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The Prospect for a Unified International Policy on Iran

by Anthony Tsontakis

Evidence made public over the course of the last year compellingly supports the conclusion that Iran's nuclear program is not peaceful, contrary to every maxim of Iran's stated policy, including a religious decree by Iran's Supreme Leader that says Islam forbids the production and use of nuclear weapons. As a result, and because confidence in the good faith and ultimate justice of the Iranian government yields, as it must, to the painful experience of endless disappointment, a consensus against Iran's nuclear activity has been emerging internationally.

As evidence mounts that Iran's nuclear program consists at least in part of a military dimension, international consensus over Iran's nuclear program rises. Accordingly, as circumstances would have it, a unique opportunity has arisen that, if pursued, could unite the world and tilt the balance of power positively in the international community's favor. Specifically, the more that is learned about the nuclear program, the closer the international community is drawn to the view that the imposition of harsher economic sanctions on Iran to compel it to change course on its nuclear development is the appropriate cooperative strategy.

Most importantly, on September 21, 2009, Iran disclosed the existence of a secret uranium enrichment facility on a military base near Qom, which had, up to that point, been willfully concealed from the international community. This has inevitably been understood by international policy makers as a menace of war because the facility cannot be reasonably considered suitable to civilian uses.

Moreover, several reports published by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 2006, including one published February 18, 2010, describe "extensive" items of evidence that show Iran has "undisclosed activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile," as well as other secret programs that cover "nuclear and missile related aspects," which, to all appearances, are "run by military related organizations." The IAEA claims its evidence is "broadly consistent and credible in terms of the technical detail."

Iran's nuclear program is of concern to the international community because Iran's practice, in specific situations involving inter-state relations, betrays a plain manifestation of hostility to the established pillars of international order. Foremost, it is clear and unequivocal that, for a series of years, terrorists have received shelter, assistance, supplies, and protection, in the practice of terrorism, from the Iranian government. To be sure, in October, 2008, a high-ranking member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) became the first such official to openly acknowledge that Iran supplies weapons to "freedom armies," which include Hezbollah and Hamas, among others. Even the Taliban has publicly stated it receives Iranian aid.

Iran's overtures for terrorism are opposed to the international interest because they undermine political stability in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan; constitute a direct military threat to countries like Israel; violate the sovereignty of countries like Lebanon; challenge efforts to advance the peace process in Palestine; and are generally destructive of regional stability in the Middle East.

Another reason Iran's nuclear program is a policy issue for the international community is that Iran has active weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. According to a recent Congressional Research Service Report, official U.S. sources state that Iran's WMD programs include the pursuit of a "self-sufficient chemical weapons infrastructure"—complete with stockpiles of blister, blood, choking, and nerve agents, along with the bombs and shells to deliver them—as well as an "offensive biological weapons program."

Finally, the international community's interests are implicated by Iran's nuclear program because a nuclear-armed Iran could ignite a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that would not only negatively disrupt the balance of power in the region, but would also adversely affect the international interest in the reduction of strategic warheads and missiles, as well as the patent international interest in the termination of fissile material production.

These and other important international interests will be protected if the world takes seriously that Iranian foreign policy options are limited due to the emerging global consensus against Iran's nuclear activity, because a narrow set of choices for Iran means strategic leverage for the international community. What is more, Iran suffers from uncharacteristically high levels of civil unrest onset by corrupt elections, the globally publicized oppression of its population, and a weakened economy—factors that further restrict the Iranian government's foreign policy decision pool. So a perfect storm that mixes domestic unrest and economic turmoil in Iran, with a global convergence of opinion on Iran's nuclear program, yields the realistic prospect of a unified policy approach the entire international community can embrace.

The reason for the broad consensus on economic sanctions is that 80 percent of Iran's revenue comes from its energy sector, and Iran's energy resources constitute the primary source of funding for its nuclear and WMD programs, its sponsorship of terrorism, and its leverage over weaker countries whose interests are damaged by those activities. Accordingly, an increasing number of members of the international community are adopting the American view that sanctions should target Iran's energy sector, including the European Union, Australia, Canada, Japan, many major oil and gas corporations, and even the United Nations Security Council.

The problem is that, while sanctions have succeeded, at least arguably, in isolating Iran diplomatically and damaging Iran economically, especially given the high level of international teamwork, there has been no demonstrable shift in Iran's deep commitment to its nuclear program. Put simply, the new strategy is not advancing the core strategic purpose of the sanctions, which is to coerce Iran to restrict its nuclear program to purely civilian uses.

In theory, economic sanctions are a solid policy option because of their potential to force an already-strapped Iranian government to make a difficult choice: either stop funneling resources into the nuclear program, or cut social services and add to the domestic turmoil. However, as explained, practice shows that sanctions have not, to date, been able to force Iran to abandon its nuclear program. Moreover, harsher sanctions than those already in place could produce undesirable consequences, including humanitarian crises. Additionally, because Iran has shared economic interests with many of its regional neighbors, further sanctions could force

vulnerable countries to choose between cooperation with the international community and their own economic welfare, which would be counterproductive.

A strategy anchored in diplomacy will not work, either. Further diplomatic engagement is not a reasonable policy option because the international community has no diplomatic carrot to offer Iran. The diplomatic strategy in this context would be to offer Iran regional power sharing in exchange for full engagement with the international community. However, Iran is currently unsuited to regional power sharing because it is a state sponsor of terrorism governed by a regime that is both unstable and overtly tyrannical.

Preemptive military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities are likewise not sensible right now. Not only are preemptive attacks of questionable legality, but there are at least 400 potential facilities to strike—many of which are located in heavily populated civilian areas—and, at any rate, facilities could eventually be rebuilt. Additionally, “You cannot bomb knowledge,” as the head of the IAEA has pointed out many times.

What is more, Iran could, and almost certainly would, retaliate to a preemptive strike by closing the Strait of Hormuz, which would cause a global energy crisis. As General John Abizaid explained in 2006, the IRGC Navy's strategy is designed “primarily to ‘internationalize’ a conflict by choking off oil exports through the Strait [of Hormuz].”

Given the circumstances, the most prudent policy option, argued for in a recent law review article, is the so-called “tripwire” strategy. The international community should use its leverage over Iran to set very specific guidelines for Iranian behavior with unambiguous, severe consequences (“tripwires”) if those guidelines are violated. This strategy is fair because it strikes a compromise between the international community and Iran: Iran could develop a peaceful, legitimate nuclear energy program while assuring the international community that the program is not and will not ever be militarized.

Given Iran's poor strategic position, the regime would have to carefully restrict its activities to avoid tripwires. However, this would be the case only if Iran believed the threatened consequences were credible. Red lines for Iranian behavior should be very comprehensive, should be meticulously crafted by diplomats, and should include, among other things, the use of nuclear material in any attacks; the transfer of nuclear material to any country or terrorist organization; evidence uranium is being enriched beyond what is needed for civilian uses; refusal to allow IAEA inspections; evidence that Iran manufactures, develops, or otherwise possesses nuclear-capable warheads; and so on.

The international community has the unqualified right to claim justice from Iran. Given the historical context, only the exploitation of Iran's current strategic weaknesses can ensure Iran's nuclear program becomes and thereafter remains peaceful. Accordingly, a narrative of tragic and complicated degeneration can be warded off if the world unites to overwhelm Iran with the heavy weight of international consensus, backed by credible and uncompromising threats.

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