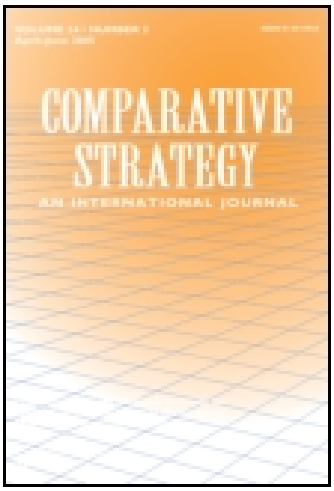
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The Rational Limitations of a Nonconventional Deterrence Regime: The Iranian Case

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The Rational Limitations of a Nonconventional Deterrence Regime: The Iranian Case

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The question of how to measure a state's rationality and compatibility with deterrence must be confronted in order to address the broader theoretical discussion concerning the credibility and effectiveness of deterrence. This article broadens Janice Stein's three-condition model of potential constraints of deterrence as a theory and a strategy. It then applies this revised model as a means of identifying potential obstacles to a future nonconventional deterrence regime with Iran, concluding with an assessment as to whether this analysis can support the argument that such a future deterrence regime would be stable.

Introduction

How is it possible to measure a state's rationality and its compatibility with deterrence? This broad question is crucial for addressing the theoretical discussion concerning the credibility of deterrence and its effectiveness as a policy. The most prominent case currently is the debate over the best strategy for a possible threat of an Iranian military nuclear program. In this context, Western officials are debating whether the Iranian regime is rational or not, rather than understanding the limits of its rationality.

Supporters of prevention—the current American policy—claim there is reason to doubt the rationality of Iran's leaders.[1] Consequently, it would be very complicated to deter Iran's leaders from using nuclear weapons if they had them. In contrast, those advocating a policy of containment highlight the American intelligence estimation that "Iran's nuclear decision-making is guided by a cost benefit approach," suggesting it is possible to rely on appropriate deterrence on "the day after."[2]

Despite the dichotomous nature of this discussion, the theoretical relations between the nature of decision-making and deterrence theory are anything but black and white. Deterrence is a strategy in which threats are issued in order to affect the calculations of the other side and thus change its behavior. It assumes that the other side's decision-making process operates along the premise of strategic rationality, namely, that "actors behave

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on the basis of cost-benefit calculations undertaken in order to advance their self-interest or obtain goods that maximize their utility."[3] If the other side does not make decisions according to this rationale, convincing it to refrain from the prohibited action would be very difficult.

Many observers criticize the classical assumption of rationality, especially the premise of "instrumental rationality." This rational model, they argue, offers a very flawed model of decision-making because it fails to incorporate emotions, culture, and organizational constraints, which significantly influence decision-making in practice.[4] Other scholars claim that the theory should be improved, for example, by incorporating insights garnered through research about the rational actor theory so as to better understand how psychological decision-making processes relate to deterrence, and by adapting to post–Cold War changes in the international framework that influence the dynamic between the deterring[5] and deterred parties.[6] They argue that although the strategy is not flawless, there is no better method for ensuring peace in a world threatened by the use of nuclear weapons.

This article deepens the discussion between the deterred party's rationality and the performance of deterrence by analyzing the nature of the Iranian regime's decision-making process and policies since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This analysis first presents the relationship between rationality and the stability of nonconventional deterrence, as well as the potential for a "bridging" model between these two research fields. It then proposes a fourth condition to Janice Stein's three-condition model of how to approach this bridging purpose. This preliminary model serves as the basis for an examination of the influence that potential obstacles may have on a future nonconventional deterrence regime with Iran, concluding with a general assessment as to whether this limited analysis can support the argument that a future deterrence regime with a nuclear Iran will be stable. Thus, this article enhances understanding of Iranian decision-making and nonconventional deterrence regimes.

Decision-Making and Deterrence Stability

According to Robert Jervis, deterrence theory has developed in three waves. The first two assumed the rationality of all actors in the sense that they process information and make decisions according to the classical rational model. Research has focused on two conditions in explaining deterrence success or failure, namely, "communicating the threat" and "threat credibility."[7] Accordingly, the concept of threat is at the core of the theory.[8]

Only after psychological studies revealed that human judgment and decision-making are subject to "bounded rationality," which contradicts the classical model of rational actors, did deterrence studies explore the relationship between rationality and deterrence success. This was the third wave of deterrence theory. For instance, Jervis, Richard Lebow, and Janice Stein have shown that psychological biases can reduce the credibility of a threat if potential challengers are highly affected by the fear that their international position is becoming more unfavorable or by domestic political considerations.[9] Colin Gray and Keith Payne have claimed that cultural differences hinder the deterrer's understanding regarding which of the other side's values to put at risk in order to make its threat credible.[10] Consequently, "strategic rationality" was identified as the third condition for successful deterrence.

