



ANALYSIS

U.S.-IRAN CONFRONTATION AFTER THE HAMAS-ISRAEL WAR: PROXY WARS, NUCLEAR STRATEGY, AND ESCHATOLOGY

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Introduction

The grand strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) as stated in its foundational documents and articulated by its Supreme Leaders Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (r. 1979-1989) and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (1989-present) has included the goals of expulsion of the United States from the Middle East and elimination of Israel. The accompanying military doctrine includes proxy forces, missiles, drones, and nuclear weapons.¹

The consequences of the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, have drastically changed the contours and trajectory of the U.S.-Iran confrontation. The balance of forces in the Middle East in January 2025 is not what it was in October 2023. The IRI's proxies and allies have been either destroyed or substantially weakened. Israel (with assistance from the United States) was able to intercept virtually all of IRI's missiles and drones when Iran launched two massive attacks. Moreover, Israel carried out highly successful retaliation (against the advice and wishes of the Biden Administration), that clearly established Israel's escalation dominance, because of which the IRI so far refrained from a third response. The IRI has not invested in modernizing its armed forces (tanks, jetfighters), but the IRGC continues to possess substantial capabilities. However, the only major element left is its nuclear weapons program. In this article I analyze the consequences of the changes in the balance of forces in the region and the various options open for the United States.

International Context

President Joe Biden's Middle East strategy collapsed on October 7, 2023. Biden's Middle East strategy was based on two main policies: first, appeasement of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) through lax enforcement of sanctions and secret verbal agreements with the expectation that such policies would cause Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to stop IRI proxy attacks on American forces in the region and to freeze Iran's nuclear weapons program.² Second, his

¹ Masoud Kazemzadeh, "The Grand Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," (forthcoming).

² Initially, the Biden Administration tried to coax Ayatollah Khamenei to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran nuclear deal), that was concluded by the Obama Administration in July 2015, which the Trump Administration left in May 2018. The Biden Administration then released about \$16 billion of Iran's frozen funds in South Korea and Iraq, stopped strict enforcement of sanctions, and ignored the large-scale purchase of Iranian oil by Chinese firms. Then the IRI took a few minor steps in diluting its highly enriched uranium. It is widely believed that these are the results of secret unwritten agreements between the Biden administration and Khamenei. See "Iran Marginally Reduces Its Highly



strategy sought the expansion of the Abraham Accords and establishment of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel (while ignoring the Palestinians).³

Between October 17, 2023, and January 27, 2024, the IRI's proxies in Iraq attacked U. S. forces in Iraq and Syria over 160 times. ⁴ Although these proxies had attacked American forces before October 7, 2023, these attacks increased greatly after October 7. The Biden Administration's response was a few minor retaliations against the IRI's proxies and virtually nothing done to the IRI itself. The result has been increased attacks with greater lethality by the IRI and its proxies. The conflicts between the IRI's proxies and the United States reached a turning point on January 28, 2024, when the IRI's Iraqi proxy Kataib Hezbollah attacked an American military base in Jordan and killed three and injured about 40 military personnel.⁵ The IRI's Yemeni proxy, the Houthis' Ansarullah, began successfully attacking shipping in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait and sinking several ships in support of Hamas.⁶ The IRI's most powerful proxy is Lebanon's Hezbollah, which began attacking Israel on October 8, 2023.⁷

A major inflection point occurred on April 1, 2024, when Israel bombed the IRI's consulate in Damascus killing seven members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) including two generals. Among those killed was IRGC Brigadier Gen. Mohammad Ali Zahedi, who was responsible for the IRGC-QF operations in Lebanon and Syria.⁸ The IRI retaliated on April 13-14, 2024, with a massive drone and missile attack on Israel. According to various sources, the IRI used about 146 drones, 110-120 ballistic

Enriched Uranium Stocks," *Iran International*, February 26, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402264079>.

³ This was the continuation of the Trump Administration policy with the same name "Abraham Accords." President Trump arguably pursued the most pro-Israel policy of any American administration. For example, President Trump moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, ordered the closure of the Palestinian Authority office in Washington, D.C., and stopped U.S. financial assistance for Palestinians. See Karen DeYoung and Loveday Morris, "Trump administration orders closure of PLO office in Washington," *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2018, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-orders-closure-of-plo-office-in-washington/2018/09/10/7410fe6c-b50c-11e8-a2c5-3187f427e253_story.html.

⁴ United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer, "Timeline of Proxy Attacks: Iraq, Syria and Jordan," *USIP.org*, July 26, 2024, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/feb/01/timeline-proxy-attacks-iraq-syria-and-jordan>.

⁵ Brad Dress, "US readies retaliatory strikes after Iranian proxy attack," *The Hill*, January 30, 2024, available at <https://thehill.com/newsletters/defense-national-security/4438511-us-readies-retaliatory-strikes-after-iranian-proxy-attack/>.

⁶ "Houthi Attacks Continue As West Ramps Up Pressure," *Iran International*, February 17, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402170492>.

⁷ Masoud Kazemzadeh and Penny L. Watson, "Israel Hezbollah War and the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2024), pp. 55-64.

