

IRAN'S THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND ARMS CONTROL POLICIES

by Peter Jones

Peter Jones is Project Leader of the Middle East Security and Arms Control Project at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Prior to joining SIPRI in 1995, he spent seven years with the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs dealing with arms control and security issues in the Middle East, Europe, and at the United Nations. Dr. Jones holds a Ph.D. in War Studies from King's College in London and an M.A. in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada.

Any discussion of Iran's arms control and security policies must necessarily be speculative to some degree. Information about Iranian security policies is often more in the nature of propaganda than objective reporting. And the political, social, and economic situations in the country are, to put it mildly, in a state of flux and have been for some time. Nevertheless, it behooves anyone interested in security in the Middle East, and particularly the Persian Gulf, to try to fathom where that country's security and arms control policies may be going. For better or worse, Iran is the biggest state in that critical sub-region, if not its richest. As the past 20 years have shown, events in Iran are also able to affect remarkably the wider regional and global policies of the international community.

This article outlines Iran's arms control and security policies, both globally and regionally, and shows how they relate to Iran's larger security goals and threat perceptions. The article argues that Iran's arms control policies have been remarkably consistent and represent a rational response (as seen through Iranian eyes) to the security situation in which that country finds itself. This does not necessarily mean that these policies are what most Western nations would like, or even that Iran's actions are always consistent with its freely entered into obligations concerning various nonproliferation regimes. There is indeed credible evidence that Iran is in contravention of at least the spirit of its nonproliferation commitments with respect to the possible acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The goal here is to put these

policies in context.

This article argues that Iran has a clear, long-standing set of threat perceptions and that these security concerns are not entirely unreasonable. Though Iran's views may not all find support in the West, once these views are understood, that country's arms control policy and WMD programs can be understood as responses that make sense given the Iranian perception of the country's security concerns. This point is not made to justify or excuse Iranian actions in these areas, as Iranian policies do pose some threats to others. However, a better understanding of Iran's motivations, even where one disagrees with them, should help the international community develop effective and appropriate responses.

Given the goal of improved un-

derstanding, this article attempts to eschew the more emotional terms of debate employed equally by Iran's detractors and apologists. My own view is that Iran is neither the malevolent demon involved in every untoward event in the Middle East that its critics suggest, nor the tragically misunderstood peace-loving nation described by its diplomats and apologists. Instead, the reality lies in the middle. On the one hand, Iran's activities in the fields of terror and weapons of mass destruction are probably not as apocalyptic as some suggest—certainly they are not as advanced as those of some other Middle Eastern states. On the other hand, Iran is undoubtedly looking into the possibility of acquiring WMD and has been a sponsor of terrorism in the world. I do not seek to rationalize these actions or imply that the international community should accept them; it should not. However, the world should seek to understand why Iran adopts the policies it does. As the record demonstrates, these are not simply the acts of irrational, religious fanatics.

This article begins by outlining Iran's arms control policies and threat perceptions. It then discusses the foreign policymaking process that gives rise to these policies. Thereafter, the article shows how Iran's military programs derive logically from its security perceptions and policy process, and it discusses how the use of terror may or may not relate to Iran's security policies. After summarizing the main findings about Iran's goals and activities, the article closes with some policy recommendations, especially for the United States. It suggests that the best policy is one of cautious engagement. Such a policy would maintain current wariness about

technology transfers to Iran. But it would also recognize areas of common interest—with containment of Iraq being number one—that provide a possible basis for improved relations.

IRAN'S ARMS CONTROL POLICIES: AN OVERVIEW

The arms control policies of Iran involve both global and regional aspects. Globally, Iran has played a very active role in international disarmament fora. It is a member of the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and is active there. Iran also takes part in the debates of the U.N. First Committee and other disarmament activities. In reviewing Iranian statements and actions on global arms control, one can discern four long-standing trends.

First, Iran is a member of all of the major multilateral disarmament agreements currently in existence. This includes the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). The only other country in the Middle East with such a record is Jordan.

Second, Iran subscribes to, and is a leader in, the development of what might have been called in a previous era the "Non-Aligned Movement" (NAM) agenda as regards such issues as technology transfer regimes. Tehran has paid particular attention to what it regards as the discriminatory policies of Western nations when they restrict access to dual-use technologies (those with both legitimate civilian and weapons development applications) in such areas as nuclear, chemical, and biological research and industry. Ira-

nian diplomats have been scathing in their condemnation of supplier control groups such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Australia Group, and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). In particular, Iranian delegates at disarmament fora have argued that treaties such as the NPT guarantee access to civilian nuclear technologies for those who have signed them and are members in good standing.¹

Thus, Iran argues that the existence of supplier control regimes is an attempt by the West, under the guise of invented security concerns, to deny developing nations the technologies they need to develop their economies. Iranian representatives have joined with others in charging that supplier control groups represent nothing less than a contravention of the basic deal inherent in multilateral arms control treaties: in return for renouncing possession of certain types of weapons, developing countries should be assisted in developing the well-recognized civilian and peaceful applications associated with those technologies.²

As a response to this problem, the Iranians have repeatedly suggested that such supplier groups be abolished and that, in their place, the international verification mechanisms associated with multilateral treaties be strengthened. They also maintain that, if an international body such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) gives a country a clean bill of health, it should be illegal for any state or group of states to deny technology transfers on the basis of an entirely independent monitoring program. It should further, in the Iranian argument, be illegal for any state or group of states to deny access to legitimate tech-

nologies on the basis of suspicions those countries are not prepared to bring to the attention of the relevant international body, with full supporting evidence.³ This argument constitutes a direct challenge to the philosophy that underpins the supply-side approach to nonproliferation and its associated regimes.

Of course, Iran is not alone in arguing this. Many developing countries argue these points, but the Iranians are particularly active. It should also be noted that some states, such as India for example, that have refused to join treaties like the NPT have done so citing, in part, these arguments. Unlike these countries, Iran has joined the regimes and has never threatened to withdraw, as did North Korea a few years ago.

Third, and not surprisingly given what happened during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran has placed great emphasis on the security guarantees that are often associated with these treaties, both positive and negative, and has called for negotiations to make such assurances legally binding.⁴ Iran has firsthand experience of the fact that these guarantees do not always work as they should. Despite Iraq's pledge under the terms of the 1925 Geneva Protocol not to use chemical weapons (CW), Iraq initiated their use and the international community did nothing.⁵ Indeed, Iraq's war effort was largely paid for by external states, which are now reaping the "reward" for their support of Saddam Hussein.

Though the Geneva Protocol did not contain any specific security guarantees (as does its successor, the CWC), the clear violation of what was at the time the main international document banning the use of chemical weapons by a signatory—

and the support given to that violator's war effort by the rest of the international community—had a dramatic impact on Iranian thinking about international arms control. This experience convinced Tehran that international instruments and guarantees are only useful if you are a friend of the great powers.⁶ As Hashemi Rafsanjani, then speaker of the Majlis (Parliament), said in 1988, "Chemical and biological weapons are the poor man's atomic bombs and can easily be produced. We should at least consider them for our defense. Although the use of such weapons is inhuman, the war taught us that international laws are only scraps of paper."⁷

At root, any arms control agreement calls upon states to surrender a part of their sovereignty in return for enhanced security. In the case of the major international arms control agreements dealing with weapons of mass destruction, these agreements are based partly on the notion that those who have renounced the WMD option can count on certain guarantees from the international community if they are attacked with those weapons. In the case of the NPT, an additional guarantee exists to the effect that the nuclear weapon states will not threaten or use nuclear weapons against those who have renounced them and joined the treaty. Iran's question, however, is: do these guarantees also apply to states that the nuclear powers do not like? Iran is not so sure.

Fourth, and finally, Iran has used its membership in international disarmament fora to defend itself from charges that it is seeking to acquire WMD and to push the nuclear weapon states to make progress towards their commitment to negoti-

ate the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. At the NPT Review and Extension Conference in 1995, for example, Iran joined with a group of developing countries to introduce a Draft Decision calling for a limited extension of the treaty for 25 years, with further extensions being contingent upon, among other things, "the elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction."⁸ The possibility that treaty membership is partly a shield behind which Iran seeks to hide the existence of WMD programs is discussed below. The point here is that Iran has joined these regimes and has expressed a range of goals in connection with doing so. To understand Iran, the full range of these objectives must be kept in mind.

