

Iran and Nuclear Terrorism

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Abstract

It is an established fact that Iran seeks to join the ranks of nuclear powers. Since 2003, Western powers have known about Iran's uranium enrichment program, its heavy water production and its missile delivery system for nuclear warheads. Tehran denies any intention to produce weapons and insists that its nuclear activities are solely for civilian energy purposes. But the international community remains highly skeptical. This paper focuses on Iran's nuclear ambitions and the threat it poses to its Arab neighbors, Israel and Europe. It also analyzes Iran's potential for sharing radiological weapons of terror, including both nuclear weapons and radiological dispersion devices with terrorist groups. The study is divided into three sections. Section I investigates why Iran covets nuclear weapons. Moreover, with the recent disclosure of a hitherto secret uranium enrichment facility near Qum and the London Times story on Tehran's plans to test a neutron initiator (or trigger for an atomic weapon) only confirm Iran's true intentions. Section II examines Iran's past uses of terrorism and its links with extremist organizations such as Hezbollah or Hamas and warns of the increased possibility that the Iranian regime could transfer nuclear weapons and radiological dispersion weapons to such groups, thus increasing the risk of a terrorist nuclear attack. Section III concludes by offering recommendations for reducing Iran's nuclear threat and terrorism.

Introduction

Iran's desire to join the ranks of nuclear powers is not a recent phenomenon. In the 1950's under the Atoms for Peace Program launched by the Eisenhower Administration, the pro-western Shah pursued nuclear energy technology with plans to construct 20 nuclear power reactors. But following the 1979 Islamic revolution, foreign assistance for the program was discontinued. At the same time, the new leadership under Khomeini felt there was no need to purchase western weapons. However, the Iran-Iraq war made the Ayatollah change his decision and restart the nuclear program.

Khomeini declared that Iran would never find itself in a vulnerable and humiliating position again and issued a fatwa (legal opinion) that sanctioned Iran to make the utmost effort to acquire nuclear weapons. Thus began Iran's secret quest to manufacture the bomb.¹

Since 2003, Western powers have known about Iran's uranium enrichment program, its heavy water production and its missile delivery system for nuclear warheads - after the exiled opposition group the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK) exposed Iran's secret nuclear program to the international community. Over the years despite four sets of international sanctions imposed since 2006, Iran has refused to cooperate with the IAEA or show transparency about its nuclear program. It has also failed to fulfill the UN Security Council's requirement of discontinuing its nuclear enrichment activities.

¹ Con Coughlin, "Iran will never give in to the US," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnist/concoughlin/4615163/Iran-will-never-give> (accessed February 16, 2009)

Iranian clerical leaders have categorically denied any intent to produce nuclear weapons capability and insist that Iran's nuclear activities are solely for civilian energy purposes. But the international community remains highly skeptical and rightfully so.

The disclosure of a hitherto secret uranium facility near Qum, the London Times story on Teheran's plans to test a neutron initiator (or trigger for an atomic weapon), Iran's plans to begin higher-grade uranium enrichment, the development of Iran's Ballistic Missile Program (which many experts fear would be used to deliver nuclear warheads) are hardly cause for comfort and only confirm Iran's true intentions.

Besides, Iran's record since the 1979 Islamic Revolution as an active sponsor of terrorism beyond its borders—a classic example of state sponsored terrorism—does not convince the world of Iran's peaceful intentions. Indeed, the dominant clerical leadership has a Pan-Islamic agenda. Designed and supported by the mullahs, the Iranian constitution calls for a unification of all Muslim peoples into a single nation.² This Pan-Islamic vision is identical to the message Bin Laden has expressed numerous times in his fatwas. Despite the long history of tensions between the Sunnis and the Shiites, the mullahs in Iran and Al-Qaeda share common enemies in the US and Israel.

In pursuit of fulfilling the Pan-Islamic agenda as well as striking back at their enemies, Iranian leaders have supported terrorist groups abroad in a variety of ways: provided financial and diplomatic support, weapons, training, organization, inspiration and sanctuary to numerous terrorist groups in the Middle East and elsewhere.³ There is ample evidence that Teheran supported radicals in the Persian Gulf, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, and the Palestinian territories, Bosnia, the Philippines, and Malaysia. More recently there is compelling evidence that they have aided terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴

Given Iran's current nuclear program and its plan to begin higher-grade uranium enrichment, the country will be capable of making enough enriched uranium for a small arsenal of nuclear weapons in the near future. This nuclear weapons capability in conjunction with Iran's active involvement in state sponsored terrorism raises the increased potential that the clerical regime could one day end up sharing nuclear weapons and radiological dispersion devices with terrorist groups.

This paper deals with Iran's nuclear ambitions and the threat it poses to its Arab neighbors, Israel and Europe. It analyses Iran's role as a sponsor of nuclear terrorism. The study is divided into three parts. Part one investigates why Iran covets nuclear weapons. Part two examines Iran's past uses of terrorism and its links with extremist organizations around the globe. Part three concludes by offering recommendations for reducing Iran's threat and terrorism.