⁸ "Suspected Israeli Strikes Killed 18 IRGC Commanders, Advisers Since October 7," *Iran International*, April 4, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202404041741>. Israeli sources indicate that in addition to Syria and Lebanon, Zahedi also was responsible for the Palestinian sphere. Emanuel Fabian, "Iran's top commander in Syria killed in airstrike; Tehran blames Israel, vows revenge," *The Times of Israel*, April 1, 2024, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-iranian-irgc-commander-said-killed-in-alleged-israeli-strike-on-damascus/>.

missiles and 30-36 cruise missiles.⁹ All drones and cruise missiles were apparently intercepted by the IDF, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ Between five and seven ballistic missiles hit targets inside Israel: two to four missiles hit the Nevatim air force base, inflicting minor damages to the taxiway and minor damages to the wall of a hangar under construction; one missile fell into the Dead Sea; one hit an unpopulated area in the Golan Heights; and one hit an unpopulated area close to an air base in a desert in south Israel.¹¹

From October 2023 to the last days of his administration, President Biden's policy was to prevent the spread of the conflict and put an end to the conflict as soon as possible while supplying Israel with assistance and munitions as well as engaging in limited kinetic actions. For example, the Biden Administration publicly opposed Israel incursion into parts of Gaza and an all-out assault on Hezbollah. Israel, however, successfully crushed Hezbollah and greatly weakened Hamas. Israel has had spectacular success in hitting the IRI's air defenses and other sensitive nuclear sites. The overthrow of Bashar al Assad's regime in Syria was a huge strategic defeat for the IRI. Since 2012, Assad's regime was kept in power by massive intervention by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah on the ground. Israel's attacks on the IRGC in Syria over the past several years had greatly weakened the IRGC. Between October 1 and November 26, 2024, Israel crushed Hezbollah's military power and killed its top leader as well as his presumed successor. On December 8, 2024, Assad's regime collapsed.

The Trump Administration faces a highly complex situation containing both grave dangers and great opportunities.

U.S. Options

Since Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, kinetic conflicts erupted on several fronts. On one front, there are conflicts between Israel and the IRI's proxies. On a second front, there are conflicts between Israel and the IRI itself. On a third front, there are conflicts between the United States and the IRI's proxies. On a fourth front, there are conflicts between the United States and the IRI. The conflicts between the United States and Iran may escalate out of control because Iran is very close to completing its nuclear weapons program and it may choose to go for a breakout.

⁹ "Government's Broadcasting Used Israeli and American Sources for Data on Drones and Missiles," *Iran International*, April 16, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/202404160108>; and, Navid Hamzavi, "Which Of Iran's Missiles Made It Through Israel's Air Defense?," *Iran International*, April 18, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202404185258>.

¹⁰ Ken Klippenstein and Daniel Boguslaw, "U.S., Not Israel, Shut Down Most Iran Drones and Missiles," *The Intercept*, April 15, 2024, available at <https://theintercept.com/2024/04/15/iran-attack-israel-drones-missiles/>.

¹¹ Jon Gambrell, "Satellite image analyzed by AP shows damage after Iranian attack on Israeli desert air base," *Associated Press*, April 20, 2024, available at <https://apnews.com/article/iran-attack-nevatim-base-israel-satellite-photo-c8bea9f43967457bd49b60a6fe1dcd42>; and, Júlia Ledur, Tim Meko, and Samuel Granados, "Mapping the wide-scale Iranian drone and missile attacks," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/14/mapping-wide-scale-iranian-drone-missile-attacks/>.

The United States has been wrestling with policy options towards the IRI and their consequences. Scholars, government officials, and think-tank fellows articulate alternative policy options by analyzing various policies, their potential political outcomes, and consequences.¹² This article analyzes six policy options, their political outcomes, and consequences: (1) do nothing; (2) surgical strikes on proxies outside Iran; (3) major surgical strikes inside Iran; (4) regime change; (5) acquiesce to a nuclear IRI; and, (6) all-out war.

Option 1: Do Nothing

The policy of doing nothing might work with cautious foes. If the opponent is highly bellicose, however, only superior force has a good chance of deterring it. For enemies who are extremely ideological, violent, and totalitarian, a lack of response is often interpreted as weakness of capability or will. Thus, doing nothing is an invitation to aggression. The fundamentalist regime ruling Iran is a totalitarian regime, which is an archaic form of fascism with an extremely jingoistic foreign policy, and therefore is likely to respond to U.S. restraint with continued or expanded aggression.¹³

Option 2: Surgical Strikes on Proxies Outside Iran

This option includes surgical strikes on the IRI's proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This option seeks to avoid spreading the conflict and beginning a war with the IRI on the one hand, yet it is significant to inflict enough pain to deter further attacks by the IRI's proxies on the other hand.

President Biden pursued this policy by ordering the bombings of seven facilities in Iraq and Syria on February 1, 2024.¹⁴ Administration officials, however, used rhetoric that was confusing to many. On the one hand, the administration promised to punish those responsible for the death of the American troops and on the other hand the administration's mantras of "we are not seeking a war or conflict with Iran" and "the strikes would not include anything inside Iran" were signaling to Khamenei that these attacks were not meant as the beginning of war with the IRI.¹⁵

¹² Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (September 1969), pp. 689-718; and Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd edition (New York: Longman, 1999).

¹³ Kazemzadeh, *Mass Protests in Iran: From Resistance to Overthrow*, op. cit.

¹⁴ "US Launches Retaliatory Attacks On Iran-Linked Targets In Syria, Iraq," *Iran International*, February 2, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402020336>.