Not all of Iran's global arms control policies seem to be universally popular in Iran. In a recent speech, the leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guards asked skeptically, "Will we be able to protect the Islamic Republic from international Zionism by signing conventions to ban proliferation of chemical and atomic weapons?"⁹ This disturbing statement could cause one to wonder whether Iran's stated arms control policies reflect their real policies. Though my own view is that this statement says more about the internal power struggle in Iran (which will be discussed in another section of this article) than arms control, it does raise questions that Iran is going to have to answer. However, it is not unknown for generals in other states to issue scathing condemnations of their country's adherence to arms control treaties either.

Turning from global to regional arms control, Iran was not a participant in the arms control talks that

took place within the Middle East peace process. It was not invited. Had it been, however, it is highly unlikely that Iran would have accepted. It regards the entire peace process, which those arms control talks were part of, as illegitimate. However, Iran's absence was critical. It contributed to Israel's position that serious talks on the nuclear issue could not be undertaken until Iran was at the table. This, in turn, was a factor in the suspension of the arms talks.¹⁰

It is the Persian Gulf sub-region, however, that is the real focus of Iran's regional security policies, whatever Iranians may say about perceived Israeli threats. Here, Iran has consistently taken the view that the presence of "outside" forces, primarily those of the United States, is the main cause of instability in the Persian Gulf. To counter this, Iran has argued that the states of the region should develop closer relations, including security ties to each other. As a first step in this process, Iran has repeatedly offered to discuss various confidence-building measures (CBMs) with its neighbors across the Gulf, leading to some sort of regional non-aggression pact.¹¹

The way in which Iran has pursued these offers has evolved in the last few years. Iranian diplomats used to talk about the purpose of a regional CBM process as being to develop a regime that would lead to the removal of all outside powers from the region. They now say that this is Iran's priority, but it is not a necessary precondition to starting a regional CBM process. In other words, Iran no longer insists that its neighbors share the view that they should all be striving to eliminate the U.S. presence from the region as an

agreed goal of regional security talks.¹² This may be another way of saying, without saying it, that Iran recognizes that its neighbors might just have invited the United States in because they feel threatened, and those threats will have to be dealt with before the neighbors can be expected to ask the United States to leave. There are signs that Iran's neighbors are now prepared to enter into such talks.¹³

In terms of more specific regional arms control proposals, Iran has advocated talks in the Persian Gulf to achieve a reduction in regional military spending.¹⁴ Iranian proposals call for measures to enhance transparency in military matters, and to promote restraint in military purchases and sales in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, as a first step in this direction. Significantly, Iran has consistently argued that such steps must include a provision for counting the military capabilities of "outside powers" that are based in the Gulf or visit the region often. Iran has also offered to invite observers from regional states to selected military maneuvers, particularly maritime maneuvers, and has suggested joint maneuvers as a possible way of beginning talks on regional CBMs. So far, there have been few takers, but that seems to be changing. For example, Kuwait recently announced that it will conduct a joint naval exercise with Iran.¹⁵

As for harder arms control proposals for the region, Iran first floated the idea of a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) during the time of the Shah.¹⁶ Interestingly, the Shah's nuclear policy and that of the present government bear many similarities. Like the current regime, the Shah was being

slightly disingenuous with his NWFZ proposal of 1974. He had already signed the contracts for the Bushehr nuclear reactor, and many believed that he had a not very secret desire to acquire the capability to make nuclear weapons—while hiding behind the NPT and regional arms control proposals during the research phase. Iran's basic approach was to subscribe to and propose arms control initiatives concerning nuclear weapons, while also exploring other options in the meantime.

Of course, exploring an option is not necessarily the same thing as having decided to go ahead and build a weapon. Moreover, it is not entirely clear what activities undertaken in such an exploration are in contravention of the NPT, although such an exploration is, of course, contrary to the spirit of that treaty. It is precisely this ambiguity that the Western supply-side control regimes seek to address. Iran's critique of such regimes is thus a possible clue to its intentions.

In fact, as a subsequent section discusses in more detail, the post-revolutionary regime does seem to have maintained the Shah's policy of keeping open the nuclear option (though with much less success than the Shah would likely have had). The one marked evolution of policy under the present regime is the firm linkage of all WMD issues to Israel's nuclear status. The notion that Israel's nuclear policy is the root cause of all proliferation pressures in the region, and the greatest single impediment to the realization of a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone, has long been a staple of Iranian statements.¹⁷ This clearly has propagandistic elements and may not fully accord with Tehran's deepest

threat perceptions. To determine where Iran's global and regional arms control priorities came from and how serious they are, therefore, it is necessary to look at Iran's threat perceptions.

IRAN'S THREAT PERCEPTIONS

At present, there are no immediate threats to Iran's borders. Nevertheless, Iran is acutely aware that it lives in a tough neighborhood. Relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan are worsening precipitously over that regime's treatment of Shiites in Afghanistan and the recent killing of Iranian diplomats.¹⁸ The Persian Gulf and the Central Asia/Caucasus regions are two of the world's more unstable regions, and Iran lies between them. The post-Soviet future of the Central Asia/Caucasus areas is still in flux.¹⁹ In the Persian Gulf, two major wars have been fought in the past decade, and the threat of more violence is real. According to one scholar of the region, the Gulf has been going through a "crisis in slow motion" for the past 20 years, a gradual, cumulative set of jolts and shocks that is creating pressures for change that regional governments may not be able to resist.²⁰

The picture adds up to a region that has many potential flashpoints, both in state-to-state terms and also in terms of the internal stability of many regional regimes. Of course, one should hesitate to predict the collapse of the Gulf political system into anarchy. News of the death of the Arab Sheikdoms has been overstated for many years now, and they have proven remarkably resilient. But the cumulative effect of the crisis in slow motion is building. Per-

haps of greatest concern, the slow-motion nature of the crisis leads to an illusion on the part of regional rulers, especially in the Arab states of the Gulf, that fundamental change is not necessary. They have, until now, survived by virtue of their vast wealth, which has permitted them, when forced, to get away with no more than tweaking at the margins of reform. They may believe that they can continue on this way, but this will not work forever. Though it may come as a surprise to many, the Gulf states are actually quite poor and are getting poorer, despite the unimaginable personal wealth enjoyed by a privileged few. Structural reforms at the basic level are necessary in societal and economic terms.²¹

If such reforms are undertaken, they will lead to a period of instability as old structures attempt to adapt themselves. Small-scale flare-ups of violence are likely during this period. If reforms are not undertaken, a period of instability is even more likely, though it may take a bit longer to develop. Flare-ups of violence in the latter case will probably be a lot more significant. Either way, the region is in for a bumpy ride, and Iranian policymakers are quite aware of this.

While most of Iran's concerns to the north and east revolve around the long-term stability of those regions (its present dispute with the Taliban notwithstanding), its greatest threat perceptions at the present time arise in the Persian Gulf and wider Middle East. In terms of specific threats, Iran's greatest concerns involve three possible scenarios for conflict.²²

The most likely of these, and the most devastating for Iran were it to

occur, is a resumption of the Iraqi military threat to Iran. Put simply, Iraq is Iran's only real regional military rival and the only state that could launch a war against it. Although Iraq is, for the moment, constrained by U.N. sanctions and inspections, this cannot be a source of long-term reassurance for Iran. Moreover, Iraq's military machine, though seriously damaged by the 1991 Gulf War, remains formidable in relation to Iran's and could quickly be rebuilt if Saddam were allowed to trade oil and buy weapons. Though neither of these things looks likely for some time, military planners in Iran, as they do elsewhere, must look to the longer term. If the West, and particularly the United States, considers Saddam's regime a long-term threat to the security of the region, one can hardly blame Iran for doing so as well.

Furthermore, the Iranians can legitimately claim to be the aggrieved party in terms of who started their war with Iraq and how Saddam's war effort was financed. As noted earlier, after its experience, Iran can also legitimately question the attachment of the international community to its own nonproliferation norms. This does not absolve Iran of the responsibility to adhere to the international agreements on WMD that it has freely signed and ratified, including the CWC, which it signed after the war. But it does color Iran's perspective on those agreements, particularly, as mentioned, on the question of security guarantees.