Research dealing with deterrence dilemmas at the end of the Cold War tested whether certain leaders met the rationality criteria in order to determine if deterrence could be applied against them. For example, studies assessing the legitimacy of a deterrence strategy against former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War crisis of 1990–91 examined whether he should be treated as a rational leader.[11] John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt claimed that "his willingness to use force . . . hardly demonstrates that he cannot be

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deterred."[12] Other scholars have identified decision-making patterns of certain leaders and drawn conclusions about potential deterrence strategies and potential threats to deterrence stability.[13] Alex Mintz, for instance, analyzed Iranian decision-making by studying thirty decisions of the current leadership in order to uncover the underlying pattern. Regarding the potential use of deterrence against Iran, he concludes, *inter alia*, that the Iranian calculus is most vulnerable to threats directed toward the survival of the regime and that "Iran will not use the bomb if there is a clear signal to its leadership that such a move will result in the removal of it leaders from power."[14]

These studies demonstrate the potential value of constructing a model that connects certain conditions of decision-making with deterrence stability. Two principal questions then arise: Does the type of rationality of the deterred party generally fit a strategy of deterrence? And, most importantly, does the degree of rationality of the deterred actor enable stable deterrence relations?

Stein suggests three sets of conditions "that constrain deterrence as a theory and as a strategy": cognitive style, strategic culture, and global environment.[15] Though these conditions correspond with the criticism levelled against deterrence theory, particularly critiques that posit its irrelevance due to bounded human rationality and a changing international environment, they lack a procedural dimension regarding decision-making, which would test whether the procedures involved in the process are "expected to maximize the likelihood that [the actor] will match means to ends."[16] Accordingly, this analysis includes the aforementioned conditions while seeking to broaden this model by offering a fourth factor and dividing these four factors into two types of "irrational" factors, external and internal, which may undermine nonconventional deterrence regimes.

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Four-Factor Model Assessing the Relationship between Rationality and Deterrence Stability

External Factors

The first external factor that influences the decision-making of an actor involved in a nonconventional deterrence regime is the international security environment. Deterrence hinges on one's ability to study and comprehend the other side and its way of thinking, communicate clear and convincing signals concerning forbidden action, and actually punish any such undesired action. This process of learning and communicating operates within a dynamic global system.[17] Hence, Stein claims, "in a global system that is both structurally complex, with large numbers of different kinds of actors, and uncertain, with changing power relationships that are difficult to interpret and unfamiliar challenges to the status-quo, deterrence becomes far more problematic."[18] Learning and developing common knowledge can occur over time but are much more risky and difficult tasks in an uncertain and complex international arena than in a simple one.

The second external factor is the technical nature of the decision-making process. This process determines the "rules of the game" and shapes the ability of decision makers to collect and assess information and translate it into several policy alternatives that maximise the potential utility of the decision maker in the situation.[19] The most basic definition of a rational decision-making process is the economic definition, namely, a decision-making process that prioritizes alternatives using cost-benefit considerations and selects the alternative with the greatest benefit.[20] This definition assumes a logical and orderly process, open to information and alternatives and based on reliable information. Thus, it

reflects an optimal model that cannot be implemented in reality because of time constraints and psychological and organizational biases. Nonetheless, it indicates that the closer the actual decision-making processes are to this model, the greater the likelihood that the deterring party will succeed in influencing the cost-benefit considerations of the deterred party and dissuade it from carrying out the prohibited action. A decision-making process that is neither orderly nor transparent increases the likelihood of miscalculation and thus also increases the probability that deterrence will fail and that a deterrence regime will be undermined over time.

Internal Factors

The first significant internal factor is the strategic culture of the actors and the differences between them. Some cultures emphasize values that do not correspond to one of the premises of deterrence, that is, preference for life over death. If the deterred actor is driven by "value rationality," by which he pursues "intangible goals with a high degree of commitment even when the costs are high and success is not assured, deterrence may not work."[21] In this case, reality does not fit deterrence's premise of instrumental rationality. Moreover, as Gray and Payne claim, if the deterring actor does not consider the differences between his strategic culture and that of the deterred actor, he might hinder his own deterrence efforts.[22] For instance, during the Cold War, the United States suspected that the Soviet Union's leaders would not be dissuaded from sacrificing its people's lives if doing so yielded significant gains, so American policy targeted the assets of the Soviet leadership instead. At the same time, Soviet bombs were aimed at American population centers, locations that the Soviet leaders believed would be the most effective targets in the eyes of American leaders. Stein also suggests that leaders whose culture highly values honor "are likely to escalate in response to deterrent threats."[23] Hence, she argues, if one wishes to deter this kind of leader, one should behave respectfully and include positive incentives alongside threats.