¹⁵ "On-the-Record Press Call on U.S. Military Operations in the Middle East," *The White House*, February 2, 2024, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2024/02/02/on-the-record-press-call-on-u-s-military-operations-in-the-middle-east/>; Daniel Byman, "Biden Walks a Fine Line With Airstrikes on Iran-Backed Militants: The U.S. hit more than 85 targets in Iraq and Syria—but not Iran itself," *Foreign Policy*, February 2, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/02/us-strikes-iraq-syria-iran-biden-response/>; and Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. Conducts Retaliatory Strikes Against Iranian Proxies as War Deepens," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/02/us/politics/us-strikes-iranian-proxies.html>.

President Biden's intention was to show American military might and the will to use it to retaliate against those who killed Americans. Biden used the B-1B Lancer bomber, perhaps because of its reputation as one of the most fearsome tools in American arsenal. However, the results were so underwhelming that many Iranian analysts described the operations by the Persian proverb "*fil moosh zaid*" [elephant gave birth to a mouse].¹⁶

Many Republicans in the United States publicly criticized former President Biden's response as too weak and unlikely to deter Khamenei from further attacks on American forces in the region. Senator Tom Cotton's remarks are typical of such views: "Iran's proxies have attacked Americans in Iraq and Syria over 170 times. We have responded 8 times. Iran and its terror groups know President Joe Biden and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin won't stand up to them."¹⁷

Top current and former American military officials responsible for the Middle East have publicly said that the Biden policy has failed to deter the IRI and its proxies.¹⁸ Current CENTCOM Commander Gen. Michael Kurilla told the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 7, 2024, "Iran is not paying a cost."¹⁹ When asked by Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan why he has not attacked the IRI's spy ships in the Red Sea (that provide intelligence to the Houthis to target vessels passing through the Red Sea), Gen. Kurilla said that he is not authorized by the President to do so.²⁰

Option 3: Major Surgical Strikes Inside Iran

This option includes attacking some IRGC or IRGC-QF facilities inside Iran. If President Donald Trump were to drastically escalate by bombing major facilities and military compounds inside Iran, then the IRI has to either do nothing or to respond.

Iran's Nuclear Weapons Option

According to top U.S. officials, Iran became a nuclear threshold state by 2023.²¹ The strategic objective of the IRI was not to be a threshold state; rather, the fundamentalist regime's

¹⁶ "Iranian Reactions Portray US Strikes As Inconsequential," *Iran International*, February 3, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402031960>.

¹⁷ "Iran And Proxies Know US Won't Stand Up To Them - Sen. Cotton," *Iran International*, March 8, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403080469>.

¹⁸ "Senior US General: 'Iran Not Paying A Cost,' Remains 'Undeterred'," *Iran International*, March 8, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403089767>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The U.S. officials include Gen. Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl. See Jim Garamone, "Milley Tells House Panel Joint Force Is at 'Inflection Point'," *Defense.gov*, March 23, 2023, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3339444/milley-tells-house-panel-joint-force-is-at-inflection-point/#:~:text=%22The%20United%20States%20remains%20committed,develop%20an%20actual%20nuclear%20weapon.%22;Iran%20can%20make%20fissile%20material%20for%20a%20bomb%20in%20about%2012%20days%20-%20U.S.%20official,%20Reuters,%20February%2028,%202023>, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-can-make-fissile-material-bomb-in-about-12-days-us->

objective was to possess functioning nuclear weapons. The IRI's nuclear weapons program began in 1986 during the war with Saddam Hussein.²² The regime engaged in secret negotiations with Pakistan to buy three nuclear warheads. Top IRGC admiral, Ali Shamkhani, flew to Pakistan in order to physically obtain the nuclear warheads and bring them back to Iran. Rather than giving him the warheads, Pakistani officials referred him to Abdul Qader Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. In exchange for \$10 billion dollars, Khan gave the IRI nuclear weapons designs, nuclear centrifuge designs, centrifuge parts, a roadmap to construct nuclear weapons, and contacts to develop nuclear weapons.²³ Pakistan officially became a nuclear weapons state in May 1998, but had the capability much earlier.

The United States intelligence community underestimated the seriousness and extent of the IRI's clandestine nuclear weapons program until 1991-1992 when Dr. Masoud Nezami Naraghi, a top official in the IRI's nuclear program, defected to the United States. Naraghi gave the CIA information about the clandestine nuclear weapons program, including the materials that A. Q. Khan had provided to the regime.²⁴ Naraghi had been working on the IRI's clandestine nuclear program at least since 1985. Naraghi had a Ph.D. in physics from Case Western Reserve University in Ohio and was a professor at Sharif University of Technology. Naraghi stored intelligence on the IRI's clandestine nuclear program on his laptop, which his wife took to the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul. After his defection, the U.S. intelligence community became aware of the seriousness and extent of the IRI's clandestine nuclear weapons program.²⁵

The fundamentalist regime has spent hundreds of billions of dollars and endured sanctions in order to acquire nuclear weapons. Nuclear latency might be an optimal state for many countries such as Japan, Germany, or even South Korea, because they have had the protection of the American nuclear umbrella and extended deterrence without the costs of acquiring a nuclear arsenal. For the fundamentalist regime, however, the nuclear threshold status has brought enormous costs and very little benefits. Because of the fundamentalist regime's highly aggressive foreign policy towards the United States, Israel, moderate Arab regimes, its use of terrorist proxies, and its Shia fundamentalist ideology, other states are extremely worried about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. Other states, therefore, have

official-2023-02-28/; and Andrea Stricker, "Top General Suggests Administration Would Tolerate Iran Having Nuclear Weapons," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 24, 2023, available at <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/03/24/administration-would-tolerate-iran-nuclear-weapons/>.