The second major threat perception that concerns Iran is a possible conflict between it and another regional neighbor. Such a development would soon occasion U.S. involvement, as all of the members

of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rely upon the United States for protection. The most-often cited possible trigger for open confrontation between Iran and one of the Gulf Arab states is the dispute with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over three islands near the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Leaving aside the rights and the wrongs of the dispute,²³ the chance of actual conflict seems remote. Indeed, talks on the dispute may now be possible in the wake of what appears to have been an Iranian offer to discuss handing over one of the islands as a possible compromise.²⁴

However, some concern exists in Iran that any flare-up would quickly involve the U.S. presence in the region, especially the U.S. Navy. In terms of the prospect for a direct confrontation with "the Great Satan," this seems the most likely avenue. It is in this context that Iran's buildup of naval forces, beyond that which could legitimately be claimed as necessary to prosecute the maritime aspects of another Iran-Iraq war, is troubling. Though it is hardly likely that Iran would, as the U.S. Navy has sometimes said it fears, try to shut down the Strait of Hormuz (which would effectively cut off Iran's trade lifeline to the world), the Iranian Navy does seem to be following a strategy designed to raise the costs for any U.S. involvement in a future regional engagement.²⁵ That said, Iran could have no illusions about who would win. The U.S. Navy is the overwhelmingly predominant force in the region. But Iran's purchase of conventional submarines, shore- and sea-based anti-ship missiles, and sophisticated mines, and perhaps aspects of its WMD programs, may be

intended to make the U.S. realize that there would be a price to pay for any U.S. attack on Iranian facilities in the Gulf.

At the same time, at the operational level, the Iranian Navy is reputed to be very careful whenever the U.S. Navy is operating nearby. Indeed, it would seem that both navies treat each other with professional courtesy and try to avoid accidents and incidents when they come into contact with each other. It is even likely that they are prepared to develop a set of tacit "rules of the road" to avoid incidents between them, though a formally signed document for this purpose is unlikely for political reasons.²⁶

The third threat perception held by Iran is that of a direct attack on it by either the United States or Israel, most likely in an attempt to curtail its nuclear power program. That program itself will be discussed shortly, but the important thing here is that Iran believes that such an attack is possible. Certainly, when Israel publicly justifies the procurement of new fighters and the possibility of seeking submarine-launched cruise missiles as being, in part, to give it the ability to strike Iranian targets, Iran cannot help but take note.²⁷

The next question that needs to be addressed next is how the threat perceptions described here get translated into the arms control policy outlined above. What is the process whereby threat perceptions become security and arms control policy, and what does that process mean in terms of the seriousness of the policy and whether it reflects Iran's true intentions?

THE FOREIGN POLICY PROCESS IN IRAN

As with most policy formulation in the Islamic Republic, foreign policy emerges from a vague process. When Iran's revolutionary government took over in 1979, it suffered, like many revolutionary governments in history, from the problem of too many factions. The only unifying force was the charisma and unchallenged leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, who was called upon to mediate. His Delphic pronouncements were vague and often contradictory, but were accepted as law. Beyond that, a dizzying constellation of Islamists, nationalists, pragmatists, and many others struggled to exercise day-to-day power. Through a long and often bloody process, the outcome of which was not a forgone conclusion, the present "system" emerged. It is still emerging.

The most dramatic recent event in this process has been the surprise landslide election of President Mohammad Khatami in May 1997. In defeating the handpicked candidate of the conservative religious establishment, President Khatami demonstrated that the growing popular displeasure with the clergy's economic mismanagement, corruption, and repressive social policies had reached a decisive point. Though President Khatami does herald the promise of change, it would be unwise to expect a great deal in the near future. Under Iran's system, the supreme leader of the revolution, currently Ayatollah Khamenei, wields ultimate power. Through him, the hardliners still control the key levers of power, including those associated with intelligence and the military. Nevertheless, President Khatami's

election is significant. He holds the good will of the people, and his desire to enact genuine reform on their behalf will be difficult for the hardliners to resist if they wish Iran to continue to have a visibly functioning democracy.²⁸

The central argument of President Khatami and (more quietly) former President Rafsanjani, the young, and the vast majority of the technocrats in the bureaucracy is that the system must change if it is to survive. Leaving aside the question of whether it is possible to ride the horse of change without being thrown, the critical point is that these men do not want an end to the Islamic Republic. They want it to take a more pragmatic approach to economic and other day-to-day issues, and they recognize that the people of Iran are desperate for change. Such change will involve opening the country up, but in a careful and controlled way, if that can be accomplished.

The reformers have also stated their belief that, to advance the pursuit of change at home, it is necessary to develop a proper "civil society." This would imply that both domestic and foreign policies must be based on the desire of the people for freedom and democracy and that no individual or institution (even the clergy) is above the rule of law.²⁹ Efforts by President Khatami and his supporters to enact long-suppressed sections of the constitution and to force the clerical establishment to conduct itself within the law are critical to this drive. Indeed, they form one of the main sources of contention between those seeking change and defenders of the status quo. But reform will not be easy. The arrest in April 1998 of the mayor of

Tehran, a key supporter of President Khatami, shows that the religious establishment will fight back.³⁰

Ideologues, by contrast, tend to be concentrated in the clergy (though there are many in the clergy who are pragmatists) and in institutions such as the security services. They take the view that hardships should be endured in the cause of preserving the purity of the revolution. Of course, the fact that many of the clergy have benefited enormously from the revolution, in both political and material terms, tends to cushion the blow as far as they are concerned.³¹

The key point is that Iran's political and policymaking structures are very diffuse and feature a high degree of interplay and struggle between various factions and power centers. While the long-term trend favors the moderates (in demographic terms, if no other), the process of change will not be smooth and the result is not a foregone conclusion. In this context, the remarks noted earlier by the leader of the Republican Guards, to the effect that adherence to arms control regimes is not in Iran's interests, do contrast with the stated policy of the Iranian government in a way that is genuinely disturbing. However, one must look at who is making such statements and what their position is within a system that continues to evolve.³² There simply is no unity in Iran on some of these issues. Indeed, the reformers take the view that international nonproliferation norms are a critical part of the international version of a civil society, based on the rule of law, that they seek to develop in Iran. Adherence to these norms is thus crucial to their vision of Iran's broader domestic and foreign policies.³³

Overall, then, Iran's foreign policy emerges from a struggle between competing coalitions, which are themselves ever shifting. At the same time, there are important elements of continuity in Iran's policies. The outcome of internal power struggles thus matters for some questions, but within a context of broader agreement on certain security threats. Based on the understanding developed to this point of Iran's arms control objectives, threat perceptions, and policymaking process, the next section traces how these are reflected in Iran's security policies, particularly its force structure and acquisition efforts.

IRAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAMS

Conventional Military Posture

Iran's conventional military capabilities were disastrously (for Iran) eroded during the Iraq war. It has been estimated that Iran lost up to 60 percent of its conventional arsenal during the final battles of that conflict.³⁴ These losses, combined with an embargo on the sale of U.S. military equipment throughout and since the conflict, dwindling cash reserves with which to buy less advanced equipment from other sources, and the need to maintain U.S. weapons for which spares are not available (or must be acquired circuitously and expensively) have led to a major problem for Iran.

Though opponents of the regime point to an Iranian threat to the other Gulf states, it seems farfetched to imagine that threat as coming from any large-scale Iranian capability to take offensive conventional military action. Even opponents of the Iranian regime concede that it poses

very little threat to its neighbors across the Gulf in terms of large-scale conventional military capabilities.³⁵ Moreover, Iran's poor economic situation and lack of access to Western technology mean that it is falling disastrously behind in the acquisition of the key military technologies that make up the so-called revolution in military affairs. Even though Iran regularly announces tests of indigenously developed advanced weapons, most Western analysts are skeptical of its real capability in these areas, and Iran rarely puts any of these weapons into production. This suggests considerable technological, managerial, and financial problems.³⁶ Thus, in relation to the United States, Israel, and America's Gulf allies, Iran may well be at risk of falling even further behind in conventional military capability, particularly in terms of the most modern systems.³⁷

Iran's primary threat is Iraq, and this is a land threat. Therefore, Iran's efforts to upgrade existing army equipment and to acquire or produce new equipment to be used in a conflict with Iraq should not occasion enormous concern on the part of other countries in the region, particularly in view of Iran's weak position in conventional weapons in comparison with its neighbors. Iran's relative weakness is most clear when one examines purchases of equipment by other countries in the region. Comparisons of imports of major conventional weapons by the Persian Gulf countries during the period 1993 to 1997 show that Iran imported considerably less than Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or the UAE during the period and much less than the GCC countries as a group.³⁸ However, as noted, the Iranians have

exhibited a disturbing interest in maritime power projection capabilities that go beyond the requirements they might have for maritime forces in the event of another Iran-Iraq conflict.³⁹

Thus, to appreciate the military situation in the Gulf, one must bear in the mind that Iran is not capable of attacking any Gulf Arab state (other than Iraq) with conventional weapons in anything other than a punitive, though possibly painful way. The prospect of invasion across the Gulf is nonexistent for the foreseeable future. An Iranian attack, punitive or otherwise, would be futile militarily and would occasion massive U.S. and Gulf retaliation. Finally, the idea that Iran would seek to "close" the Strait of Hormuz, thereby severely disrupting world oil shipping, also seems unlikely. Such a step would cut off Iran's only outlet for its own oil exports, upon which the regime depends entirely for its economic survival.