Iran and Nuclear Weapons

² Shaul Bakhash, *Reign of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 233

³ For a detailed account of Iran as a sponsor of terrorism, see Council on Foreign Relations, "State Sponsors: Iran," <http://www.cfr.org/publications/9362/> (accessed February 8, 2010)

⁴ Ibid

Iran's quest for nuclear weapons constitutes a major threat to global peace and security by altering the strategic balance in the region, in addition to triggering a nuclear arms race worldwide. President Ahmadinejad's recent statement declaring Iran a nuclear power, and Iran's decision to enrich uranium to a higher grade, leaves no doubts that the country is on the path to producing nuclear weapons.

There are several reasons why Iran desires to acquire nuclear weapons. First, Iran is bordered by several states in its neighborhood that all possess nuclear weapons, such as, China, Russia, Israel, India, and Pakistan. At the same time, it is the only Gulf state with a predominantly Shiite population that is not exactly surrounded by Arab Sunni friends or a nuclear armed Israel and an American military presence in the region. Hence, Iran's attempts to secure nuclear weapons are partly fueled by fear of countries that already have the bomb.⁵ Second, the driving force behind Iran's ambition to acquire nuclear technology and weapons is national pride. Middle East expert William Beeman has asserted that, "Iranians want to be seen as a modern developing state with a modern developing industrial base. By pursuing such advances, the Iranians want to prove that they are indeed a technologically developed and industrialized country."⁶ Third, wants nuclear weapons capability to assist in its goals to become a regional power. Indeed, armed with nuclear weapons, this geostrategic objective would enable Iran to dominate and pursue aggressive adventures in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. One must not forget that Iranians are a very proud people and many centuries ago, they ruled over vast lands.⁷ Iran has a long history of empire building and the notion of empire is embedded in their psyche. Not too long ago, Hashemi Rafsanjani, chairman of the Expediency Council and former President declared that Iran's leadership intended to regain "Iran's past greatness." Clearly, this was a reference to the "imperial outlook" that dominates the thinking of Iran's clerical mullahs as they seek to promote militant Islam beyond Iran's borders. Teheran seeks respect, recognition, and great power status. Possessing nuclear weapons would most certainly elevate their status regionally and globally and prop up the regime and strengthen their prestige for the long term. Internally, it would revive the original fire of the first revolution of 1979 and usher in a second revolution aimed at the augmenting of clerical rule with a streamlined brutal police-security state under the banner of Islam.⁸ It would also send a message to dissidents and internal opponents that if the entire world could not stop Iran from acquiring the bomb, then their quest for liberty and democracy will also be a hopeless one.⁹ Externally, Iranian officials deny "empire ambitions" but contend that their goal is to seek a "just order" and resist the unjust global hierarchy and join other nations seeking to restructure it along equitable lines. These would include economic, political, military and

⁵ Richard Payne, *Global Issues, Politics, Economics, and Culture* (New York: Longman, 2011), 135

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_Program_of_Iran (accessed March 10, 2009)

⁷ Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 235

⁸ Jonathan Spyer, "Iran Hasn't Won the Cold War Yet," <http://www.administrator@gloria-center.org> (accessed January 8, 2010)

⁹ <http://cicentre.net/wordpress/index.php/> (accessed February 15, 2010)

geostrategic considerations including arms races and disarmament.¹⁰ However, in reality, their objective is to seize the leadership of the international Jihad movement away from the Sunnis. The idea of a ‘Shia Rising’, Persian Empire reborn and a Shia at the forefront of the Islamic Jihad vs. the western, non-Muslim world is extremely attractive for their global agenda.¹¹ In essence, Teheran would prefer to undermine the old Sunni order and portray themselves as a populist incorruptible regime committed to assisting the downtrodden and poor in the Islamic global community. In their view, the corrupt Saudi Wahabi monarchy is not committed to assisting the underprivileged and thus should no longer be regarded as the keepers of Islam’s two holiest places—Mecca and Medina.¹² A nuclear bomb would bring them power, influence and an insurance policy with which to redress global inequality and the bargaining chip to play at the global poker table. It would make the Islamic republic the only nuclear power in the Middle East, other than Israel.

The Iranian regime is committed to undermining American influence in the Middle East region. The US invasion of Iraq and its presence in Afghanistan brings America too close to Iran’s borders which the mullahs find very unsettling and threatening. Teheran is openly hostile to the US presence and has resorted to state sponsored terrorism through proxies such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and other proxies in Iraq and Afghanistan in hopes of undermining US presence in the area. This it could accomplish through covert terrorism involving the transfer of nuclear weapons to its clients—that could target American interests without openly being involved.