²² R. Jeffrey Smith and Joby Warrick, "Pakistani Scientist Khan Describes Iranian Efforts to buy Nuclear Bomb," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2010, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/13/AR2010031302258.html>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Oppenheimer Iran' va Jassosi Bename 'Dolfin'" ["Oppenheimer of Iran" and a Spy Named "Dolphine"], *Radio Farda*, June 25, 2010, available at https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f3_nuclear_Iran_spygame/2082636.html; "Masool Barnameh Carterfuge Sazeman Energy Atomi Iran Dr. Masoud Naraghi Bood" [Dr. Masoud Naraghi Was the Head of Centrifuge Program at the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran], *Niloblog*, July 14, 2020, available at <https://msalahshorannaraghg.niloblog.com/p/606>.

²⁵ Ibid. Naraghi passed away in the United States in 2020.

imposed harsh sanctions on the IRI for its nuclear activities as well as its support for terrorism. Moreover, being a threshold state has made others and the IAEA extremely concerned about the IRI and has placed it under great surveillance. In addition, the regime regularly endures sabotage of its nuclear facilities and assassinations of its nuclear scientists.²⁶

The United States or Israel could in theory attack the fundamentalist regime because it does not possess nuclear weapons. In other words, possession of nuclear weapons might provide regime security to Iran, but being a threshold state does not. Indeed, being a threshold state is extremely dangerous because the United States or Israel may believe they must act to end Iran's nuclear potential before it becomes a reality. Stated otherwise, Israel and the United States have incentives to attack the IRI's nuclear facilities before Iran completes its weapons. Once the IRI crosses the line and completes its nuclear weapons then the risks of war may dramatically increase because if the IRI retains even one nuclear weapon and the ability to launch it, the costs of war could be enormous – both in people and infrastructure. Therefore, to remain a nuclear threshold state is a very perilous for the IRI.

It is highly advantageous for the IRI to attempt a nuclear breakout if it could do so successfully. Surgical strikes inside Iran by the United States might provide the fundamentalist regime the justification to opt for a breakout. The IRI could retaliate by expelling the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. According to a report by the Institute for Science and International Security, one of the most reliable sources on nuclear proliferation, Iran could have weapons-grade uranium for one nuclear bomb in about one week and six nuclear bombs in about one month.²⁷ Since at least 2003, Iran has possessed the knowledge of how to build nuclear bombs, with only a few minor tasks remaining. The efforts to conduct research and obtain materials to build nuclear weapons have not remained frozen since 2003.²⁸

On January 31, 2018, the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad broke into a warehouse in Turghoozabad on the outskirts of Tehran and seized substantial amounts of documents on the IRI's nuclear weapons program.²⁹ These documents show that the IRI has continued its nuclear weapons programs to the present day, lied to the IAEA, and has not revealed many of its nuclear sites and nuclear materials.³⁰ The post-AMAD programs have been titled

²⁶ Masoud Kazemi, "How A Secret Atomic Workshop In Iran Went Up In Flames," *Iran International*, March 2024, available at https://content.iranintl.com/how-a-secret-atomic-workshop-in-iran-went-up-in-flames/index.html?_gl=1*1dlmbvf*_ga*MTk3ODY0MTM4NS4xNzA5MjExMzUw#section-First-page-LkXxB5ulYR.

²⁷ David Albright, "How Quickly could Iran make Nuclear Weapons Today?" *Institute for Science and International Security*, January 8, 2024, available at <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/how-quickly-could-iran-make-nuclear-weapons-today>.

²⁸ Masoud Kazemzadeh, "The Sources of the Middle East's Crises and American Grand Strategy," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2018), pp. 56-72.

²⁹ David E. Sanger and Ronen Bergman, "How Israel, in Dark of Night, Torched Its Way to Iran's Nuclear Secrets," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/us/politics/iran-israel-mossad-nuclear.html>.

³⁰ Aaron Arnold, et al., *The Iran Nuclear Archive* (Belfer Center, Harvard University, April 2019), available at https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/The%20Iran%20Nuclear%20Archive_0.pdf; and David Albright et. al., *Highlights of Iran's Perilous Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, D.C.: ISIS, 2021), available at

SPAND and Project 110.³¹ These programs apparently continue to attempt to develop nuclear weapons under the direction of IRGC Gen. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. In the seized documents, Fakhrizadeh says that the objective was to develop five nuclear warheads by 2003.³²

According to a report by the Institute for Science and International Security, the combination of the Israel-Hamas war, the IRI's expanded use of hostile rhetoric, the major escalation in violence between the IRI's proxies and the United States, decreased IAEA monitoring, and the continued advancement of the IRI's nuclear program, there is a very high likelihood of breakout.³³

Top IRI officials have stated that they have all the necessary components and technology for assembling nuclear weapons.³⁴ For example, Ali Akbar Salehi admitted that the IRI has developed all the components for assembling a nuclear bomb. Salehi is one of the fathers of the IRI's nuclear weapons program: and was the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (2009-2010 and 2013-2021), foreign minister (2010-2013) and the IRI's representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (1998-2003). The regime's television reporter asked Salehi whether the IRI has the ability to assemble nuclear weapons, and he responded: "We have [crossed] all the thresholds of nuclear science and technology. Here's an example: Imagine what a car needs; it needs a chassis, an engine, a steering wheel, a gearbox. You're asking if we've made the gearbox, I say yes. Have we made the engine? Yes, but each one serves its own purpose."³⁵