These points being made, certain aspects of Iran's security and arms procurement policies are worrying. First, although Iran is unlikely to launch an offensive against any of its neighbors, it does have the ability to undertake terror operations. Indeed, if the Iranians really do want to influence the security situation on the ground in neighboring countries, this is virtually the only way they can do it, and they freely admit to having supported such groups as Hamas and Hezbollah. Meanwhile, Iran's Gulf neighbors charge that the Islamic Republic has been active in fomenting unrest in their countries, though such charges are less frequent now that relations appear to be thawing in the wake of President Khatami's election. Sec-

ond, Iran's neighbors do seem to worry about Iranian efforts to develop greater naval capability, WMD, and missiles capable of striking throughout the Gulf and possibly beyond. These represent a possible threat to Iran's wider circle of neighbors and to U.S. interests in the region. This brings us logically to the possible non-conventional threat posed by Iran.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Whether Iran is developing WMD is one of the most vexing questions about security in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East.⁴⁰ In the nuclear area, there is simply no smoking gun that proves irrefutably that Iran has decided to develop a nuclear weapon and is working toward the early realization of that aim.⁴¹ This is at least true in the public domain, and one has to believe that the United States and Israel would have found a way by now to make public any hard evidence they have, given their interest in this issue. If there were hard evidence, the United States would likely have formally raised it with the IAEA. That it has not done so seems to indicate that the evidence is more in the form of circumstantial and cumulative developments that suggest a WMD research program of some kind. But the critical question is what kind of WMD program and why?

Before discussing the evidence, let me indicate that I do believe Iran is researching all forms of weapons of mass destruction, and probably possesses a chemical and perhaps even a biological arsenal of some type. It is also undertaking efforts to acquire or develop longer-range missiles than it presently has. From a policy perspective, in order to de-

velop appropriate responses, one needs to focus on the questions of how far Iran has gotten with this research and why Iran is doing this. However, such an understanding does not absolve Iran from its obligations under treaties to forego WMD, treaties that it entered into freely.

Turning first to the nuclear file, there is no publicly available evidence to support the notion that Iran is anywhere near producing a nuclear weapon, despite the rolling "five to seven years from now" warning that has been emanating from Washington and Tel Aviv for more than five to seven years.⁴² There is considerable reason to believe that Iran has a research program into how to construct such a device and is trying to acquire (often through surreptitious means⁴³) the various technologies that would be necessary both to produce a bomb and to "weaponize" it. But their known enrichment capability is such that they have no hope of producing the raw materials for a bomb anytime soon, and this is likely to remain so for many years to come. Of course, if they could acquire already enriched uranium, the calculation would change dramatically, but there is no public evidence that they have come close to this.⁴⁴ At the same time, Iran points out that it is a member of the NPT and has accepted more visits under the IAEA's revised "93+2" verification procedures than any other state. None of these visits has ever revealed untoward activities, though there is some question as to whether Iran will accept all of the 93+2 inspection requirements. Certainly, if it does, clandestine research into prohibited nuclear activities will become more difficult to conceal over the longer

term, a point that Iranian officials understand.⁴⁵

On the other hand, the fact that Iran arguably has no real need for a civilian nuclear power program, given its reserves of oil and gas, and seems to be spending considerable sums of precious foreign reserves to sustain a technically questionable nuclear program, does legitimately raise questions. This is particularly true when one notes the Iranian's interest in a number of technologies that have no real utility for the power program they are pursuing.⁴⁶ For their part, the Iranians note that they have every right to pursue a nuclear power program and to receive technical assistance as a non-nuclear weapon state that is in compliance with the NPT. Iranian officials claim that they are interested in nuclear power for reasons of environmental protection, economic development, and the general development of Iran's technical and industrial infrastructure.⁴⁷

In short, Iran's current nuclear weapons research program is real, but it looks most like an effort to develop an option to build a bomb at some future point should the regional security situation dictate that Iran needs such a deterrent for its safety.⁴⁸ This was in essence also the Shah's program. Indeed, if one looks closely at the current Iranian program and the Shah's, one finds a surprising number of similarities. Under both regimes, Iran participated in the international nuclear nonproliferation regime, but it also explored the nuclear option. The exact point at which this exploration will become a violation of the NPT is difficult to ascertain and may not yet have happened in a strictly legal sense. In terms of the spirit of the

regime, however, as a non-nuclear weapon state signatory, Iran should not be exploring this option at all. At the same time, it is not at all clear that any decision has yet been made actually to build a bomb. The Iranian program is certainly nothing like the Iraqi one was before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.

This point has now been grudgingly acknowledged by the U.S. government. After many years of dire warnings, U.S. officials have now quietly admitted that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon is a prospect best measured in decades, rather than years. They even say Iran may have shelved some time ago any ambitions it might have had to rapidly develop such a capability.⁴⁹

The recent nuclear tests by India and Pakistan are unlikely to change this estimate in the short to medium term. Officially, Iran has expressed regret over the tests and called on both states to respect the international nonproliferation norm.⁵⁰ Though fears that Pakistan and Iran will combine their efforts to produce an "Islamic bomb" play well in fiction, their reality is questionable. Pakistan and Iran have an often difficult relationship, due to their subscription to the Sunni and Shi'a strands of the Islamic faith, respectively, among other factors. Besides, if Pakistan intended to transfer nuclear technology to Iran, it could have done so long before now; the tests were an affirmation of a capability that Pakistan has had for some years. There is no evidence of such a transfer having taken place before the tests, nor any indication that a transfer is any more likely now.⁵¹

The South Asian tests may, however, contribute to a general weakening of the nonproliferation norm

over time, both regionally and globally. If this is the outcome, Iran is likely to be affected to the extent that the international nonproliferation regimes will offer less and less certainty. Under such circumstances, and given Iran's other concerns about neighbors such as Iraq, we may expect those within Iran who argue that the Islamic Republic requires its own deterrent to receive a boost.

Another point to note is that the question of constructing a bomb is a matter of debate within Iran itself, and many segments of the government and society do not support this course. The extent to which such policy issues are the subjects of genuine debate within Iran is not appreciated in the West, and particularly the United States. I have sat in on many meetings in universities and research institutes in Iran where the bomb issue was hotly debated. Though such discussions may be "staged" for the benefit of Westerners, or may be irrelevant to some small cadre of officials who are making the real decisions, they do take place. The idea that Iran should possess a nuclear option does not seem to enjoy anything like the overwhelming support that it does in other countries, such as Israel.

In the case of chemical and biological weapons (BW), there seems little evidence that either was particularly well developed when the Iran-Iraq war began. Iraq's use of CW against Iran triggered an enormous crash research program in Iran. Though Iran was never able to employ CW as effectively as Iraq during the conflict, Iran did finish the war with a major program of research and production of both CW and BW, under the control of the Is-

lamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.⁵²

Today, Iran probably has an ability to conduct limited chemical and biological operations near its borders. Western analysts believe that Iran has effectively mastered the technology to use artillery armed with chemical warheads and to deliver CW and BW by aerial means.⁵³ But analysts think Iran has little ability to conduct longer range CW and BW operations, outside of the immediate Gulf area, because of the current range limitations of its missile forces and the difficulties in mastering effective warhead technology. Iran is reported to be making large-scale efforts to master these technologies. However, these claims are themselves not without their detractors.⁵⁴ At a minimum, though, Iran has the ability to use CW and BW as terror weapons if it so chooses.

Other points are worthy of note in the biological and chemical areas. First, Iran has formally proposed that the parties to the BTWC urgently consider ways to develop an effective verification regime for that treaty.⁵⁵ Second, the BTWC permits signatories to retain "reasonable" (but unspecified) amounts of material for research purposes.⁵⁶ Thus, in a strictly legal sense, Iran may not be in violation of the treaty, but it is certainly in violation in spirit if it has a BW program. On the other hand, some Iranians have expressed to me the view that the BTWC is about as effective a guardian of Iran's security as the Geneva Protocol was. Iran expects Iraq to rebuild its BW capability once UNSCOM's demise is complete (and it may be the case that Iraq has managed to shield large portions of its BW program from

UNSCOM and has an intact BW capability even today). Thus, taking advantage of a loophole to maintain a deterrent may not seem unreasonable to some Iranians.