Finally, an underlying reason why Iran seeks nuclear proliferation revolves around the issue of oil. Iranians are aware that they will run out of oil someday not too distant in the future and they have no intention of becoming a future Bangladesh of the Persian Gulf.¹³ Already, Iran commands influence over a third of Iraq and a bulk of its oil. With Iraq’s 6 million barrels of oil a day, Iran could easily become the world’s largest producer and exceed Saudi production. A key aspect in this equation is that Iran has already consolidated its hold over three vital energy corridors: Afghanistan, the Strait of Hormuz and Kurdistan. Thus, Persian Gulf oil is well within its reach. It is aware that it is the dominant military force in the Gulf region, and armed with nuclear weapons capability, it could pursue adventuresome aggression against Saudi Arabia and the mini sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. Clearly, Iran’s strategy of having access to abundant oil, a nuclear weapons program, and actively sponsoring terrorist organizations is enough to remind the international community that the clerics in Iran cannot be trusted and pose a danger to world peace.

Iran and State Sponsored Terrorism

¹⁰ Kaveh Afrasiabi, “Hard Choices for Iran in 2010,”
http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/KL24AK02.html (accessed December 23, 2009)

¹¹ <http://cicentre.net/wordpress/index.php/2010/02/12/former-cia-analyst-tehran-wants-nucle...> (accessed February 15, 2010)

¹² Robert Baer, *op.cit.*, 151-152

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141

Over the past few years, most world leaders have cautioned that the greatest threat the international community faces is from nuclear terrorism. Weapons of Mass Destruction that include Chemical, Biological, Radiological (which refers to nuclear weapons and a radiological dispersion weapon) and Nuclear could be obtained by terrorists through two channels: state-sponsored terrorism and from a black market supplier.¹⁴ The latter scenario is less likely to occur because of difficulties in finding a holder who would actually sell weapons grade highly enriched uranium; in assembling and moving the device across national borders and then moving it to the target location.¹⁵ Consequently, the former scenario is more feasible.

Terrorism has been utilized by authoritarian rulers as an instrument of foreign policy. This normally takes the form of covert terrorism because the actions are generally expected to be committed without the state being openly involved.¹⁶ States that sponsor international terrorism share common characteristics: repressive governments, ambitious political and/or religious goals, and a tendency to blame outside enemies for their domestic or regional problems. This government and terrorist cooperation benefits both.

There is ample evidence that Iran's theocratic rulers have engaged in acts of state sponsored terrorism in the Middle East and beyond. Since the establishment of the Islamic republic in 1979, Iran has used terrorism as a legitimate tool to promote its ideological and strategic agenda. These include: exporting the revolution and assisting Islamic groups worldwide; destroying Israel and sabotaging the peace process; destabilizing moderate Arab regimes; and eliminating any opposition to the regime internally as well as from outside Iran.¹⁷ Indeed, Iran continues to pursue these goals and has waged war against the United States, Israel, and west for years through proxies. Thus, the US listed Iran as the world's "most active sponsor of terrorism" in 1984.¹⁸ Iran's support for extremist Islamic and terrorist organization began in the early 1980s in the form of providing safe havens, funds, weapons, and training. Moreover, several Iranian agencies such as the Ministry of Intelligence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran's Banking Institutions (Bank Melli and Bank Saderat) the force of the Revolutionary Guard Corps., and other Iranian organizations, culture centers and mosques have provided the means for local militant recruitment, and a cover for terrorist activity.¹⁹ However, it has been the 120,000-member Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—created in 1979 to export the revolution that wields considerable political and economic clout in Iran. It was the IRGC that helped establish, organize, and train the Lebanese Hezbollah in 1982, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Since then, Hezbollah has served Iran faithfully as one of its most important "clients" and as a proxy, has carried out some of the most lethal acts of terrorism. In the 1980s and 1990s, it carried out suicide attacks on the US Embassy and the US Marine barracks in 1983, hijacked TWA Flight 847 in 1985, bombed the Israeli embassy in Argentina in

¹⁴ Brian Forst, *Terrorism, Crime and Public Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 176

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Cindy Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2009), 80-81

¹⁷ http://www.mehr.org/iran_terrorism.htm (accessed February 8, 2010)

¹⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, "State Sponsors: Iran," <http://www.cfr.org/publications/9362/> (accessed February 8, 2010)

¹⁹ http://www.mehr.org/iran_terrorism.htm (accessed February 8, 2010)

1995, and attacked the US military facility of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996. Besides Hezbollah, Iran supported a wide range of other radical groups that have been responsible for terrorist acts. These include the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command, Taliban and Iraqi insurgents.²⁰ The Iranian government also carried assassinations of members belonging to the main opposition groups such as the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) in the late 1990s. Today, Iran continues to remain the world's number one state sponsor of terrorism and assist its proxies financially and militarily.

The following is a breakdown of Iranian financial assistance to some terrorist groups that has occurred in recent years.

Hamas: After the Hamas parliamentary victory in Gaza in 2006, Iran pledged \$30 million annually and also trained 1,000 Hamas fighters.