Kamal Kharrazi was Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1997 and 2005. He has since been Senior Adviser on Foreign Policy to Khamenei, which is an official position at the Office of the Supreme Leader. He is also the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, which provides Khamenei with confidential policy recommendations on grand strategy. In May 2024, in an interview with al Jazeera, Kharrazi said:

If they [Israelis] dare to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, our level of deterrence will change. We have experienced deterrence at the conventional level so far. If they

https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Highlights_of_Irans_Perilous_Pursuit_of_Nuclear_Weapons_August_25%2C_2021.pdf.

³¹ AMAD and SPAND are the acronyms in Persian for particular secret nuclear weapons programs. "Site Hastei Marivan Dar Abadeh" [The Marivan Nuclear Site at Abadeh], June 8, 2022, *Iran International*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nV4qTWnGhU>.

³² "Israel has tape of slain Iran nuke chief talking about building five warheads," *Times of Israel*, December 4, 2020, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-has-tape-of-slain-iran-nuke-chief-talking-about-building-five-warheads/>.

³³ Institute for Science and International Security, *The Iran Threat Geiger Counter: Reaching Extreme Danger* (Washington, D.C.: ISIS, February 5, 2024), available at <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/the-iran-threat-geiger-counter-reaching-extreme-danger>.

³⁴ "Iran Signals It Is Closer To Building Nuclear Weapons," *Iran International*, February 12, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402123916>.

³⁵ Ibid. The video of the television interview is available at MEMRI, "Former Iranian Nuclear Chief: Iran Has Crossed All Thresholds Necessary for Producing a Nuclear Bomb," *YouTube*, February 14, 2024, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXeJ5kcM9Uo>.

intend to strike Iran's nuclear capabilities, naturally, it could lead to a change in Iran's nuclear doctrine.

Two years ago, in an interview with Al Jazeera, I announced that Iran has the capacity to produce a nuclear bomb. Today we still have that capacity, but we have not decided to produce a nuclear bomb. But if Iran's existence is threatened, we are forced to change our nuclear doctrine. Recently, military officials also announced that if Israel intends to attack the nuclear facilities, it is possible and conceivable to revise Iran's nuclear doctrine and policies and deviate from the previous declaration considerations.³⁶

The major reasons the IRI has not advanced to a breakout posture appears to be the possibility of detection and military strikes by the United States and or Israel. Major escalation by the United States would provide the IRI the opportunity and incentive to order a breakout and the completion of nuclear weapons. Military conflicts in the region would increase the price of oil and potentially inflict casualties on Americans.

The fundamentalist regime feels extremely vulnerable after the huge changes in the balance of forces in the region. The Trump Administration includes many officials who strongly oppose appeasement of the IRI. A major option left for the IRI to prevent a forceful regime change is possession of nuclear weapons, which explains the numerous public calls by top officials about the changing of the IRI's nuclear doctrine.

Option 4: Regime Change

There is only one policy that could guarantee an end to the IRI's nuclear weapons program and its export of violence and war in the region: regime change before the fundamentalist regime completes its nuclear weapons program. This strategy could be accomplished by decapitation strikes (attacking leadership, command, control, and communication apparatuses) which include Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, top IRGC leaders, as well as bombing the IRGC bases inside Iran.³⁷ No American boots on the ground would be required. The fundamentalist regime is extremely weak and unpopular. According to a reliable opinion poll of Iranians, about 75% oppose the regime and only 16% support the regime.³⁸ In all likelihood, the regime would be overthrown by the Iranian people who have been oppressed and brutalized by it. The only thing that has kept the regime in power has been the ability of its coercive apparatuses to violently suppress and subjugate the people. The

³⁶ "Kharazi: We have the capacity to produce bombs, but we don't have the decision. If the existence of Iran is threatened, we will have to change our nuclear doctrine," *Rouydad 24*, May 9, 2024, available at <https://www.rouydad24.ir/fa/news/369328>; and "Iran to Change Nuclear Doctrine if Sites Attacked, Says Official," *Iran International*, May 9, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202405090972>.

³⁷ Masoud Kazemzadeh, "Foreign Policy Decision Making in Iran and the Nuclear Program," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2017), pp. 198-214.

³⁸ Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran, "Iranians' Attitudes toward the 2024 Elections," *GAMAAN*, February 16, 2024, available at <https://gamaan.org/2024/02/16/iranians-attitudes-toward-the-2024-elections/>.

substantial weakening of the IRGC would enable and empower the Iranian people themselves to overthrow the regime and determine their own future.

Option 5: Acquiesce to a Nuclear IRI

One may argue that the United States should acquiesce to the IRI obtaining nuclear weapons. The option rests on a number of assumptions. One, the fundamentalist rulers of Iran make rational cost benefit calculations. However, the IRI's goals of eliminating Israel and expelling the United States from the Middle East are ideological and not consistent with the goals of a "rational actor"—at least as the West is accustomed to defining the term. Two, Mutual Assured Destruction would work and the IRI would not engage in nuclear war with either Israel or the United States. As will be discussed later, however, IRI officials have expressed policies contrary to the principles of MAD. Three, neither Israel nor the United States has the capability to destroy the IRI's nuclear facilities. If this assumption is true, then Israel or the United States have the only option of regime change if they do not want to acquiesce to a nuclear IRI. Four, the United States lacks the military capability to overthrow the fundamentalist regime. If this assumption is true, then the United States must acquiesce to a nuclear-armed Iran. If this assumption is false, the United States has the option of regime change in Iran.