Another internal factor, which is naturally influenced by all the other factors and can weaken nonconventional deterrence regimes, is the cognitive decision-making process. Stein states that cognitive psychology research has "demonstrated important differences between the expectations of rational decision models and the processes of attribution, estimation, and judgment that people frequently use."[24] Studies in foreign policy, psychology, and neuroscience offer robust evidence that people who harbor cognitive biases often deviate from the rational model. For example, using game theory models, Frank Zagare has argued that the rationality postulate of "classical deterrence theory is logically inconsistent, empirically inaccurate and prescriptively deficient."[25] Daniel Kahneman, Philip Tetlock, and Stein explain that people prefer consistency and simplicity, are more averse to loss than to gain, and fail to accurately comprehend probability.[26] Neuroscience studies indicate that there is a greater role accorded to emotions than rational thinking.[27]

Altogether, these biases indicate the "hot," emotional nature of decision-making, rather than adherence to the "cold" rational choice model. Moreover, they underscore that people differ in their ways of thinking and thus also in the limits of their rationality. Jervis, Lebow, and Stein claim that psychological biases could cause the credibility of a genuinely threat to be underestimated, thereby undermining even presumably stable deterrence regimes.[28]

These four factors are mutually reinforcing. A complex international arena is likely to produce more communication failures that amplify differences between strategic cultures and challenge the limits of leaders' rationality than would a more certain and less intricate international environment. Differences that foster cognitive failures and "irrational" policy will make the international arena more complex and less stable. An understanding of

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the dynamics between these factors provides the basis for discussing relations between decision-making (especially its potential flaws) and deterrence regime stability.

The next section applies the above analysis to the case of Iran. It analyzes the following factors and aims to explain the dynamics between them: the strategic environment in which Iran operates, how decisions are made in Tehran, the messianic elements of Iranian culture and its worship of honor, and one dimension of the current Iranian leadership's bias when faced with potential threats. This analysis provides a basis for further discussion regarding the relationship between decision-making and deterrence stability, as well as potential "red lights" that should be tested before considering any such nonconventional deterrence regime.

Assessing Iran's Rationality

Current International Security Environment

The first external factor is the global security arena. "The contemporary global system," Stein argues, "is both structurally complex and uncertain, and the absence of common knowledge compounds the problem of rationality."[29] This notion corresponds with other studies that stress the complexity of the contemporary international security environment. Paul, for instance, has identified three elements of complex systems that characterize the contemporary global system, namely, "non-linearity," multiple and uncoordinated interactions between different agents, and a process of system evolution and adaptation.[30] Emanuel Adler, Jeffrey Knopf, Patrick Morgan, and Andrew Krepinevich have emphasized the emergence of non-state actors and their influence on deterrence stability, and Freedman has attributed vertical proliferation to the risk of weapons of mass destruction.[31] Altogether, these elements heighten instability and make the process of predicting, learning, and adapting increasingly difficult and risky. Thus, any deterrence mechanism against Iran would operate in an unstable global system.

Moreover, Iran's uneasy relations with its neighbours and rivals suggest that the regional system in which it operates is problematic for any future nonconventional deterrence regime; a bipolar Middle East in which Iran, along with Israel (according to foreign sources), has nuclear weapons would be a high-risk environment.

Furthermore, various conditions and circumstances would make it difficult to maintain a stable deterrence regime. These include low-intensity conflicts and military capabilities that have reached non-state proxies; the short distance between the countries; undeveloped detection and warning capabilities (partly as a result of the short distance); lack of effective regional security arrangements; absence of free, reliable channels of communication for managing crises; and lack of a credible second-strike capability to deter first use.

The threats from Iran's other adversaries in the region further reduce chances for stability. An Iranian nuclear bomb is likely to be perceived as a serious threat by its Sunni neighbors and may encourage some, in particular Saudi Arabia, to acquire nuclear weapons as well.[32] This situation could create an inherently unstable multipolar system in the region. Conveying messages to several adversaries with differing worldviews and different cultures, decision-making processes, and interests would compound the complexity. In such a situation, there might be an increased likelihood of one side failing to convey its messages, of misinterpretation of conveyed messages, and of crisis escalation, even unintentionally. In addition, the proliferation of weapons of various kinds in the region could cause confusion and difficulty in monitoring first use. As soon as other countries acquired military nuclear capability, it may not always be clear who was deterring whom.