Hezbollah: receives \$300 million annually, especially in the aftermath of the Israel Hezbollah war of 2006. Iran has trained at least 4,500 Hezbollah operatives and supplied the Lebanese Shia militia with Katyusha rockets, surface-to-air rockets and anti-tank weapons. Hezbollah also raises \$300 - \$500 million a year in Latin America alone where it has presence in Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela and Mexico.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards have trained PIJ members in Hezbollah camps in Lebanon and have transferred \$2 million to the militant organization.

Iraq Insurgents: the Iranian Revolutionary Guards have been arming, funding and training Shiite radicals in Southern Iraq for years and has sought to influence the government in Baghdad. The insurgents have received \$3 million monthly and Iran has provided explosives, mortars, small arms and surface-to-air missiles to these radical extremists.²¹

In short, the latter record of Iranian assistance to its proxy friends affirms that Iran's role as a sponsor of state terrorism has not abated, but in fact has become progressively greater over the years.

Some studies in recent years on the subject of Iran and Nuclear Terrorism have suggested that once Teheran acquires nuclear weapons, it is less likely to share its weapons of mass destruction with its proxy terrorist organizations.²² In one study, Daniel Byman argues that Iran's past behavior shows that despite its possession of chemical weapons for nearly two decades, it has not transferred unconventional systems to terrorists.²³ Besides, he argues that Iran has become more cautious in its backing of terrorists in recent years and is aware that any such transfer would incur US wrath and worldwide condemnation.²⁴ This assessment is quite simplistic. Iran has a global Pan-Islamic agenda and is slowly working toward it. The reason why the Iranian regime has not transferred WMDs to terrorists groups so far is because they are waiting for the right time and moment. One must not dismiss the fact that they calculate all their

²⁰ Cindy Combs, op.cit., 86-87

²¹ <http://www.theisraelproject.org/site/c.hsJPKOPIJptt/b.2486101/k.AD22/Iran> (accessed February 8, 2010)

²² Daniel Byman, "Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31: 169-181, 2008

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

moves to attain their goals. Still, others have contended that Iran's nuclear program poses no danger and we should learn to live with Iran's nuclear ambitions just as we have with China, India, Pakistan, and Israel.²⁵ One should not forget that these countries were not state sponsors of terrorism.

Indeed such mild interpretations of Iran's nuclear intentions are a risky business. An Iran armed with nuclear weapons would be extremely dangerous given its past and present sponsorship of terrorism. In addition, the sugar coated assurance by the Iranian Supreme leader that Iran does not seek nuclear weapons because it's against Islam, should not be taken seriously. One cannot disregard the concept of 'taqqiyah' in the Shia faith. In a political context it means the concealment of one's belief and actions in order to prevent the infidel from knowing the believers true intentions.²⁶ Furthermore, official statements put forward by conservatives in state run newspapers contradict what Khamenei says. For example, the hard line Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) that reports directly to the Supreme Leader, craft a viable deterrent posture based on Islamic tenants that not only allows nuclear weapons, but considers having them compulsory. This hardliners' argumentation runs counter to the Islamic principle of 'jihad' which justifies war only for the defense of Islam.²⁷

Moreover, Iran has declared that it will share its nuclear know-how and weapons with Islamic countries or groups.²⁸ So under what conditions would Iran transfer nuclear weapons or radiological dispersion weapons to terrorist organizations? There are several reasons why Iran's mullahs might contemplate the transfer of nuclear materials. Over the past decade, American deterrence as perceived by Teheran has decreased. This perception is fueled by the fact that since the 1979 revolution, Iranian sponsored terrorist activities against the west have continued and have brought lukewarm reactions.²⁹ Thus far, the response has been verbal condemnation and economic sanctions-though the military option remains on the table. Furthermore, the western strategy in dealing with Iran's nuclear and missile program has convinced the Iranians that they have chosen the correct course. Iran closely watches America's reactions to North Korean provocations over the nuclear issue to determine its own response. Iran, like North Korea, believes that it has nothing to gain by accommodating Washington and thus has become more forceful in its refusal to abandon its nuclear agenda.³⁰

²⁵ Eric C. Anderson, "Learn to Live with the Iranian Nuclear Program," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-c-anderson/learn-to-live-with-the-ir_b_394175.html (accessed December 21, 2009)

²⁶ http://www.rferl.org/content/Irans_HardLiners_Are_Looking_To_Justify_A_Nuclear_Arsenal (accessed February 26, 2010).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ <http://www.theisraelproject.org/site/c.hsJPKOPIJpH/b.2486101/k.AD22> (accessed February 8, 2010)

²⁹ Steven Emerson and Joel Himelfarb, "Would Iran Provide Nuclear Weapons to Terrorists?" <http://www.steveemerson.com/6633/iran-nuclear-weapon-to-terrorists> (accessed December 23, 2009)

