will be its backbone. Having lost its facilities in Uzbekistan, at present, the U.S. Air Force relies upon air bases in Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Afghanistan, Oman, and the isolated Indian Ocean atoll of Diego Garcia.

There is less to these facilities, however, than meets the eye: under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish government has grown closer to the Islamic Republic and has sought to limit U.S. Air Force use of the Incirlik Air Base; Turkish negotiators have even demanded veto power over every U.S. mission flown from Incirlik.³⁷ Oman, too, has been less than reliable in granting U.S. freedom of operation. According to military officials familiar with the negotiations between U.S. and Omani officials, the sultanate initially refused the U.S. Air Force permission to fly missions over Afghanistan from its territory in the opening days of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, a campaign that, in the wake of 9/11, had far greater international support than would any containment actions against Iranian forces. Both the congressional desire to curtail the U.S. presence in Iraq and Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki's demands that the United States evacuate the country on a set timetable make any use of the Kirkuk and Ali air bases in that country as part of containment operations unlikely. Saudi Arabia has many airfields but, because of domestic unease with a U.S. presence in the kingdom, only allows the United States to maintain a small combined air operations center for U.S. aircraft in the Persian Gulf.

While the United States maintains 228,000 troops in the Near East and South Asia, all but 5,700 are stationed in Iraq or Kuwait in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom or in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.³⁸ These troops would, presumably, return home upon the completion of their missions. Kuwaiti officials

have made clear that they do not envision hosting a permanent U.S. presence. The Kuwaiti government designates portions of Camp Arifjan as temporary and insists that when U.S. forces depart, no trace of their presence should remain. In practice, according to officers with the 45th Field Artillery Brigade operating facilities in Kuwait, this means that U.S. officers must spend weeks engaging the Kuwaiti bureaucracy if they wish to do so much as pave a road through their tent city.

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Almost half of the troops stationed in the region outside of Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan are afloat, which highlights the need for naval bases and shipyards. The U.S. 5th Fleet uses facilities in Bahrain and ports in the United Arab Emirates. Both countries, however, remain vulnerable to Iranian missiles and airstrikes.

Upgrading regional facilities would support containment strategies that rely on a long-term U.S. regional presence as well as Washington's deferral of the primary containment responsibilities to Iran's neighbors. In order to upgrade the GCC states' military capacity, in May 2006, the Bush administration launched a "Gulf Security Dialogue" aimed at improving the GCC militaries' interoperability, their defense capabilities, and the states' counterterrorism abilities and critical infrastructure protection.³⁹ As mandated by section 36(b) of the Arms Export Control Act, the White House on August 3, 2007, informed Congress of its intention to sell Bahrain six Bell 412 air search and recovery helicopters, the sum price for which, if all technology options are exercised, might be as high as \$160 million. Such helicopters, however, can do little to protect the tiny island nation of Bahrain, whose sovereignty Iranian officials on occasion still question,⁴⁰ from an Iranian onslaught.

Two months after signaling the Bahrain sale, the administration notified Congress of its intention to upgrade three Kuwaiti L-110-30 aircraft (a civilian version of the C-130) at a sum cost as high as \$250 million.

Subsequent notifications regarding Kuwait included maintenance and logistics support for Kuwait's F/A-18 aircraft, sale of eighty PAC-3 missiles, Patriot missile system upgrades, and 2,106 TOW-A and 1,404 TOW-B missiles, the total cost of which would be higher than \$1.3 billion. Proposed arms sales to Saudi Arabia are even greater and include light armored vehicles; high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles; advanced radar; sniper targeting pods; and, most controversially, nine hundred Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tail kits to create high precision smart bombs. The United Arab Emirates itself may purchase three hundred AGM-114M3 Blast Fragmentation Warheads and nine hundred AGM-114L3 Hellfire II Longbow missiles, upgrades for three E-2C airborne early-warning aircraft, 288 Patriot Advanced Capability-3 air defense missile systems, 224 AIM-120C-7 Advanced Medium Air-to-Air Missile Air Intercept Missiles, two hundred JDAM tail kits, and more than two hundred one-ton bombs.⁴¹ The shopping list of equipment may seem technical, but it underscores both the complexity and the expense of preparing for containment.