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Some researchers claim that a nuclear Iran could enhance stability in the Middle East.[33] The analysis presented here challenges this argument and suggests that in fact the simultaneous existence of uncoordinated deterrence regimes within an innately unstable region might make the regional security arena even more unstable. In other words, regardless of the nature of the Iranian regime, it would be operating in an unstable global and regional framework whose capacity to sustain a deterrence regime over time would be very limited.

The Iranian Decision-Making Process

There is little reliable information on the technical component of the Iranian regime's decision-making, both because it is very secret and because it is not conventionally organized and institutionalized. Nevertheless, we will offer a limited analysis based on available information, including of the influence of the lack of institutionalization and disorganization, as part of this overall analysis of Iranian decision-making and its influence on the stability of a deterrence regime.

Iran's national security decision-making system comprises multiple organizations with overlapping areas of responsibility. The main competition is between the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), which coordinates the country's intelligence and is subordinate to the president, and the intelligence service of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is directly responsible to the supreme leader.[34] In 1997, the supreme leader approved the transfer of direct authority over the IRGC to himself because he feared the president's influence over the MOIS. Thus, there are actually two intelligence systems in Iran: one subordinate to the supreme leader and the other to the president. This dual structure reflects the tension in the regime between the president and the supreme leader.

Likewise, Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which is subordinate to the president, is—officially—essential to Iranian decision-making on security issues, as it has the authority to coordinate among the various intelligence and security organisations and make important decisions, generally by consensus, on issues of national security. In practice, however, the SNSC secretary is a close associate of the supreme leader, its deliberations are subject to his prior consent, and its decisions require his approval. Thus, in actuality, the supreme leader controls the SNSC's agenda, staffing, and decisions.

In this framework, which is replete with political tension and rivalry, presumably the flow of information among organizations is not open and is influenced by relations between the president and the supreme leader. The second term of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad entailed a great deal of tension with the supreme leader as well as his supporters. This situation undoubtedly interfered with the flow of information to the leadership and engendered flaws in assessment and judgment processes. It is too early to determine whether the relationship between the newly elected president, Hassan Rohani, and Khamenei will follow this trend.

Political tension within this system is intensifying because of the strong identity of the various organizations as well as the close internal ties among officials. The top echelon of the MOIS, for example, comprises men from Madrase-ye Haqqani, the religious school in Qom. The top brass in Iran's military, the IRGC, and the Basij also have ideological connections or even familial ties through marriage.[35]

The resulting tension fosters competition among the organizations and generally weakens them. The system is designed to reduce the likelihood of one faction growing too strong and threatening the regime. Consequently, those individuals with the power to bridge gaps among organizations and resolve their conflicts are given greater roles. The most

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striking example is the tremendous power of the supreme leader, whose formal and informal influence makes him the de facto center of Iranian decision-making.

Under the Iranian constitution, the IRGC and the army answer directly to the supreme leader, who has exclusive authority to launch a war or make decisions about Iran's nuclear program. He also has influence through commissars who report directly to him.[36] These are representatives of the ideological-religious committee who participate in various committees and discussions, accompany senior officials, and have responsibility for staff appointments and promotions within the system. This ideological-religious apparatus allows the supreme leader to influence day-to-day decision-making in the upper echelons of Iran's defense establishment, and when an important subject is raised, it is the supreme leader himself who decides.

Although the Iranian system allows the supreme leader tremendous influence over the national security decision-making process, Iranian organizational culture requires that he seek consensus or at least broad agreement within the leadership.[37] In other words, even the supreme leader does not typically act against widespread opposition. This principle is intended to ensure cautious policymaking and prevent hasty decisions that could jeopardize Iran's interests. It also leads to increased caution in decision-making, but its effect is probably limited. Given the supreme leader's influence on the system as a whole, substantial opposition to his decisions seems unlikely to emerge.

According to Shmuel Bar, the supreme leader is also assisted by an unofficial forum of fewer than a dozen advisers who are personally and ideologically close to him. Their official positions within the regime do not necessarily reflect their importance. Generally, they are former senior officials of the IRGC who serve as "information gatekeepers" for the Iranian leadership. This forum could have a decisive influence on the flow of information to the defense leadership and on decision-making regarding important security issues. Nevertheless, as Bar states, "it does not seem that the leadership suffers from significant cognitive distortions regarding the strategic reality."[38]

The picture that emerges of the Iranian leadership's decision-making is of a centralized system full of political tensions and organizational redundancy. If these tensions impair the quality of intelligence reaching the supreme leader or his ability to process the information unemotionally and methodically, then there is a basis for the claim that the Iranian decision-making process is not responsive to a deterrence regime and would undermine its stability over time. However, there is not yet enough information about the products of the Iranian intelligence system to make a determination. We do know that Iran has not yet established a doctrine and an orderly, operational nuclear system. Moreover, it has a history of poor management in organizing its control systems, which could generate a series of unauthorized actions ultimately leading to unsanctioned use of weapons. The behavior of the Revolutionary Guards' Navy in recent years illustrates this point. For example, its capture of British sailors in Gulf waters may have resulted from the initiative of a low-level commander, not from above.[39]