³⁰ Caroline Glick, "Column One: Israel and the Axis of Evil" <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1243346492707&pagename=JPost%2FJPArctic...> (accessed May 29, 2009)

Deterrence has further been weakened by the fact that the Iranian leadership does not fear conflict with the West.³¹ Iran's Ahmedinejad has been extremely vocal in the threats against Israel. In recent years, Iran's backing of anti-violence threats against Israel has grown. Iran's leader has asserted that the Holocaust never happened and has threatened to throw Israel off the map. Iran refuses to recognize Israel and refers to it as "the occupation regime of al-Quds."³² It is through the terrorist organization Hezbollah that it plans its proxy war against Israel. Hezbollah is dedicated to liberating Jerusalem through their notorious Quds Force that includes 20,000 trained personnel specializing in international terrorism, armed conflict and support of proxies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza.³³

Iran has admitted to supplying Iranian manufactured Zelzal-2 missiles to Hezbollah capable of reaching major cities in Israel.

At the moment, Iran's ballistic missile program forges ahead full-speed. Its arsenal contains short-range (1,000 km), medium, and intermediate range (1,000-5,500 km). Already, it has manufactured and tested the Shahab-3 with an estimated range of 2,500 km, thereby putting Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and US military bases in the Persian Gulf within striking distance. In February 2009, Iran successfully orbited its Omid satellite and a year later test-fired another satellite rocket.³⁴ While western defensive analysts are unclear about how far Iran's missile technology has advanced, nonetheless, western powers fear that Teheran is seeking nuclear weapons and a missile nuclear program to deliver them. Considering that Iran now produces its own missiles, is in the process of manufacturing nuclear weapons, projects a pan-Islamist agenda, and has been a state sponsor of terrorism, the transfer of weapons of mass destruction to its proxy friends is very real. The most likely candidate at the receiving end would probably be Hezbollah. Iran already has smuggling routes to the organization. Indeed, in the 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, Iran replenished Hezbollah's missile losses destroyed by Israel to three times the number it possessed at the beginning of the conflict.³⁵ In 2007, the Turkish PKK terror group derailed an Iranian train in Southern Turkey carrying rocket launchers, mortar shells, and light arms to Syria- most likely for Hezbollah.³⁶ Again in November 2008, Israeli commanders intercepted large quantities of weapons aboard MV Francop, an Antiguan registered vessel. These included 9,000 mortar bombs, 500,000 small rounds of small arms and 2,800 rockets with Farsi language markings.³⁷ Furthermore, in 2009, Cypriot authorities captured a shipment of anti-tank weapons, artillery, and rocket manufacturing materials on a Cypriot ship leased by an Iranian company.³⁸ The latter are some Iranian arms shipments that were successfully intercepted, but countless numbers slip through. If that is the case, could a nuclear

³¹ <http://ezjnearicles.com/?iran-is-dangerous-international-terrorists-under-proxy-with-n...> (accessed March 8, 2010)

³² http://www.mehr.org/iran_terrorism.htm (accessed February 8, 2010)

³³ <http://www.aina.org/news/20100224111603.htm> (accessed March 8, 2010)

³⁴ <http://www.cfr.org/publication/20425/> (accessed December 21, 2009)

³⁵ Steven Emerson and Joel Himelfarb, "Would Iran Provide Nuclear Weapons to Terrorists?"

<http://www.steveemerson.com/6633/iran-nuclear-weapon-to-terrorists> (accessed December 23, 2009)

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

weapon or a radiological dispersion weapon also known as a dirty bomb also get through? This is a very likely possibility- but the most plausible nuclear threat scenario could come from a crude dirty bomb. It is the most easily manageable device for terrorists. The so-called “dirty bomb” would consist of radioactive material wrapped in conventional explosives would spew deadly radioactive particles into the environment.³⁹ In the event that a dirty bomb was detonated in a city, there could be thousands of casualties from the blast and then from the radiation exposure. It would be an ideal tool for terrorists to instill fear into the minds of the targeted general public. Indeed, in 1996 Islamic radicals from the break-away province of Chechnya planted, but did not detonate, such a device in Moscow’s Izmailovo park to demonstrate Russia’s vulnerability. The dirty bomb contained a deadly brew of dynamite and a highly radioactive by-product of nuclear fission- Cesium 137.⁴⁰ A lesson to be learned from this incident is that terrorists can get access to fissile material from poorly guarded nuclear sites that exist in Russia and elsewhere.