In terms of CW, Iran appears not to have submitted a statement on its chemical weapons holdings on January 3, 1998, as it was supposed to do under the terms of the CWC. This statement, which all members of the regime are required to submit, is intended to provide a complete inventory of national CW to facilitate inspections and to establish a schedule for the destruction of such stocks. However, it should be noted that many countries are late in their reports, the United States among them, and Israel has not yet ratified the CWC. In some cases, this may be due to bureaucratic workload or oversight. In others, it may be due to a desire to sit back and see who else in the region submits a statement and what they say. Whatever the reason, when Iran submits its statement, the document will be closely scrutinized. Failure to submit a realistic statement would be interpreted as a sign that Iran does not take its obligations under international arm control regimes seriously.

Finally, Iran has an ambitious program to develop long-range missiles capable of striking throughout the Gulf and beyond, with Israel as one oft-cited target. Iran has long been rumored to be working to upgrade missiles supplied by North Korea. Many believe Iran is being assisted in this by Russia, though it is not clear whether this is being done as an act of policy or because the Russian government is losing control over its scientists and research centers.⁵⁷ Proof of Iran's missile efforts came on July 23, 1998, when Iran

tested its Shahab-3 missile. This is believed to be a solid-fuel missile, based on the North Korean Nodong and designed to carry a 700 kg warhead with a range of 1,300 km.⁵⁸ Although the test was only partially successful (the missile exploded 100 seconds into a flight that was supposed to have lasted longer⁵⁹), it has proven that Iran is well on the way to developing an indigenous capability. Indeed, Iran is already at work on a longer range missile, the Shahab-4, and officials have talked about possibly also developing a Shahab-5. Analysts believe the Shahab-4 is based on an old Soviet design and will be liquid fuelled and capable of carrying an unspecified payload up to 1,900 km.⁶⁰

These missile programs are troubling and do raise the level of tension in the region. However, Aaron Karp suggests that these development programs may not be priorities nor run according to any well-defined timetable, but rather as and when foreign assistance is available and to fulfill a generally perceived need to have a long-range capability.⁶¹ Iran's goal may simply be to match the undoubted ability of Iraq, Israel, and the United States to strike Iran. Even if defensively motivated, however, the high visibility of Iran's missile program does understandably increase suspicions about its WMD intentions. At the same time, though, the very ambiguity of the overall evidence on its WMD efforts may have caused these suspicions to run ahead of Iran's actual capabilities.

The Terror Issue and Overall Findings

With respect to terror as an instrument of foreign policy, the problem

that quickly arises is that of definitions. While it is banal to resort to the "one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter" formula, there is something to it. As one analyst points out, Israel has a far longer and greater history of political assassinations of opponents abroad and support of overseas factions seeking the destabilization of others in the region than does Iran (at least, so far as we know), although this does not make Iran's undoubted activities in this realm any more acceptable.⁶² What makes Iran's use of terror a potential threat to Western interests is the apparent goals of such use. Iran is alleged to have used this instrument to undermine the Middle East peace process and to threaten its neighbors and Western interests in the Persian Gulf.

However, there is a sense that the Iranians have scaled back their overseas terror operations since the period immediately following the revolution, and that this trend is intensifying under President Khatami as Iran seeks better relations with its neighbors and the international community. Certainly, President Khatami and other officials have made repeated statements to the effect that they condemn terrorism.⁶³ Western governments acknowledge that there has been a reduction in Iranian involvement in and support for terror, though Iran maintains its capabilities and continues operations against selected targets.⁶⁴

Interestingly, the Clinton administration recently and for the first time placed the *Mujahedin-e Khalq*, a terror organization dedicated to the overthrow of the Iranian regime, on its list of terrorist organizations with which it is illegal for U.S. citizens to be involved.⁶⁵ This was almost

certainly done to signal to Tehran a desire to improve relations. However, it seems likely that the administration will continue to list Iran as a sponsor of state terror in its annual statement on such matters. Though there was no discernible softening of the language in the latest statement, administration officials quickly engaged in a round of quiet interviews to make the point that Iran's behavior is not as bad as the statement may have indicated.⁶⁶

Thus, in the midst of the competing claims about Iran's WMD and terror programs, one needs to bear in mind some essential facts. Altogether, the foregoing analysis suggests five key conclusions:

- Iran's WMD programs are not all equally well developed. Assertions that Iran is actively researching nuclear weapons are based on the analysis of cumulative, circumstantial evidence. The evidence points to a real research program, but does not seem to add up to nuclear weapons in the next decade. In the CW and BW cases, Iran appears further along, but probably lacks capabilities to do much that is militarily significant beyond its immediate borders. Iran's missile program, however, is clearly real and appears to be making some headway.
- Any use by Iran of WMD against a neighbor aligned with the United States, or against U.S. interests or Israel, would invite massive retaliation, far beyond that which Iran could hope to inflict by its own use of such weapons. It would amount to an act of suicide by the current regime, and the regime realizes this.
- The potential for use of these weapons (especially CW and

BW) as instruments of terror does exist. As with the above case, however, the retribution would be far in excess of anything Iran could hope to accomplish. Moreover, such use, or even the threat of such use, would be at least as likely to drive the other states of the region further into the U.S. orbit as out of it. This would be completely counterproductive from Iran's point of view.

- Given the above, and given that every state associated with Iran's basic threat perceptions (Iraq, the United States, and Israel) possesses WMD of its own as well as the means to strike Iran with these weapons, Iran's own programs may well add up to a strategy of deterrence. Certainly, Iran has every reason to put little faith in the security guarantees that come with membership in international arms control regimes. This does not excuse these programs, especially in light of the international nonproliferation instruments Iran has signed. But it does put Iran's efforts in a different light than analyses that depict the regime as an irrational, fanatical group of religious lunatics bent on blackmailing and threatening their neighbors.

- Finally, if Iraq is Iran's overriding perceived threat, it seems possible that Iran's research efforts with respect to WMD and missiles are designed to provide it with the capability to face Iraq once again if the sanctions are ever lifted and Saddam Hussein renews his military buildup and WMD programs, both of which seem likely at some point in the future. That Iran's weapons could also be used against others is an ancillary factor, though at least

some Iranians may well regard this as highly desirable.

THE RATIONALITY OF IRAN'S ARMS CONTROL POLICY

Given all of the above, let us now return to a consideration of Iran's arms control policy. As noted in the first section, that policy is framed around global and regional themes. Globally, Iran is an active player in the international arms control agenda and subscribes to all major treaties. It takes the NAM view on such issues as supplier-control regimes and security guarantees. Regionally, Iran considers Iraq to be its main source of potential threat. Beyond this, the presence of U.S. forces in the region is a concern, as is the general level of tension in the region. Iran has proposed a dialogue on CBMs, hopefully leading to the signing of a regional NWFZ or WMD-free zone, a regional non-aggression pact, and steps to reduce arms spending in the region.

Once the emotional rhetoric about Iran is stripped away, the first thing that strikes one about Iran's arms control policy, and the perceived threats on which it is based, is that it is all quite rational. The West may not like these policies, but these are not the crazed policies of a group of religious lunatics. Iran, like the rest of the world community, has every reason to be intensely skeptical of Iraq, and of the international inspections regime in that country, in the absence of far-reaching change there. Given the high level of animosity between Iran and the United States and Iran and Israel—even if one admits that Iran must take a large measure of the blame for this animosity due to its ideological predis-

positions—Tehran has yet more reason to look to its defenses and fear the worst. At the same time, membership in global nonproliferation regimes permits Iran to develop its options with respect to WMD behind these regimes, all the while claiming the right to receive civilian technologies associated with WMD as a member in good standing.

The second point that emerges out of a careful reading of Iranian arms control statements over the years is that their policy towards arms control is consistent and enduring. Despite the changes that have taken place within Iranian politics over the past several years, Iran's representatives have hewed to a remarkably constant line on arms control. This may mean that it is a lowest-common-denominator policy, or that those who fight for power within the allowed political spectrum of Iran share a common view of the nation's security needs at some basic level. It may also be the case that some forces in Iran subscribe to this policy publicly while working privately to defeat or circumvent it. Probably, all three trends are in play. Another point to make about consistency is that Iran's nuclear ambitions go back to the Shah and would probably have been realized by now if the revolution had not set them back.