The maneuverability that individuals enjoy in the Iranian decision-making system could manifest through the influence of Iranians other than the supreme leader and behavior in the field. For instance, as Shahram Chubin argues, pre-delegation is inherited in the Iranian command-and-control system, and therefore the manner in which powers are relegated to officials in the field with close ties to the supreme leader might conceivably be maintained even if Iran had military nuclear capabilities.[40] Undoubtedly, such a situation would increase the likelihood of misperceptions that could undermine the deterrence regime. However, simultaneously the threat would increase, possibly making the regime more credible and thus reinforcing the balance of threats that serves as the basis of deterrence regimes. What

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is certain is that research is needed, in as much depth as possible, on Iran's decision-making process. It is also necessary to assess the supreme leader's impact on decision-making regarding foreign and defense issues, as well as the implications of his death. The above analysis and the discussion that follows provide a taste of the importance and potential of such research in evaluating the stability of a deterrence regime with a nuclear Iran.

The Iranian Strategic Culture

The first internal factor that influences the decision maker and may hinder the stability of deterrence is the cultural environment. The basic assumption of deterrence theory is that when decision makers are forced to choose between life and death, they will make cost-benefit calculations and choose life.[41] This is the essence of a strategy based on negative influence (that is, clarification of the prohibited action, not the desirable action) by means of threats. However, when a decision maker is guided by a culture that could justify preferring a policy whose price is human death or serious harm to the implementing organization, the power of deterrence is diminished.

Such a situation presents a challenge to the deterring party because it necessitates an understanding of the priorities of the deterred party—which might conflict with its own cultural assumptions—in order to create a threat that the deterred party will perceive as intolerable. If the deterring party fails in its assessment of the deterred party's priorities or in creating an intolerable threat, the strategy of deterrence can be expected to fail. Research on the Iranian decision-making process has revealed two important cultural elements that could prove very relevant for a future nonconventional deterrence system with the current Shiite Iranian regime.

The Revolutionary Form of Religion. The tension between the ambition of the regime of clerics in Tehran to promote a revolutionary ideology and the need to safeguard the interests of the regime has characterized Iran since the end of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.[42] This tension shapes Iran's foreign policy and the decisions of the supreme leader. Statements by supreme leader Ali Khamenei indicate the weight of religious-messianic motifs in Iranian decision-making. In 2008, for example, Khamenei declared that the Shiite messianic figure of the end of days, known as the Twelfth Imam or the Mahdi, would return to this world in order to save humanity and that he himself was committed to preparing the ground for this event.[43] According to former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, Khamenei informed him in a private conversation in 2000 that "an open confrontation against the U.S. and Israel was inevitable, and that he was working for Iran to prevail in such a confrontation."[44] Khamenei, Aznar explained, also asserted that "Israel must be burned to the ground and made to disappear from the face of the Earth" as part of a global Islamic revolution.[45]

Former President Ahmadinejad, officially the second-most important figure in the Iranian decision-making system, also frequently discussed the return of the Hidden Imam during his tenure. At a conference of clerics in November 2005, he declared that the main mission of the Islamic Revolution is to pave the way for the appearance of the Twelfth Imam. The current president, Hassan Rouhani, is a religious scholar and "an ideologue and defender of the Islamic Revolution."[46] Furthermore, in recent years the military wing of the establishment has been growing stronger and veterans of the Iran–Iraq War began occupying key positions in the leadership. In many instances, these are extreme religious nationalists with militant views on both domestic and foreign affairs.

The key question is how the messianism promoted by the Iranian regime influences its decision-making. Hosam Matar argues that Iranian Mahdism is an active revolutionary

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ideology that is not awaiting a revolution but, rather, seeking to promote one.[47] In the Shiite approach, Iran —as the only Shiite empire—is responsible for bringing about the arrival of the Mahdi, even at the cost of self-sacrifice. Nabi Sonboli, an Iranian scholar, states that "the costs and benefits of any action are not confined to this world but also to the afterlife."[48]As Matar explains, however, the role of the supreme leader is to balance this expectation with reality and act judiciously, and only when conditions provide an opportunity for success. Indeed, the Iranian regime tends to act when a situation allows significant potential gain in the future, even if the regime's interests are seriously threatened. Thus, as Chubin concludes, "Iran appears to see passivity as more dangerous than escalation."[49]

It seems, therefore, that Iranian ideology espouses a worldview that attributes great importance to future gain, even at great risk, and is in keeping with the ideological and religious values of the regime. However, this approach does not mean that Iranian decision-making is reckless. Rather, it underscores the role of the supreme leader in Iranian decision-making as the highest ideological and political authority. By the virtue of his position, the supreme leader is responsible for interpreting ideology and formulating Iranian policy accordingly. Since in practice he is at the intersection of Iranian ideology and foreign and defense policy, he holds a key position. His role is to identify opportunities for Iranian gains and order action under the appropriate conditions. Thus, he also serves as the main brake for restraining Iran's revolutionary ambitions. His role is examined in the next section.