Another nuclear threat may come from Al-Qaeda. In 2006, MI5 warned that al-Qaeda was planning to use nuclear weapons against British cities by acquiring the bombs via clandestine means.⁴¹ It is a known fact that al-Qaeda continues to try to acquire nuclear weapons and technology and know-how. Thus, we must pay attention to the hidden connection between the Wahabi al-Qaeda and the Twelver Shiites in Iran. Despite some Sunni-Shia differences both have common enemies in Israel and the West. In fact, after being indicted for the U.S.S. Cole bombings in Africa, bin Laden called for putting aside differences with Shiite Muslim terrorist organizations.⁴² The al-Qaeda- Iranian connection was also mentioned in the 9/11 Communism report. In 2004, it concluded that al-Qaeda operatives have travelled to Iran to receive training, whilst instruction at Hezbollah facilities have included al-Qaeda top military committee members.⁴³ As recently as in November 2008, Yemeni security officials intercepted a letter written by bin Laden’s son Saad thanking Iran for “monetary and infrastructure assistance” in carrying out a double car bombing on the American embassy in Yemen that killed 16.⁴⁴ Hence, considering the Iran- al-Qaeda cooperation, there exists a strong possibility that Teheran could use al-Qaeda as a proxy to unleash its anger against the United States and Israel. After all, Iran’s past record has shown its repeated use of proxies and terrorism to strike at its enemies.

Reducing Iran’s Nuclear Threat: The US Response

International skepticism of Iranian intentions only deepened with the discovery of Iran’s concealment of the partially constructed enrichment facility at Qom, and the London Times story in December 2009 that described Teheran’s planned use of neutron initiator (or trigger for atomic

³⁹ <http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/nuclear.cfm>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_terrorism.

⁴² Steven Emerson and Joel Himelfarb, “Would Iran Provide Nuclear Weapons to Terrorists?” <http://www.steveemerson.com/6633/iran-nuclear-weapon-to-terrorists> (accessed December 23, 2009)

⁴³ Ibid. Also see, Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Countdown to Crisis: The Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran* (New York: Crown Forum, 2005) for more details on Iranian-al-Qaeda Cooperation.

⁴⁴ [http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/december 2009/iran-and-al-qaeda-source-of](http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/december%2009/iran-and-al-qaeda-source-of). (accessed February 8, 2010)

weapon). Furthermore, Iran's decision in February 2010 to boost uranium enrichment levels to 20 percent in defiance of UN resolutions convinced the United States and the international community that Iran is using its rightful nuclear program (under the NPT) to secretly develop nuclear weapons.⁴⁵ Iran's historical quest to acquire nuclear weapons were confirmed by the Pakistani army chief of staff Mirza Aslam Beg. In a May 2006 interview with the Associated Press, Beg detailed 20 years of Iranian approaches to obtain technology for nuclear weapons from Pakistan. It was during the time they asked if they could buy the bomb. There were politely told that they would have to make it themselves- just as Pakistan had.⁴⁶

American officials and international inspectors are sure that Iran has made enormous progress in three technologies required to manufacture a nuclear weapon: enriching uranium to weapons grade; developing a missile program; and designing a warhead that will fit on the missile.⁴⁷

So what course of action should the United States take in confronting the danger that a nuclear armed Iran poses to America and its European and Middle Eastern allies? How might the US deter Iran from supplying nuclear weapons to terrorist organizations? Can nuclear terrorism be prevented? There are crucial questions that will be addressed here.

US policymakers have sought to employ a robust and comprehensive approach to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear capable state. This would involve diplomacy, non-military punitive actions (economic sanctions) and a military strike- if diplomacy and sanctions failed to produce results.

Thus far, the diplomacy- only approach has yielded few results and has failed to slow Iran's nuclear program. The Obama administration has focused on obtaining support from major powers for a UN Security Council Resolution sanctioning Iran. On June 9, 2010, the UN Security Council Resolution 1929 was adopted on expanding UN sanctions against Iran with European, Chinese, and Russian support. The resolution which began a fourth round of sanctions against Iran was adopted by twelve votes. American officials said they would continue to support sanctions until Teheran slowed its nuclear enrichment and was ready to negotiate.

Now that four rounds of UN sanctions are in place since 2006, the goal of a fourth UN Security Council resolution has been constructive and has facilitated additional sanctions by European and other nations.⁴⁸ The new sanctions take aim at the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps which is also a business conglomerate controlling some 500 companies active in a wide range of industries including nuclear power, banking, insurance, and recreation.⁴⁹ It is hoped that by singling out the organizations vast array of companies, banks and other entities- it would drive a wedge between the Iranian population and the Revolutionary Guards who have now become a new "entitled class" in Iran. The resolution would also prohibit foreign banks, shipping

⁴⁵ Scott Peterson, "Why West struggles to rein in Iran's nuclear program,"

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/0428> (accessed May 3, 2010)

⁴⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran_and_weapons_of_mass_destruction (accessed February 26, 2010)

⁴⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/info/iran-nuclear-program/> (accessed February 1, 2010)

⁴⁸ <http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2010/02/21/2010-02> (accessed February 22, 2010)

⁴⁹ <http://www.aina.org/news/20100224111603.htm> (accessed March 8, 2010)

oil, and insurance companies from investing in Iran's energy sector without incurring stiff penalties for sanctions busting. However, in order to impose such sanctions on Iran, Chinese and Russian cooperation was essential. Russia and China are Iran's major trading partners. All a long, the Chinese have insisted on weaker and narrower sanctions against Iran, and giving diplomacy serious consideration. Nevertheless, though sanctions could take a long time to affect change, the important fact according to Defense Secretary Gates is that it, "provides a new legal platform for tougher unilateral measures. That it gives you an international blessing that is worth a lot."⁵⁰

An Iran with nuclear weapons will have serious consequences for the United States, the Middle East, and the rest of the world. Also instantly, the balance of power in the region would most certainly be altered. A nuclear armed Iran under the guidance of its radical clerics would become less risk-averse and more belligerent towards its neighbors and foes.