Third, at a declaratory level at least, Iran's arms control policy is not particularly extreme. Iranian officials say many things Western delegates do not like to hear concerning such issues as supplier-control regimes, but they are not saying anything that is not said by other developing countries, some of which are not part of these regimes. Certainly, a lot of countries that take these positions have been able to

have a perfectly productive relationship with the West on many other issues. In strictly declaratory terms, Iran's arms control policy should not be the reason for the deep estrangement between Iran and the United States. The problem comes when each side views the other's statements and actions through a prism of deep suspicion concerning more basic motives and ideologies.

Finally, though it is largely supposition at the public level, it seems likely that Iran is using arms control to hide certain WMD programs, or at least the desire to develop WMD options. The question of whether Iran is violating the letter of its arms control commitments may be argued at some length by lawyers, but this activity would certainly be a contravention of the spirit of Iran's arms control obligations. On the other hand, given the security concerns that the regime has, many Iranians may view it as only prudent to preserve WMD options. In short, though it is likely that Iran is to some extent violating its arms control commitments, this may not necessarily imply strictly aggressive intentions. To understand fully Iranian policy, its unwelcome aspects must be balanced against the elements of restraint and the valid security concerns that are also involved. Once again, however, this statement is not made to excuse Iranian actions that threaten others.

CONCLUSIONS

At the declaratory level at least, Iran's arms control policies are not what one would expect from a supposedly irrational, "rogue" state. When combined with an analysis of its threat perceptions, Iran's arms control priorities and military pro-

grams begin to look very much like a strategy of deterrence against what it believes to be a set of serious threats to the country. Moreover, when one looks closely at Iran's conventional and non-conventional procurement efforts, the picture that emerges is of a state that is having difficulty keeping up with those whom it identifies as its primary possible threats, though it is still a state that also poses some specific and disturbing threats of its own. If this is the case—and Iran is not an irrational state bent on domination of its neighbors and committed to the destruction of Israel for ideological reasons—certain policy responses are suggested.

First, with respect to weapons of mass destruction, the United States and the international community should not relax their vigilance in seeking to limit Iran's access to WMD and the technologies upon which they are based. Iran *does* have research programs and capabilities in these areas and they *are* disturbing. Even if these research programs are devoted more to the creation of options for eventual deployment than to such deployments any time in the foreseeable future, they do run counter to the spirit of Iran's nonproliferation undertakings, and possibly the letter as well. Efforts to deny Iran access to WMD technologies have raised the costs and difficulties associated with their development and should be maintained and even strengthened where possible.

Second, it needs to be recognized that Iran's WMD capabilities may be far less developed than we have been told, and they probably stem as much from Iran's deep-seated feelings of national threat as from

any ideological or hegemonic ambitions. Moreover, Iranian threat perceptions are not all unwarranted. If Saddam Hussein is the menace that the West makes him out to be, it can hardly blame Iran for agreeing. Since they have bitter experience of the fact that security guarantees associated with arms control do not always work, it is difficult to criticize the Iranians for coming to the conclusion that they must deter Hussein themselves, including across the range of non-conventional capabilities he may throw at them. Even if Americans do not like that conclusion, in many ways they are at least partly responsible for it in that they refused to honor nonproliferation norms when Iraq began CW use against Iran.

Third, if it is the case that Iran's WMD capabilities are some years away from fruition, the West has some time, though this is not a call for complacency in any way. Furthermore, if these capabilities are primarily intended to act as deterrents to perceived threats, it behooves the West to try to understand those threat perceptions and see if there is anything that can be done to lessen them, while still pressing Iran to respect the West's basic security interests and live up to its nonproliferation commitments. This will not be easy. The success of the pragmatists in Tehran, with whom any hope of a real dialogue rests, is far from assured.

Fourth, if Iraq is Iran's overriding perceived threat, then the containment of Hussein's regime by the international community may constitute the most effective way to prevent Iran from fully developing and deploying WMD (though Iran may well continue to develop its options

regardless of what happens with Iraq). The integrity of this logic depends largely on the unprovable assertion that Iran will only go down the WMD deployment road if it believes that Iraq is left unconstrained to do the same. One cannot know if this is true, but it points to an area of possible congruence between Iranian and Western policy. It also suggests that, while the West should not accept Iranian research on WMD and should seek to counter it where possible, an informal understanding may be reached that this research should not go beyond a certain point unless international constraints are removed from Iraq. In short, Iran may be willing to keep its efforts within certain bounds in return for some form of cooperation from the international community. Until the day when Iran believes it is secure enough to abandon its WMD options, this may be the best that can be hoped for. In the meantime, this policy costs little for either side. The containment of Saddam Hussein remains a priority for both, even if they cannot work out a tacit understanding on what it should lead to in terms of their own relations. And Western attempts to deny Iran access to suspicious technologies should continue regardless of any such understanding.

Recommendations that the West should keep trying to deny Iran access to technologies that may further its WMD ambitions while, at the same time, trying to establish tacit understandings as to how far those programs should go may appear fundamentally contradictory. In a sense, they are. However, nonproliferation is a complex game at the operational level and policies in support of these goals sometimes pursue contradictory avenues to reach the desired ob-

jective. As was the case in North Korea, for example, the West may have to consider strengthening a government it does not like by assisting Iran to develop other sources of energy (primarily in the Iranian case in terms of assistance in modernizing its oil and gas infrastructure) if it is to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear power program. Ultimately, however, a combination of two factors will determine whether Iran eventually abandons its pursuit of WMD options. These are the outcome of efforts to eliminate the Iraqi WMD threat and the product of who wins the internal power struggle in Tehran.

Other areas where discussion may prove fruitful are in establishing tacit understandings, if not agreements, as to what Iran's legitimate defense needs are and what role the United States should play in the Persian Gulf. Though Washington is prepared to state what conventional weapons Iran should not have (and seems to want to block any and all purchases Tehran tries to make⁶⁷), it is less forthcoming about what weapons Iran may seek for its defense needs. Surely, Iran has *some* legitimate need to acquire conventional weapons. Similarly, quiet discussions may seek to establish tacit understandings on the U.S. role in the Persian Gulf. At a minimum, both sides have a key interest in preventing the rise of another military threat from Saddam Hussein. Calmer heads in Iran do recognize that this requires a U.S. military presence in the Gulf, public rhetoric from Tehran notwithstanding.⁶⁸ A third area of possible tacit understanding is Afghanistan, where some policies of the Taliban have proven disturbing to both Iran and the United States.

Thus, the analysis suggests that the United States should pursue a strategy of cautious but serious engagement of Iran. Such a policy would be better than either non-engagement or an engagement that seeks to bring Iran to the table for the exclusive purpose of delivering a stern lecture. It would be best if Iran were prepared to enter into official talks with the United States, but, in the absence of this willingness, serious academic and other exchanges are warranted to explore differences and to see if there may be areas where informal understandings could be developed that may be to the advantage of both sides. Whatever mechanism for dialogue emerges, it needs to be recognized that the Iranians do have their own views on security issues and these deserve to be taken seriously, even if Americans do not entirely agree with Iran's views.

Above all, one needs to get away from the broad generalizations and simplifications that too often characterize the debate over Iran. Iran is a complex nation whose internal political situation is highly fluid and whose revolution is still in progress. As with all revolutionary societies, Iran contains advocates of both extreme and moderate positions. Often, the success of one position is far more dependent upon domestic issues and forces that are only peripherally related to those that excite Americans or that the West can necessarily do anything about. The West should not accept Iranian claims of innocence as regards WMD at face value, but neither should it always assume guilt simply because it does not feel comfortable with Iran's government or rhetoric. Iran does have legitimate security concerns, foremost of which is Iraq.

At the end of the day, Iran and the United States are and always will be major players in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. The United States cannot isolate Tehran forever, just as Iran cannot force America to leave either the Persian Gulf or the Middle East. It seems increasingly foolish for Iran and the United States to base their policies towards the region and each other on a single-minded attempt to try to accomplish impossible aims that are not really in either's longer-term interests anyway. It may actually be possible to accomplish more in the nonproliferation area by engaging Iran, while holding firm to an insistence that Tehran abide by its nonproliferation commitments.