Iran's messianic approach is not limited to the regime's upper echelon. It also exerts great influence over the entire political leadership and within the IRGC. Bar has argued that the fundamental role of the clerics in the Iranian regime makes the ideological component a built-in element of the decision-making system and of the identity of the people who staff this system.[50] The messianic influence should therefore be regarded seriously when examining Iranian decision-making, and Western concepts of "rationality" or "irrationality" should not be relied upon exclusively.

The Iranian ideological apparatus thus casts doubt on the problematique of a stable deterrence regime. Its justification of sacrifice, for example, creates difficulties in formulating an intolerable price for the deterred party. In the nuclear context, the former president, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, called on Muslim countries to use nuclear weapons against Israel, thereby, in his opinion, destroying Israel while only causing damage to Iran.[51] Furthermore, the ideology behind the worldview of the regime and the supreme leader is revolutionary and purports to undermine the status quo in order to change the situation eventually. Consequently, the success of deterrence would be temporary and very much dependent on the supreme leader's assessment of actual conditions and their suitability to his ideological aspirations. These two elements, sacrifice and revolution, can be expected to create difficulties in maintaining a stable balance of deterrence with Iran.

Iranian Honor. When considering potential flaws inherent in strategic culture conditions, Stein claims that "leaders who come from cultures of honor and have strong senses of grievance are especially likely to escalate in response to deterrent threats."[52] Thus, using deterrence can be counterproductive. This insight is relevant for the Iranian case as its culture values honor on both the national and personal levels.

Iranians believe their country is a regional power and expect to be treated as such. In one of his recent speeches, Khamenei attacked the United States for trying "to cripple the Iranian nation and to bring it to its knees."[53] In the same speech, he offered his evaluation of Iran's performances in light of international economic sanctions: "Such a large-scale evaluation will reveal the Iranian nation's pride and honor." Similarly, the centrality of dignity is characteristic of statements by other senior officials addressing the nuclear issue. For example, the Iranian chief of staff, Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, declared that

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"whenever the US abandons the hegemonic system and respects the rights of the Iranian nation and recognizes the rights of regional nations, based on mutual respect, we will start negotiations."[54] Some observers claim that the Iranian nuclear project is motivated by Iran's self-perception as a global power and pride in its historic civilization.[55]

Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Iran's former representative to the negotiations on its nuclear program, and Mohammad Ali Shabani have discussed the Iranian sensitivity to dignity. They claim that, "for thousands of years, Persian culture has been distinguished by customs that revolve around honor and esteem." They argue that saving *aberu* (face) is equivalent to preserving dignity.[56] In other words, it is important for any Iranian decision to maintain or save the honor and dignity of the regime, which is the representative of the Iranian nation.

This notion of honor and dignity is intricately tied to nationalism and the aforementioned pride in history and culture. This pride is accompanied by a deep sense of injustice at the hands of international and regional powers throughout history. Thus, argues Bar, these dual components evoke "a fierce reaction to any affront to national dignity or suggestion that Iranian culture is but a sub-category of Middle Eastern, Muslim or (the worst suggestion) Arab culture" along with pervasive defensive behavior intended to guard against attempts at foreign intervention or imposition.[57] It is not surprising, therefore, that in 2003 the Assembly of Experts announced that "the hue and cry created by America and other arrogant powers [in connection to the peaceful use of nuclear energy] is in keeping with their continuous and successive conspiracies against the Islamic system in Iran."[58]

With these two components in mind, the importance of Iranian decision-making and its ties to national dignity can be more easily understood. As Christopher De Bellaigue points out, Mossadegh and his supporters claimed they would prefer Iranian oil "to remain underground than for it to be the cause of Iran's humiliation." Iranian-run production would, conversely, be a source of pride.[59] Likewise, statements tying Iranian success in the nuclear field to national pride or expounding on the "right" to enrich uranium and pursue the peaceful use of nuclear technology are common. President Hassan Rohani, for example, once stated in a speech that technological success in the nuclear program "is good for our international reputation and shows that we have made good technological progress and have been successful in the area of technology."[60] Moreover, a 2010 RAND survey found that 86 percent of Iranians supported the civilian nuclear program, and 97 percent claimed that it was a "national right."[61] Thus, to Iranians, domestic decision-making—free from foreign intervention—and the ability to achieve domestic technological success correspond with the maintenance of dignity and pride, and vice versa.