Oil rich Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikhdoms are aware that were it not for the American military presence in the region, they would be an easy prey for an Iranian takeover. The Saudis are militarily weak and no match for the Iranians. Iran could seize Saudi oil fields within 48 hours, while the rim of the Persian Gulf is 90 percent Shia and therefore would be quite vulnerable to Iranian meddling and occupation.⁵¹

Indeed, the gravity and scope of the Iranian threat could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. In particular, Sunni countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey have announced their plans to begin their own nuclear programs, ostensibly for peaceful purposes but actually aimed at balancing Iran's new strategic power.⁵² In a recent trip to the Middle East, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated that America's response to an Iranian bomb should be a "defense umbrella" throughout the Mideast.⁵³ There are reports, that the US is accelerating the deployment of defensive missiles against possible Iranian attacks in the Persian Gulf.⁵⁴ Thus, offer a robust defense umbrella to protect friends in the region. In addition, to an Iranian military threat, Arab states fear a Chernobyl type disaster, since Iran's nuclear facilities rely on Russian technology. The Bushehr reactor is only 2 miles from six Arab capitals. A nuclear accident would be an ecological tragedy as it would deprive them all of the only source of drinking water from the Persian Gulf.⁵⁵

Though the military option remains on the table if economic sanctions fail, the likelihood of a US attack remains slim given America's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. A military strike against Iran would most probably come in form of an Israeli military attack on Iranian nuclear installations. But the overall consequences of an Israeli attack would be quite risky and

⁵⁰ http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20100415_7623.php (accessed April 16, 2010)

⁵¹ Robert Baer, *op.cit.*, 138.

⁵² Michael Crowley, "The New Republic: The Nuclear Fallout,"

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125933082> (accessed April 14, 2010)

⁵³ <http://www.foxnews.com.com/opinion/2010/02/17/michael-goodwin-hillary-clinton-iran-obama> (accessed February 19, 2010)

⁵⁴ <http://www.iranfocus.com/en/> (accessed February 3, 2010)

⁵⁵ Tariq Khaitous, "Why Arab leaders worry about Iran's nuclear program." <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/why-arab-leaders-worry-about-irans-nucle...> (accessed February 15, 2010)

serious. First, a single raid would not destroy all of Iran's nuclear capacity- given that it possesses covert underground sites spread around the country. Hence, a bombing campaign would have to be widespread and lengthy, and its success would also be guesswork.⁵⁶

Second, an Israeli strike would be viewed throughout the Muslim world as a joint US-Israeli operation and ignite a regional backlash. It would sow the seeds of instability in the region and serve as a powerful recruiting tool for extremist Islamic groups. Furthermore, an outraged Iran could unleash its arsenal in Iraq and support Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, shoot missiles into Saudi and Kuwaiti oilfields and attack American interests in the Persian Gulf. Most importantly, it could block the Strait of Hormuz through which a significant amount of oil flows to the west.

Finally, Iran would most certainly respond to an Israeli attack with the Shahab-3 missile whose range covers all of Israel. Although the Israeli Arrow II anti- ballistic missile has the capability to intercept several incoming missiles, the rocket defense system will not prove effective against thousands of rockets launched in their direction. Teheran knows that Israel is a "one-bomb" country, and only one Iranian nuclear- tipped missile needs to penetrate the Arrow anti- missile defenses to devastate the state.⁵⁷ It would most certainly involve its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas that maintain large quantities of surface-to-surface missiles capable of reaching Israel.

Despite the three-tier approach of diplomacy, sanctions and possible military action, preventing Iran's quest to acquire nuclear weapons will not be easy-and stopping Teheran's path to the bomb remains a vital component of the fight to prevent nuclear terrorism.⁵⁸

Hence, what necessary measures should the United States pursue in order to prevent Iran from sharing its weapons of mass destruction with its proxy terrorist organization?

Nuclear weapons are a terrorist's dream weapon since they kill indiscriminately and terrorize large segments of the population. Thus far, the world has been extremely fortunate as it has been able to postpone the explosive mix of a terrorist with nuclear weapons.⁵⁹ But we may not be lucky for too long. There is growing concern that the spread of nuclear weapons throughout the world increases the likelihood of nuclear terrorism.