¹ Virtually every Iranian speech to a disarmament gathering takes up this theme. For examples see: Statement by Mr. Amrollahi to the 1991 International Atomic Energy Agency General Conference, GC(XXXIV)/OR.325, April 22, 1991; Statement by Mr. Velayati to the Conference on Disarmament, June 18, 1992, CD/PV.625, p. 5; Statement by Mr. Kharrazi to the First Committee, October 14, 1992, A/C.1/47/PV.5, p. 52; Statement by Mr. Amrollahi to the 1993 IAEA General Conference, GC(XXXVII)/OR.354, November 24, 1993; Statement by Mr. Nasser to the Conference on Disarmament, August 10, 1993, CD/PV.659, p. 6; Statement by Mr. Kharrazi to the First Committee, October 24, 1994, A/C.1/49/PV.9, p. 15; Statement by Mr. Velayati to the NPT Review and Extension Conference, April 21, 1995, NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part III), p. 100; Statement by Mr. Takht-Ravanchi to the First Committee, October 24, 1996, A/C.1/51/PV.13, p. 18; Statement by Mr. Danesh-Yazdi to the First Committee, October 23, 1997, A/C.1/52/PV.11, pp. 20-21; Statement by Mr. Kharrazi to the Conference on Disarmament, June 4, 1998, CD/PV.796, pp. 2-5; Statement by Mr. Ayatollahi to the IAEA Board of Governors meeting, Vienna, June 9, 1998; and Statement by Mr. Zarif to the Conference on Disarmament, June 18, 1998, CD/PV.798, pp. 2-4.

² See the statements listed in note 1.

³ During the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, the Iranian delegation proposed language for the Conference Document that stated that "no nuclear-weapon State may attempt to impede or deny access by non-nuclear-weapon States parties to the Treaty to nuclear materials, equipment and technology for peaceful purposes unless non-compliance is verified and established by the IAEA" (Statement by Mr. Baeidinejad to the NPT Review and Extension Conference, May 4, 1995, NPT/CONF.1995/32, (Part III), p. 352). The proposal was not successful.

⁴ See, for example, Kharrazi First Committee statement, October 14, 1992, p. 56; Statement by Mr. Behrouz Moradi to the First Committee, October 26, 1993, A/C.1/48/SR.13, p. 9; Statement by Mr. Nasser to the NPT Review and Extension Conference, May 11, 1995, NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part III), p. 177; and Statement by Mr. Zarif to the Conference on Disarmament, June 18, 1998, CD/PV.798, pp. 2-4.

⁵ See the emotional statement on this subject by Ambassador Nasser to the CD's Ad Hoc Committee on Chemical Weapons, August 21, 1992, CD/CW/WP.435, p. 1.

⁶ Interview with senior Iranian Foreign Ministry official, Tehran, December 1997 (names withheld by request on this and all subsequent interview references to protect anonymity).

⁷ "Majlis Speaker on Acquiring Chemical Weapons," October 19, 1988; in FBIS-NES-88-202 (19 October 1988), pp. 55-56.

⁸ See "Extension of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons," NPT/CONF.1995/L.3, May 5, 1995.

⁹ AFP, April 29, 1998; Reuters, April 30, 1998.

¹⁰ Though it is entirely possible that the Israelis would not have agreed to discuss the nuclear issue even if Iran had been at the table. For more on the Middle East arms control talks, see P. Jones, "Arms Control in the Middle East; Some Reflections on ACRS," *Security Dialogue* 28 (March 1997).

¹¹ See, for example, Nasser statement to the CD, August 10, 1993, pp. 8-9; and Takht-Ravanchi statement to the First Committee, October 24, 1996, p. 19.

¹² Interviews in Tehran, December 1995, December 1996, and December 1997.

¹³ See "Saudi paper calls for Gulf non-aggression pact," AFP, December 15, 1997. The paper in question was government controlled.

¹⁴ See, for example, Statement of Mr. Kharrazi to the First Committee, October 26, 1995, A/C.1/50/PV.11, p. 13; Statement by Mr. Takht-Ravanchi to the First Committee, October 24, 1996, A/C.1/51/PV.13, p. 19.

¹⁵ See C. Faraj and P. Finnegan, "Kuwait, Iran to hold joint naval Exercise," *Defense News*, February 9-15, 1998, p. 40. In March 1998, an Iranian naval vessel visited a Saudi port for the first time since the Revolution ("Iran Warship makes friendly visit to Saudi Arabia," Reuters, March 9, 1998).

¹⁶ For a review of the Shah's nuclear policy, see A. Cordesman, *After the Storm: The Changing*

Military Balance in the Middle East (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 421-22.

¹⁷ See, for example, the statements cited in footnote 1. It is interesting to note, however, that the recent Iranian Statement on the India-Pakistan nuclear tests to the IAEA Board of Governors meeting did not mention Israel by name (Statement by Mr. Ayatollahi to the IAEA Board of Governors meeting, Vienna, June 9, 1998). For a repudiation of the argument that all other regional weapons of mass destruction programs are related to Israel's nuclear status, see P. Jones, "New Directions in Middle East Deterrence: Implications for Arms Control," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 4 (December 1997).

¹⁸ At the time this essay was written, Iran had massed 250,000 troops on the Afghan border and tensions remained high between the two sides. On the origins of the dispute, see M. Huband, "No war with Taliban, Iran insists," *Financial Times*, September 7, 1998, p. 4; D. Jehl, "Tehran threatens Taliban over missing diplomats," *International Herald Tribune*, September 7, 1998, p. 1.

¹⁹ See "A Caspian Gamble - A Survey of Central Asia," *The Economist*, February 7-13, 1998.

²⁰ G. Sick, "The Coming Crisis in the Persian Gulf," in G. Sick and L. Potter, eds., *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 12.

²¹ See, for example, D. Long and C. Koch, "Gulf Security in Broad Perspective," in their edited volume, *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1997), pp. 1-12.

²² The following is based on S. Lotfian, "Threat Perception and Military Planning in Iran: Credible Scenarios of Conflict and Opportunities for Confidence-Building," in E. Arnett, ed., *Military Capacity and the Risk of War: China, India, Pakistan and Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); S. Chubin, "Iran's National Security: Threats and Interests," in G. Kemp and J.G. Stein, eds., *Powder Keg in the Middle East: The Struggle for Gulf Security* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995); and numerous interviews with Iranian researchers and officials during four trips to Iran between 1995 and 1998.

²³ An excellent account of the dispute may be found in R.N. Schofield, "Border Disputes in the Gulf: Past, Present, Future," in Sick and Potter, *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium*, pp. 127-166.

²⁴ Interview in Tehran.

²⁵ See, for example, T. McNaugher, "Iran's Military Posture: Whether 'Hegemonic' or 'Defensive,' Iran's Force Build-up Complicates U.S. Defense Planning," *Middle East Insight*, vol. 11, no. 5 (1995).

²⁶ Interviews with senior U.S. and Iranian naval officers involved in Persian Gulf operations. The desire of the two navies to avoid incidents is referred to in E. Sciolino, "Quietly, America takes steps to answer an Iranian opening," *International Herald Tribune*, March 27, 1998, p. 12. Rumors abound of work towards an informal set of operational understandings. Such an understanding

is suggested and further discussed in P. Jones, "Maritime Confidence-building in the Persian Gulf," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 8 (Summer 1996).

²⁷ See J. Borger and M. Kettle, "Israel goes underwater to counter Arab bomb," *The Guardian*, July 21, 1998, p. 6.

²⁸ See S. Bakash, "Iran's Unlikely President," *New York Review of Books*, November 5, 1998; and M.J. Gasiorowski, "The Power Struggle in Iran," unpublished paper. For general overviews of the situation in Iran, see R. Wright, "Dateline Tehran: A Revolution Implodes," *Foreign Policy*, no. 103 (Summer 1996); and "Children of the Islamic Revolution: A Survey of Iran" *The Economist*, January 18-24, 1997.

²⁹ Thus, President Khatami told a group of students in Tehran on May 23, 1998: "[T]he art of a government lies in its ability to get its opponents to act within the law and the framework of the constitution.... [I]f religion comes into conflict with freedom, then it will be religion that suffers.... [F]reedom must be at the root of everything" (quoted in D. Gardiner, "Tehran celebrates a year of reform politics," *Financial Times*, May 25, 1998). See also M. Torkzahrani, "Iran after Khatami: Civil Society and Foreign Policy," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 9 (Winter 1997-98), pp. 499-512.

³⁰ See R. Allen, "Iran's factions wary after Tehran mayor's arrest," *Financial Times*, April 14, 1998, p. 4; D. Jehl, "Year into Khatami's term, tension mounts in Iran," *International Herald Tribune*, May 25, 1998; and D. Gardiner, "Tehran celebrates a year of reform politics," *Financial Times*, May 25, 1998.