Option 6: All-Out War

The worst-case-scenario is for the IRI to complete its nuclear weapons program without detection. What would the United States do if the IRI sent the IRGC to Syria or Lebanon to overthrow their governments and place its proxies in power there? What would the United States do if the IRI sent the IRGC to take over Kuwait? What would the United States do if the IRI dropped nuclear bomb on the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia? In all likelihood, the end result might be an all-out war between the United States and Iran. The ideology, the grand strategy, the 46-year history of the IRI do not show consistency with the principles undergirding MAD and their aggression could easily spiral into general war in the Middle East.

Iran's Nuclear Strategy

The fundamentalist regime ruling Iran is a regime comprised of apocalyptic religious fanatics with an ideology and a history of suicidal martyrdom bent on exporting its rule.³⁹

³⁹ Mehdi Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Politics* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 2008), available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/PolicyFocus79Final.pdf>; Kasra Aarabi, *Beyond Borders: The Expansionist Ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2020), available at <https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/beyond-borders-expansionist-ideology-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>; and, Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the Rising Cult of Mahdism: Missiles and Militias for the Apocalypse* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East

Eschatological yearnings and tenets have become official ideology, the dominant discourse, and propaganda of the social base of the regime, particularly among the ruling clerics and the IRGC.⁴⁰

There are very few public expressions of the IRI's nuclear strategy. Perhaps the most instructive is that of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani's words are significant because he was: one of the founding fathers of the fundamentalist regime. For much of the war with Iraq, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had transferred his power as Commander-in-Chief to Rafsanjani. After Khomeini died in June 1989, Rafsanjani was able to orchestrate the selection of Ali Khamenei to become Supreme Leader by the Assembly of Experts.⁴¹ Rafsanjani was president from 1989 to 1997. Between June 1989 and 1993, Rafsanjani was the most powerful regime figure and Supreme Leader Khamenei stayed in the background. Rafsanjani was the second most powerful member of the fundamentalist oligarchy until his suspicious death on January 8, 2017.⁴²

Rafsanjani was one of the most pragmatic and least ideological leaders of the fundamentalist oligarchy.⁴³ His primary concern was the monopolization of power in the hands of fundamentalist Shia clerics. Rafsanjani was the father of the IRI's nuclear weapons program. In a major speech on December 14, 2001, Rafsanjani discussed the United States, September 11, 2001 attacks the American overthrow of the Taliban regime that took a week or so, Israel, and nuclear war between Iran and Israel.⁴⁴ Rafsanjani kept repeating that the swift U.S. overthrow of the Taliban may become the American strategy in the Middle East and how Muslims should respond to the United States and Israel. Rafsanjani said:

They have supplied vast quantities of weapons of mass destruction and unconventional weapons to Israel. They [The United States] have permitted it [Israel] to have them and they have shut their eyes to what is going on. They have nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles and suchlike.

If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality. If an independent Islamic country is thinking about acquiring other kinds of

Institute, May 3, 2022), available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-revolutionary-guard-and-rising-cult-mahdism-missiles-and-militias-apocalypse>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ The Assembly of Experts is an assembly of fundamentalist Shia clerics that chooses the Supreme Leader when the current one dies or otherwise leaves office.

⁴² Masoud Kazemzadeh, "Ayatollah Rafsanjani's Death and Trump Policy on Iran," *Small Wars Journal*, January 18, 2017, available at <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/ayatollah-rafsanjani%E2%80%99s-death-and-trump-policy-on-iran>; and, Maryam Sinaee, "Ex-President's Daughter Suggests Iran Succession As Motive For His Death," *Iran International*, January 12, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202401126546>.

⁴³ Kazemzadeh, "Foreign Policy Decision Making in Iran and the Nuclear Program," op. cit.

⁴⁴ Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, "Qods Day Speech," *GlobalSecurity.org*, December 14, 2001, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2001/011214-text.html>.

weaponry, then they will do their utmost to prevent it from acquiring them. Well, that is something that almost the entire world is discussing right now.⁴⁵

In his prepared speech, in all likelihood, Rafsanjani was discussing some of the plans that he and other top leaders of the ruling fundamentalist oligarchy had been discussing on the strategic objectives of the IRI's nuclear weapons. Rafsanjani was signaling to the United States that if it tried to overthrow the fundamentalist regime ruling Iran like it did the Taliban in Afghanistan, the IRI has a nuclear option and would be willing to use it against Israel.