Any country wishing to deter the current Islamic Iranian regime would, therefore, have to consider how its threats will be interpreted in Tehran. Intense threats without concrete gestures may not withstand the face-saving test and could personally offend Iranian leaders. As Mousavian and Shabani argue, taking the first step in exchange for promises alone may be impossible for the Iranian leadership if it wishes to maintain *aberu*.[62] If no proposal takes these cultural characteristics into consideration, Iran might opt to take risks in order to save its national pride. Hence, Iranian sensitivity to honor and dignity alongside the influence of the Iranian revolutionary element could confound any future system of deterrence with Iran's current regime.

The Iranian Cognitive Style

The description of hot, emotional decision makers implies for many the possibility of flaws in the Iranian decision-making process, which could influence the stability of a future

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nonconventional deterrence system. This factor is perhaps the most mysterious one, given our severely limited ability to understand the cognitive processes by which present leaders operate. This analysis examines one potential bias—the tendency to take risks—which is often attributed to the current Iranian regime under the rule of supreme leader Khamenei and can be tested in terms of Iranian policy to date. Future research on Iran's decision-making process should test additional biases in order to shed light on the more mysterious elements of the regime and the role of the individual in this process. Even though this analysis contains only one cognitive bias, it demonstrates the dynamics between the decision maker and other factors, thus offering a preliminary understanding of the conditions in which the Iranian decision-making process occurs.

Risk Averse or Risk Prone. Stein claims that "we have risk profiles that depart from what models of rational choice would expect. For example, we are far more averse to loss than we are gain seeking."[63] Stein refers to the Prospect Theory developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. According to this theory, humans generally fear losing and attribute a higher price to potential loss than to identical potential gain (risk aversion).[64] Of course, this approach encourages a strategy of deterrence whose goal is to alter the other actor's policy through threats of harm and loss. However, studies that examined human decision-making have shown that people differ in their fear of losing and some even tend to take risks (risk prone).[65] These actors are often less cautious than others. A deterrence regime against risk-prone actors is inherently less stable than one against actors who attribute greater importance to threats of loss, the essence of a deterrence strategy.

From the little information available, it appears that caution is a main element in Iran's foreign policy. Research on the Iranian style of decision-making has often reiterated this insight. For instance, Mousavian and Shabani point to the importance of caution in Iranian foreign policy, arguing that it is a balance between the need to maintain the regime's interests (*maslahat*) and the need to save face (*aberu*). The balance between these two concepts will guard against external threats by protecting the regime's interests and guarding against internal threats by protecting its image.[66] In addition, Mintz's empirical study of 30 Iranian decisions related to national security and foreign policy concludes that Tehran conducts a very cautious policy when it deals with critical issues that could affect its survival, like the nuclear issue.[67] Bar and Chubin also highlight the cautious nature of Iranian national security and foreign policy.[68]

Indeed, since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has shown that it traditionally conducts a cautious policy when military force might entail a high price. Thus, for example, when the "war of the cities" intensified and claimed the lives of thousands of Iranian citizens, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had previously declared that he would not agree to a ceasefire with Iraq under any circumstances until it surrendered completely, was forced, as he put it, to "drink the cup of poison." In light of the difficult military situation resulting from Iran's defeats on the battlefield with Iraq—which involved the loss of conquered Iraqi territory, serious damage to infrastructure, heavy loss of life and a decline in the morale of the Iranian people—in July 1988 he agreed to a ceasefire on the basis of conditions set forth in UN Security Council Resolution 598. Suspension of the nuclear activity of the "weapons group" in Iran in 2003, when Iraq was conquered by the United States, can also be seen as evidence of a continuing policy of caution on the part of Khamenei, who feared that Iran could be next in line after Iraq. Iranian recent willingness to negotiate over its nuclear program in contrary to past Iranian declarations, and even accepting an interim agreement that contains several restrictions on its nuclear development is another sign for cautious policy after the international sanctions severely harmed the Iranian economy.