In order to contain a nuclear Iran, the United States and its allies in the region will need to enhance their military capability to counter the likelihood of successful Iranian conventional action.

Even with such upgrades, and assuming Congress does not disapprove the sales—188 members of Congress have expressed concern—it is unclear whether the GCC states could contain Iranian aggression for long. No GCC state with the exception of Saudi Arabia has strategic depth. If Iraq could overwhelm Kuwait in a matter of hours, so, too, could Iran overwhelm Bahrain—the central node in regional U.S. naval strategy—or Qatar, where the U.S. army pre-positions much of its heavy equipment.

A quick glance at the Iran-GCC military balance is not reassuring. Iran has 663,000 military service personnel, including regular army, IRGC, and Basij. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, has only 214,500 military personnel, and the combined total for the other five GCC states is a paltry 131,300. Iran falls short on fighter aircraft (332 versus 496 for the GCC) but is near parity on battle tanks (1,710 versus 1,912) and dominates with combat vessels (201 versus 94).⁴² While Iran may fall short in certain

categories, it has a superior ballistic missile capability to any immediate neighbors besides Pakistan. Iran's Shahab-3 missile has performed erratically during tests but now reportedly has a two-thousand-kilometer range. As the Gulf Security Dialogue sales indicate, the GCC states are scrambling to recover from this missile deficit.

Iran's other neighbors cannot bring much to the containment table. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan's militaries are negligible. The Russian invasion of Georgia has eliminated the possibility of assistance from Tblisi. Uzbekistan and Armenia are, in practice, hostile to U.S. strategic concerns.

Turkey, with its 514,000 troops, nearly four hundred fighter aircraft, and 4,400 tanks, is in theory a NATO ally and, as such, interoperable with the U.S. military. It could bring significant resources to the table, but it is an unreliable ally unlikely to participate in any serious containment; nor will Iraq or Afghanistan who, for years to come, will be more concerned with ensuring internal stability than participating in regional containment. Indeed, with the exception of Turkey, every other Iranian neighbor remains vulnerable to Iranian political or infrastructure sabotage, as incidents such as the Khobar Towers bombing and the 1995–96 Bahraini riots demonstrate.⁴³ A Kuwaiti parliamentarian has even accused the IRGC of infiltrating Kuwait.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The Bush administration has treated deterrence and containment as rhetorical pillars, but, beyond the Gulf Security Dialogue, few in Washington appear willing to take the measures necessary to deter or contain a nuclear Iran. Even in the unlikely event they would achieve Iraqi acquiescence, neither Barack Obama nor Joe Biden support permanent bases in Iraq,⁴⁵ even though such facilities would be the cornerstones of a containment policy. Simply put, without permanent bases in Iraq, a nuclear capable Islamic Republic cannot be contained.

While Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) laid down the necessary marker to support a deterrence strategy when she declared that the United States could “obliterate” Iran should the Islamic Republic use nuclear weapons, Obama's criticism of her statement⁴⁶ undercut the commitment to retaliation upon which any deterrence policy must rest.

It may be comforting to Abizaid, Mullen, and the electorate to believe that the United States can deter or contain Tehran's worst ambitions, but absent any preparation to do so, Washington is instead signaling that the Islamic

Republic has a green light to claim regional dominance and, at worst, carry out its threats to annihilate Israel. At the same time, absent any effort to lay the groundwork either for containment or deterrence, Washington is signaling to its allies in the region that they are on their own and that the U.S. commitment to protect them is empty. Arab states and Iran's other neighbors may calculate that they have no choice but to make greater accommodation to Tehran's interests. Should Israeli officials believe that the West will stand aside as Iran achieves nuclear capability and that a nuclear Islamic Republic poses an existential threat to the Jewish state, they may conclude that they have no choice but to launch a preemptive military strike—an event that could quickly lead to a regional conflagration from which the United States would have difficulty remaining aloof.

AEI research assistant Ahmad Majidiyar and associate editor Christy Hall Robinson worked with Mr. Rubin to edit and produce this Middle Eastern Outlook.

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