For Rafsanjani, nuclear weapons were to guarantee regime security from forceful American regime change. For Khamenei and other hardliners, nuclear weapons are the cover for the export of fundamentalist rule in the region and the defeat of Israel. For the ultra-hardline fundamentalist and apocalyptic hardline elements of the ruling oligarchy, nuclear weapons are necessary for the annihilation of Israel and the eschatological necessities of Shia Islam.⁴⁶ Nuclear weapons play major roles in the grand strategy of the IRI.⁴⁷

Before August 2021, Supreme Leader Khamenei had sidelined only some members of the oligarchy (e.g., reformists, expedients, and hard-liners). These were case-by-case and episodic. Since August 2021, however, Khamenei has methodically and successfully engaged in wholesale sidelining of all members of the oligarchy who are not ultra-hardline or apocalyptic ultra-hardline from the major positions of power. The apocalyptic Shia fundamentalist rulers of Iran believe that they are the central cast in the events that will usher in the arrival of the 12th Imam (the Shia Islam's Messiah) and their violent activities will form part of the eschatological events of Shia Islam.⁴⁸

The United States must decide whether to live with a nuclear armed fundamentalist regime. Some argue that the rulers of the IRI are rational, and the doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD) is as applicable to them as it was for the Soviet leaders during the Cold War.⁴⁹ Others argue that MAD works on those who value life on this earth. The doctrine of MAD will not deter those who crave mass martyrdom and eternal bliss in heaven.⁵⁰

Sophisticated scholars of the Second Nuclear Age argue that Cold War deterrence theories (such as MAD) are not universal theories applicable to all systems, all countries, and all leaders. Rather, deterrence is what transpires in the minds of decision-makers. In other

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "Taeb: Danesh Sakht Bomb Atom Baray Yari Imam Zaman Lazem Ast" [Taeb: The Knowledge for the Construction of the Atom Bomb is Necessary for Assistance for the 12th Imam], *Entekhab.ir*, December 31, 2015, available at <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/245422/>; and Alireza Forghani, "Dalayel Foghahee Zerorrat Naboodi Israel" [Theological Reasons for the Annihilation of Israel], *Alef*, February 4, 2012, available at <http://old.alef.ir/vdcepw8zwh8ewi.b9bj.html?142262>. *Alef* is a hardline publication.

⁴⁷ Masoud Kazemzadeh, *The Grand Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ See the views of Hojatolislam Ali Saeedi, the Head of the Ideological-Political Bureau of the Armed Forces, in "The Prophet and Imam Kazim had Predicted the Islamic Revolution and the Leadership of Imam Khomeini / The Election of the Supreme Leader is done by God," *Didban Iran*, June 3, 2023, <https://www.didbaniran.ir/fa/tiny/news-156490>.

⁴⁹ Stephen M. Walt, "The Day After Iran Gets the Bomb," *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/14/iran-nuclear-weapon-strategy/>.

⁵⁰ Henning P. Duus, "Deterrence and a Nuclear-Armed Iran," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2011), pp. 134-153.

words, every deterrence relationship is unique. One must understand the ideology, political culture, motivations, and objectives of those one is trying to deter.⁵¹ To put it another way, the strategic culture of rulers of a country influences how deterrence might work with those leaders.⁵² A threat that deters Brezhnev or Mao may not deter Ayatollah Khamenei or Osama bin Laden.⁵³

If the United States decided not to attack the IRI after it became a nuclear weapon state, then, in all likelihood, there would be nuclear war between the IRI and Israel. Perhaps, the only way to convince Israel to not launch a first strike would be an American decision to attack the IRI's nuclear facilities. If the U.S. decision is to attack the IRI, then the United States would have the following sub-options:

- 1. Disarming Conventional Strikes.** The United States could attack and destroy the IRI's nuclear facilities with conventional weapons. If the American intelligence were flawless, there would probably be thousands of Iranian deaths and minimal nuclear fallout. If American intelligence failed to identify all the nuclear sites, or the attacks failed to completely incapacitate the sites, then the IRI might be able to retaliate and kill millions of people if it could deliver the nuclear bomb or bombs, with a particular danger to Israel.
- 2. Disarming Strikes with Nuclear Weapons.** The United States could conduct a nuclear strike using low yield weapons. Depending on the number, time, and location of the nuclear strikes, Iranian deaths could plausibly range from the tens of thousands to millions – in addition to the possibility of significant nuclear fallout. Israel also reportedly possesses a second strike capability and could use its submarine launched nuclear tipped cruise missiles to massively attack Iran.⁵⁴ There would likely be tens of millions of Iranian and Israeli deaths and massive nuclear fallout.

Conclusion

The IRI became a nuclear threshold state by 2023. Since 1986, the strategic objective of the IRI has been to possess nuclear weapons. The United States, Israel, and European powers have pursued policies that have put obstacles in the path of the IRI's nuclear weapons

⁵¹ C. Dale Walton, "The Second Nuclear Age: Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century," in John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, and Colin S. Gray, eds., *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, 6th edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 202-219, see p. 206; and Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 39-95.

⁵² Jeffrey S. Lantis and Darryl Howlett, "Strategic Culture," in John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, and Colin S. Gray, eds., *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, 6th edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 89-107.

⁵³ Masoud Kazemzadeh, "Chapter 5: Strategic Culture of the IRI and Deterrence," in Kazemzadeh, *The Grand Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (forthcoming).

⁵⁴ "Israel's Deployment of Nuclear Missiles on Subs from Germany," *Spiegel*, June 4, 2012, available at <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/israel-deploys-nuclear-weapons-on-german-built-submarines-a-836784.html>.

program. There is a very high likelihood that the IRI will cross the line and become a declared nuclear state.