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Nevertheless, various incidents since the Islamic Revolution indicate that Iran does not always behave cautiously. For example, during the naval clashes between the United States and Iran at the end of the Iran–Iraq War, on a number of occasions Iran acted against a much stronger force, whether because of a mistaken assessment of its strength, a determination to take action, or a willingness to pay a high military price, even knowing that it could not achieve military gains. More recent examples, under the current supreme leader, include an attempt to assassinate Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi ambassador to Washington, and increased friction with the United States and its allies in the Gulf. This friction appears to have manifested in recent years in, *inter alia*, cyber-attacks on the Saudi oil infrastructure and the Qatari gas infrastructure[69] and the shooting down of an American drone.[70] All the aforementioned behavior could have incited a conflict between Iran and the United States. Apparently when the regime in Tehran believes that the potential gain from exploiting a crisis justifies the great risk entailed, it deviates from its cautious policy. For this reason, Chubin claims, we cannot make a sweeping generalization that the regime is risk averse at all times.[71]

As a rule, it seems that Iran's current foreign policy does in fact tend to promote Iranian interests cautiously and could eventually strengthen a deterrence regime whose purposes are to prevent an undermining of the status quo and to avoid a small, local crisis escalating into nonconventional war. Nonetheless, as this analysis demonstrates, Iran's behavior can be influenced by environmental and cultural factors. For example, the present complex and unstable international system offers more opportunities to win "big gains" and more room for miscalculation and misunderstandings than does a more stable system.

Conclusion

The definition of rationality is based on the assumptions that we are in possession of all the relevant information for decision-making; that we have the ability to calculate the value of all the possibilities before us; and that from a cognitive point of view, there is nothing preventing us from assessing the possible ramifications of each potential choice. Under this definition, no one is rational. Human beings, including leaders, find it difficult to determine the correct choice among various alternatives with varying degrees of benefit, in light of multiple influences, including worldview, intuition, culture, and political and institutional biases. Although this observation is not new, it can provide greater understanding in the practical arena, with particular relevance for those debating the appropriate policy toward Iran's military nuclear program. The rationality of Iranian decision-making has become an essential component of this discussion.

The limited information available about Iranian decision-making on national security issues makes it difficult to conclude decisively whether it is compatible with a deterrence regime. It is possible, however, to identify possible points of failure in a nonconventional deterrence regime with the current leadership in Tehran. By extrapolating four main external and internal factors that could hinder nonconventional deterrence regimes from the debate on the efficacy of deterrence as a theory and a strategy, one can better study the dynamics between them. This revised model can serve as a basis for assessing the potential threat of a nuclear Iran to deterrence stability.

This analysis has shown that the present international arena would challenge any attempt to establish a nonconventional deterrence regime. Moreover, the unstable environment of the Middle East and the likely situation created following Iran's acquisition of military nuclear capability could create crises and generate a multipolar system of deterrence regimes that are innately unstable.

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The preliminary examination of the decision-making process in Tehran concerning foreign and defense issues further reveals that it is not appropriately institutionalized and exists against the backdrop of internal tensions between the supreme leader and president. It is not, therefore, expected to be a stabilizing factor and, indeed, is likely to further undermine potential deterrence regimes with Tehran. This analysis also indicates that despite the centralized nature of decision-making, authority tends to be delegated to military officials in the field.

Moreover, the components of messianism and honor in Iran's strategic culture have a significant impact on the worldview of Iranian leaders, including supreme leader Khamenei, and on the formation of national security policy. Consequently, it would be difficult to establish a stable deterrence regime with Iran, although the typically cautious behavior exhibited by the Iranian leadership makes it possible, in general, to eschew escalation and frequent eruption of crises. Nevertheless, history has shown that Iran does not shy away from initiating or escalating crises if its leaders believe that there is great potential for gain.

This behavior can be better understood by analyzing the dynamics between the model's four factors, specifically in regard to Iran. The unstable nature of the regional system, for example, can offer increased opportunities for gain. For that reason, it is likely to increase tension between the contradictory elements of the revolutionary, messianic nature of the Iranian strategic culture and its cautious behavior. The Iranian strategic culture demands that the supreme leader strike a balance between revolutionary Iranian aspirations and a traditionally cautious policy whose purpose is to protect Iran's interests and save Iranian honor. However, Iran's decision-making process, which should support the supreme leader in this task, is not open or organized. As a result, Iran's bravado in exploiting instability and sometimes even manufacturing crises would threaten the stability of a deterrence regime. The Iranian tendency to pre-delegate even in crucial military matters further increases the possibility of unauthorised use of nuclear weapons. Altogether, this analysis indicates that Iran's leadership and its adversaries are exposed to a high risk of cognitive biases that could eventually generate an intended or unintended nonconventional crisis.

Although much remains unknown regarding Iran's decision-making process, this preliminary analysis indicates that the environmental, cultural, and procedural framework creates a dynamic that would challenge the premises of deterrence, regardless of the nature of the supreme leader's decision-making style. The conclusion of this analysis does not correspond with the claim that a nuclear Iran would encourage a stable deterrence regime in the region. Rather, with certain developments, there is a high likelihood of undermining such a regime.

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Notes

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