

As published in *Defense News*, January 24, 2005.

# The Looming Crisis

## Iran's Nuclear Ambition Offers No Easy Solution

By KEITH PAYNE

A global dispute is brewing that could lead to a grave international crisis in short order. Its basic features are easy to understand, what to do about it is not.

The Islamic Republic of Iran appears to be well down the road toward acquiring a nuclear-weapon capability. Many countries, including the United States, do not want Iran — a notorious sponsor of terrorism — to have nuclear weapons. But there is no obvious compromise to satisfy both Iran, which is highly motivated to become a nuclear-armed state, and the United States, which is highly motivated to the contrary.

Nuclear-power status would be an enormous feather in the cap of Iran's clerical leadership, helping to solidify its repressive domestic rule over a younger generation that yearns for greater freedom. A nuclear-weapon capability also would help to fulfill the leadership's ambition to make Iran the Middle East's pre-eminent power, with a foreign policy essentially hostile to any U.S. presence and to Israel's existence.

Finally, Iran's leaders believe a nuclear capability would prevent serious U.S. opposition to their domestic or foreign policy agenda. The United States, they believe, would be unwilling to confront a nuclear-armed Iran; the potential cost would be too high.

For the Islamic leadership, which sees the long history of Iran and Persia as one of unrelenting victimization at the hands of the West, and the United States in particular, the issue also carries tremendous cultural, religious and historical baggage. For a leadership that has adopted hostility to the United States as a basic political principle, conceding on an issue involving high technology, cultural pride, national security and regime security is a nonstarter, other than as a short-term, tactical move to secure an immediate advantage without precluding the nuclear option.

The United States and other Western powers are highly motivated in the opposite direction. A nuclear Iran would put the world's most lethal weapons in the hands of a brutal leadership committed to terrorism and enabled by oil wealth. It also would vividly demonstrate the weakness of the established nuclear nonproliferation regime, while being a catalyst to further regional proliferation as Iran's moderate neighbors seek some protective counterweight.

The options for Iran's neighbors are not attractive. Acquire their own weapons of mass destruction? Lean on the U.S. nuclear deterrent? Take comfort in a U.N. collective security guarantee?

This scenario reveals the classic prelude to a serious international crisis — two sides, highly motivated in contrary directions, with little margin for conciliation, each seeing the other's position as posing a serious security challenge.

There are serious potential costs associated with Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, and with all realistic options to move Iran away from the nuclear path. U.N. appeals to international norms and carrots won't work because the potential value of possessing a nuclear threat almost certainly is seen as greater than any proffered benefits.

Coercive U.S. threats to induce Iranian concession would likely reinforce the Iranian leadership's desire for a nuclear deterrent.

The actual use of force, such as air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, likely would solidify nationalist sentiment behind the current odious leadership and not eliminate a program that would re-emerge with even greater zeal.

President Bush faces what the late, great deterrence theorist, Herman Kahn, said often is the case when leaders confront a crisis: They must choose among several miserable alternatives; the goal becomes finding the least miserable.

The United States could regret the consequences of seeking to block Iran's nuclear ambition, but could realize greater regrets in allowing Iran to acquire a nuclear capability.

No one knows whether the deterrence policies that kept the Soviet Union at bay during the Cold War could function with any reliability against a future, nuclear-armed Iran. The prospects for deterrence functioning predictably now are weaker than they were during the Cold War.

There are serious force structure implications of this looming crisis for the United States, its friends and allies. While it is difficult to focus narrowly, it is worth noting that Iran essentially has two modes of projecting force — terrorism and by its expanding missile arsenal.

Whether the U.S. president decides to pursue coercive diplomacy, use force or concludes that learning how to live with a nuclear-armed Iran is the "least miserable" option, the United States will need to employ a spectrum of anti-terrorism measures and layered missile defenses to shut down Iranian force-projection options.

The United States must reduce its vulnerability, whether it seeks to bolster its negotiating credibility, protect the homeland, friends and allies in the event of conflict, or extend deterrence to assure allies and friends. All roads lead to these force structure imperatives.

Unfortunately, the U.S. president cannot put this decision on pause or try out multiple possible solutions to discover which entails the fewest regrets. Given the nuclear path Iran is following, a decision long deferred is likely to be a decision made. 

**Keith Payne** is president of the National Institute for Public Policy, Fairfax, Va. He was U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for forces policy, 2002-'03