³¹ *Ibid.* An example of the vast corruption that exists in Iran are the "Bonyads." These are "charitable" foundations set up after the revolution to administer the confiscated wealth of the Shah and his supporters for the good of the people. In reality, they have become little more than private economic fiefdoms of the clergy that are accountable to no one and control literally billions of dollars in wealth.

³² Though the statement in question did contain the disturbing reference to arms control, so far as it has been leaked to the press, considerable sections of it were devoted to a spirited attack on the reformers (AFP, April 29, 1998).

³³ Interviews with Iranian officials in Tehran, December 1997 and February 1998.

³⁴ See A. Cordesman and A. Hashim, *Iran: Dilemmas of Dual Containment* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997); M. Eisenstadt, *Iran's Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996), chap. 2.

³⁵ Eisenstadt, *Iran's Military Power*. For more on the idea that Iran poses a limited conventional military threat to its Persian Gulf neighbors, if any at all, see J.D. Green, "Iran and Gulf Security," in Long and Koch, *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century*, esp. pp. 21-23.

³⁶ See, for example, "Built in Iran: the push for self-sufficiency," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, October 15, 1997, p. 23.

³⁷ For more on this trend see I. Anthony and P. Jones, *International Arms Transfers and the Middle East*, Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, Occasional Paper no. 21, 1998.

³⁸ For example, SIPRI estimates that Saudi Arabia imported almost five times as much as Iran, while Kuwait and the UAE each imported roughly 30 percent more than Iran. This data may be found in S.T. Wezeman and P.D. Wezeman, "Transfer of major conventional weapons," *SIPRI Yearbook, 1998: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 291-317, especially the table on pp. 300-01. This data may also be found on the SIPRI homepage (http://www.sipri.se/projects/armstrade/facts_and_figures.html). SIPRI data does not, however, include indigenously produced equipment. A comparison of the overall military capabilities of the Persian Gulf countries, that also makes the point that Iran is far behind the other countries of the Gulf, especially in the most modern capabilities, may be found in Cordesman and Hashim, *Iran: Dilemmas of Dual Containment*, pp. 165-263.

³⁹ Indeed, some U.S. analysts believe that Iran has relied on the fact that Iraq has not been able to buy weapons since 1991 to invest disproportionately in maritime forces, because Tehran has not had to fear a resurgent Iraq during this period. If this logic is true, we may expect Iran to invest much more heavily in its land and air forces if the sanctions ever come off Iraq. See "Iran makes most of military sanctions imposed on Iraq," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, June 24, 1998, p. 4.

⁴⁰ See the chart summarizing the open-source data on Iran's WMD policies, published on the Monterey Institute's Center for Nonproliferation Studies web site (<http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/wmdme/iran.htm>). As it states, "Precise assessment...is difficult because most WMD programs remain secret and cannot be verified independently."

⁴¹ Although, as one reviewer of this article pointed out, there has rarely been a "smoking gun" in cases of nuclear proliferation until just before a nuclear capability has been achieved and, in some cases, not even after such a capability was developed.

⁴² See, for example, the sources cited by Gary Sick in "Rethinking Dual Containment," *Survival* 40 (Spring 1998), pp. 16-17.

⁴³ See, for example, C. Hedges, "A vast smuggling network gets advanced arms to Iran," *The New York Times*, March 15, 1995.

⁴⁴ For an excellent summary of Iran's nuclear program, that comes to the conclusion that they are not close to the capability to produce a weapon and will not be for at least 10 to 15 years, see A. Koch and J. Wolf, "Iran's Nuclear Procurement Program: How Close to the Bomb?" *The Nonproliferation Review* 5 (Fall 1997), pp. 123-135. See also W. Seth Carus, "Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction: Implications and Responses," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 2 (March 1998).

⁴⁵ Interviews with Iranian officials, May 1998.

⁴⁶ See the extensive discussion of this issue in

Koch and Wolf, "Iran's Nuclear Procurement."

⁴⁷ See the Statement by Mr. Amrollahi to the IAEA General Conference, September 16, 1991, GC(XXXV)/OR.334, October 21, 1991, esp. p. 32.

⁴⁸ This conclusion is also reached by Gary Sick in his "Rethinking Dual Containment."

⁴⁹ See the reference to unnamed sources in the U.S. intelligence community, who admitted in December 1997 that Iran had "shelved" its nuclear program "two years ago," but warned of the threat of Iranian missiles (J. Fitchett, "Ousting Iranian, Russia signalled U.S. on arms; Yeltsin co-operates in curbing Tehran's drive," *International Herald Tribune*, December 9, 1997).

⁵⁰ See Statement by Mr. Kharrazi to the Conference on Disarmament, June 4, 1998, CD/PV.796, pp. 2-5; Statement by Mr. Ayatollahi to the IAEA Board of Governors meeting, Vienna, June 9, 1998; and Statement by Mr. Zarif to the Conference on Disarmament, June 18, 1998, CD/PV.798, pp. 2-4.

⁵¹ Though there are reports that Iran asked Pakistan for such assistance, but was refused. See J. Hoagland, "Briefing Yeltsin on Iran," *The Washington Post*, May 17, 1995, p. A23; and E. Sciolino, "Report says Iran seeks atomic arms," *The New York Times*, October 31, 1991, p. A7. Whether individual Pakistanis may have assisted Iran, perhaps by revealing sources and methods of clandestine supply, is another matter.

⁵² Cordesman and Hashim, *Iran: Dilemmas of Dual Containment*, pp. 291-295. See also the Center for Nonproliferation Studies chart on Iran (<http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/wmdme/iran.htm>).

⁵³ *Ibid.* See also Carus, "Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction."

⁵⁴ See P. Finnegan and S. Rodan, "Israelis Scale Back Iran Missile Estimate," *Defense News*, February 2-8, 1998, p. 8.

⁵⁵ See the Statement by Mr. Takht-Ravanchi to the First Committee, October 24, 1996, p. 18.

⁵⁶ See *Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and their Destruction*, April 10, 1972, Article I, paragraph 1.

⁵⁷ See M.R. Gordon and E. Schmitt, "Seepage of missile technology from Russia to Iran comes under fire," *International Herald Tribune*, April 27, 1998, and D. Buchan, "Clinton urges Yeltsin to halt Iran missile transfer," *Financial Times*, May 18, 1998. For background on Iran's missile programs, see A. Karp, "Lessons of Iranian Missile Programs for U.S. Nonproliferation Policy" *The Nonproliferation Review* 5 (Spring-Summer 1998), pp. 17-26, and D. Lennox, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Projects: Uncovering the Evidence," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (June 1998).

⁵⁸ T. Weiner, "Iran tests new missile that could reach Israel," *International Herald Tribune*, July 24, 1998; D. Mulholland, "Iranian missile test highlights broader proliferation threat," *Defense News*, July 27-August 2, 1998, p. 8.

⁵⁹ B. Bender, "Shahab 3 only partial success," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, July 29, 1998, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Karp, "Lessons of Iranian Missile Programs"; Lennox "Iran's Ballistic Missile Projects"; interviews with Israeli defense officials, Tel Aviv, November 1997; Associated Press, "Iran missile plans worry Israel, U.S.," *San Jose Mercury News*, September 27, 1998, p. A15.

⁶¹ Karp, "Lessons of Iranian Missile Programs."

⁶² Sick, "Rethinking."

⁶³ In his widely noted CNN interview, for example, President Khatami said that, "Any form of killing innocent men and women who are not involved in confrontations is terrorism.... Terrorism should be condemned in all its forms" (CNN interview, January 7, 1998, quote taken from recording of broadcast made at SIPRI).

⁶⁴ Interviews with Western officials.

⁶⁵ U.S. State Department, Notice In Federal Register of Terrorist Organizations, October 8, 1997 (<http://www.usis.it/wireless/wf971008/97100808.htm>).

⁶⁶ See R.J. Smith, "Iran a terror state? 'Yes, but,' U.S. intelligence says," *The International Herald Tribune*, May 6, 1996, pp. 1, 6.

⁶⁷ The U.S. recently purchased 21 MiG-29 fighters from Moldova to prevent their acquisition by Iran and has made many other such efforts in past. See Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran Under Khatami: Weapons of Mass Destruction, Terrorism, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," testimony given on May 14, 1998, before U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Near East and South Asian Affairs (available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/mike.htm>).

⁶⁸ Interviews in Tehran, 1997 and 1998.