The only way this threat can be successfully deterred is if all the countries around the world that deal the radioactive materials take comprehensive steps to control and monitor all fissile material. In an effort to accomplish this task, the Obama administration hosted a two-day summit in April 2010 of 47 nations to press for better safeguards and thus keep nuclear material from falling into terrorist hands. The president set a goal of ensuring all nuclear material worldwide are secured from theft or diversion within four years. This new nuclear strategy was to move the United States focus from the Cold War threats to the new danger- the spread of atomic weapons

⁵⁶ <http://middleeast.about.com/od/iran/f/iran-israel-nukes.htm> (accessed February 15, 2010)

⁵⁷ Reuven Pedatzur, "Here's how Israel would destroy Iran's nuclear program."

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1085619.html> (accessed May 18, 2009)

⁵⁸ Michael Crowley, "The New Republic: The Nuclear Fallout,"

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125933082> (accessed April 14, 2010)

⁵⁹ Yvr Man, "Iran and nuclear terrorism of the G7," <http://www.discoveryvancouver.com/forum/iran-and-nuclear-terrorism-of-the-g7-t368596.h..> (accessed February 24, 2010)

to rogue states and terrorists.⁶⁰ The new nuclear policy also aimed to demonstrate that the Obama administration was serious about nuclear disarmament and reducing its own arsenal- and gathering international support for stricter safeguards against nuclear proliferation- in an attempt to further isolate Iran diplomatically.⁶¹ However, on the question of Iran's nuclear program, the American president acknowledged that tough choices lay ahead on stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons.⁶² On the subject of preventing Iran from sharing its weapons of mass destruction with its proxies, Daniel Byman suggests the following measures.

First, America must maintain pressure on the transfer of weapons. Since 9/11 the issue has received considerable importance. As a result, countries supporting terrorism recognize that a transfer of WMDs would cross a US "red line"- and use more caution.⁶³

Second, in addition to diplomatic pressure, efforts must be made to gather good intelligence on the ground particularly on terrorists dealing with unconventional weapons. Intelligence gathering in the Middle East is America's "weakest link" mainly because of a shortage of Farsi, Arabic, or Pushto speakers.⁶⁴

Third, priority should be given to neutralizing Iran's ties to al-Qaeda. There is a likelihood that Iran could pass on WMDs to al-Qaeda which does not recognize America's "red lines". Washington should let Teheran know that it will not tolerate the continued harboring of senior al-Qaeda members, and will hold Iran responsible for any attacks on the US and its allies.⁶⁵

Fourth, Washington should advocate a bold international approach in dealing with states that harbor terrorists or sponsor terrorism. Considering that the nature of warfare has changed since the rise of global terrorism, there should be stringent international measures in place to deal rapidly with states that sponsor terrorism. Essentially, states like Iran that use proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas should be directly held responsible for the actions of its proxies. Counterterrorism should remain a top priority with respect to Iran.⁶⁶

Finally, should Iran succeed in building a nuclear weapon, it is likely to keep its success a secret. In recent decades, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea have all in become nuclear states in secret. Iran will follow the secrecy path too. Unfortunately, if such a scenario were to unfold, the threat of deterrence by the US and its allies will send a powerful signal to Teheran that they will have to pay a heavy price if they ever contemplated launching a nuclear strike directly on through proxies.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ http://www.philly.com/inquirer/world_us/90592439.html (accessed April 12, 2010)

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Victor Kotsev, "Israel evades 'ambush' at nuclear summit,"

http://atimes.com/atimes/middle_east/2D15AK04.html (accessed April 14, 2010)

⁶³ Daniel Byman, op.cit. 169-181

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Reuven Pedatzur, "Here's how Israel would destroy Iran's nuclear program."

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1085619.html> (accessed May 18, 2009)

Conclusions

It is evident that Iran continues to enrich uranium, prevent the IAEA inspectors from inspecting suspect nuclear sites, and refuses to respond to questions about research into weapons designs. It is estimated by western analysts that Iran will have a nuclear weapon within a year or two.

At the same time, Iran has been a sponsor of terrorism for nearly three decades and a threat to international peace and security. Over the years, it has used proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other groups to strike at the US and its allies worldwide. Teheran views every American initiative in the Middle East as an assault on Iran's regional interests. Hence, support for terrorism provides Iran with a tool to fight the US and in particular Israel, influence Iraq's future and way to challenge the United States in the Middle East. Once Iran acquires nuclear weapons capability it is just a matter of time before it could unleash its nuclear arsenal through a proxy. One must not forget that Iran tries to destroy the "Great Satan" from afar- through proxies, rather than direct confrontation. Not too long ago, President Ahmedinejad threatened to step up support for regional extremists in response to actions against its nuclear program. There is concern that access to WMDs is easier than it used to be and the probability of a threat by terrorists deploying one seems credible. Given Iran's history of sponsoring state terrorism, the international community is attempting to meet the challenge at all levels- diplomatic, economic, and if necessary militarily- before it becomes too late.

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