The Trump presidency will begin with an international environment that contains both grave perils and fortuitous circumstances. Russia has been weakened due to the Ukraine war. China is suffering from serious economic crises.⁵⁵ The IRI is at its weakest point it has ever been. A sophisticated grand strategy could restore stability to the international system and greatly benefit American national interests. How to deal with the IRI is part of that strategy.

If Iran were to successfully test a nuclear device, it may take more time to miniaturize it into a deliverable warhead. It is true that the documents captured by Mossad show that the IRI has been working on miniaturizing nuclear bombs and placing them on missiles. However, this might lead to a false sense of security. For short-term emergency use, the IRI may use non-conventional methods of delivery such as transport aircraft or passenger airplanes to deliver clandestinely crude nuclear bombs.

If Israel was able to detect the IRI's breakout, there is a very high likelihood that it would militarily attack the IRI's nuclear sites. The United States likely has the capability to successfully overthrow the fundamentalist regime. The U.S. military, for example, succeeded in overthrowing Saddam's regime in about three weeks. The U.S. military was capable to overthrow the Taliban regime in less than two weeks. The U.S. military played a major role in the overthrow of Moamar Gaddafi in Libya.

Many believe that the United States has the capability to destroy the IRI nuclear facilities using conventional weapons.⁵⁶ Israel likely lacks the capability to overthrow the fundamentalist regime. According to both Israeli and American officials, Israel lacks the capability utilizing its conventional weaponry to eliminate the IRI's nuclear weapons program.⁵⁷ Israel could potentially eliminate the IRI's nuclear weapons program purportedly utilizing its own nuclear weapons as others estimate that Israel possesses about 90 nuclear weapons and materials to manufacture an additional 200.⁵⁸ According to the

⁵⁵ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "China's Economy: Has THE Crisis Started?," *CSIS*, February 29, 2024, available at <https://www.csis.org/events/chinas-economy-has-crisis-started>; and Howard French, "The Reason China Can't Stop Its Decline," *Foreign Policy*, January 23, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/23/china-decline-economy-demographics-geopolitics-growth/>.

⁵⁶ Isabel Kershner, "Israel's President Criticizes Talk of Unilateral Strike on Iran," *The New York Times*, August 16, 2012, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/17/world/middleeast/israels-peres-criticizes-talk-of-unilateral-iran-strike.html>.

⁵⁷ Isabel Kershner, "Israeli Strike on Iran Would Be 'Stupid,' Ex-Spy Chief Says," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2011, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/09/world/middleeast/09israel.html>; "Former Mossad Chief: Israeli Strike on Iran Will Lead to Regional War," *Haaretz*, November 29, 2011, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/2011-11-29/ty-article/former-mossad-chief-israeli-strike-on-iran-will-lead-to-regional-war/0000017f-e80a-dc7e-adff-f8afa0f80000>; Elisabeth Bumiller, "Iran Raid Seen as a Huge Task for Israeli Jets," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2012, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/20/world/middleeast/iran-raid-seen-as-complex-task-for-israeli-military.html>. For the argument that (at least in 2007) Israel possessed the capability, utilizing its conventional weaponry, to destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program see Whitney Raas and Austin Long, "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Spring 2007), pp. 7-33.

⁵⁸ Kelsey Davenport, "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," *Arms Control Association*, July 2024, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-weapons-who-has-what-glance>; Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "Israel's Nuclear Inventory," *ArmsControl.org*, (no date), available at

Institute for Science and International Security, as of 2014, Israel had at least 115 deployed nuclear weapons.⁵⁹

What remains unknown is what the United States and/or Israel would do if the IRI was able to achieve a breakout without detection and announce that it possesses several nuclear bombs. Many American and Israeli policies appear to be based upon the assumption that the United States or Israel possess near-perfect intelligence and would be able to detect an order by Khamenei to assemble nuclear weapons and identify where all such weapons may be located.

Another assumption has been that the IRI would expel the IAEA inspectors and officially withdraw from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) before it begins the breakout, actions that would provide the United States and/or Israel several weeks lead time to prepare for a rapid military response if they so wish. It is possible that the IRI might begin the breakout and only announce its withdrawal from the NPT and expulsion of the IAEA inspectors after it completes its nuclear bomb. This assumption is based on North Korea's experience. North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003, and then conducted its first nuclear test on October 9, 2006. North Korea had to do that because its breakout period was about three years and it could not successfully hide its nuclear bomb development for three years under IAEA inspectors' monitoring. Unlike North Korea, Iran is reportedly only few weeks away from completing its first nuclear bomb. Moreover, Iran is far larger than North Korea and Iran's nuclear facilities are more numerous than North Korea's. It is, therefore, plausible for the IRI to believe that it might be able to successfully complete its nuclear breakout without first expelling the IAEA inspectors and withdrawing from the NPT.

Wrong assumptions and faulty intelligence have caused poor policies and deterrence failure in the past.⁶⁰ The failure to detect Pakistan's and North Korea's nuclear breakouts as well as Hamas' surprise attack on October 7 may serve as cautionary histories. In the case of nuclear weapons and the IRI, faulty intelligence and wrong assumptions may lead to truly horrific and apocalyptic outcomes.

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<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-weapons-who-has-what-glancearmscontrolcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Israel.pdf>;

⁵⁹ David Albright, "Israel's Military Plutonium Inventory," *Institute for Science and International Security*, November 19, 2015, available at https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Israel_Military_Plutonium_Stock_November_19_2015_Final.pdf.

⁶⁰ Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, pp. 1-6.