

The Iranian Challenge

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The Iranian nuclear project is fast approaching a critical watershed. Iran has continued to develop a range of nuclear capabilities that under optimal technical circumstances will allow it to build its first nuclear device as early as the beginning of 2011. In the coming months, Iran will have to decide whether, for now, to stop at the nuclear weapons capability threshold or to break out and build these weapons. The United States and Western governments have labored to stop Iran before it achieves nuclear weapons by enticing it with incentives, applying pressure on it, and imposing sanctions against it. To date these efforts have failed to yield satisfactory results and the American administration may have to choose between difficult options: to pursue a military option against Iran or give Israel a green light to operate militarily, or alternately, to accept uranium enrichment in Iran and subsequently a nuclear Iran and prepare for the associated risks. Given that Iran has not been stopped, Israel too will have to decide in the immediate future whether conditions are suitable for a military move against Iran's nuclear sites. Against this background, the most severe internal crisis in the history of the Islamic regime has assumed center stage, with implications primarily for the nature of the regime and its future but also for the nuclear question.

The Program's Progress

The most important aspect of the Iranian nuclear issue is Iran's significant steady progress towards the capability to produce nuclear weapons, despite the technical difficulties it has encountered along the way. In 2008 Iran

fully mastered uranium enrichment technology. By the end of 2009, Iran had enriched uranium to a low grade of 3.5 percent in quantities sufficient – after being enriched to a high grade, i.e., after evolving to a fissile status – to create one core of a nuclear explosive device. Low enriched uranium (LEU) is manufactured at the large enrichment facility in Natanz; the plans are for the facility ultimately to contain 54,000 gas centrifuges. By late 2009, 9,000 centrifuges had already been installed, but for reasons that remain unclear only 4,000 were put into operation. The installed centrifuges are of the outdated Pakistani P-1 model with low enrichment capacity, but the Iranians are developing centrifuges of a more advanced model that, if and when installed and made operational, will increase the rate of enrichment.

Other crucial steps have been taken by Iran in the last eighteen months as part of the nuclear program. In February 2010, Iran announced that it was starting to enrich uranium to a 20 percent level; this level is still not defined as high enrichment. By now Iran is enriching uranium to this grade within a limited scope, and this step will significantly shorten the timetable for producing high enriched uranium (HEU) in large quantities. Two months later, in April 2010, Iran announced that it had successfully tested new centrifuges, soon to become operational. According to Iran, these are third generation centrifuges, capable of enriching uranium six times faster than the centrifuges in current use.

In September 2009, Iran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that it was building a second installation for uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes near the city of Qom as a backup for the Natanz facility, should the latter be attacked. Iran was apparently forced to announce the construction of the installation after it was uncovered by Western intelligence services. The facility discovered is much smaller than the one in Natanz, and is designed to contain some 3,000 centrifuges. According to most Western estimates, the facility is intended for HEU production, whether from natural uranium or from LEU manufactured in Natanz. In any case, it is clear that the facility in Qom is not intended for peaceful purposes. As a result of the disclosure of the Qom facility, suspicions have grown that Iran has built other secret nuclear facilities.

This suspicion was even raised by the IAEA, which usually tends to statements marked by caution and restraint.

Iran has taken a number of steps related to building a nuclear explosive device. It has apparently studied the uranium processing technique for the core of the explosive device. It likely received complete plans for an explosive device from the Pakistani network; likewise, there is evidence that Iran has experimented with fitting the explosive device with a warhead. Moreover, American intelligence assessments reported in December 2007 that Iran had a military program for development of nuclear weapons, albeit frozen since 2003. This assessment has yet to change, despite the fact that some of the data discovered in the intervening years does not match this estimate. According to media reports from early 2010, the American intelligence community today believes that the military program was in fact not on hold or that it was renewed in a more modest scope.

In response to pressure, Iran announced in late 2009 and early 2010 that it intends to build additional uranium enrichment facilities. At first Iran spoke of ten installations – an intentionally exaggerated number – but in April 2010 it announced that it would start constructing two new facilities in the coming months.

Iran's missile program – which, unlike the nuclear program, the Iranians take no pains to conceal – is making rapid progress: the quality, range, and accuracy of the missiles are gradually improving. Today Iran has ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead; and for about a decade it has had missiles with ranges covering all of the State of Israel.

Where is the Iranian nuclear program headed? From a technical perspective and under optimal circumstances with no significant mishaps, Iran will be able to produce a nuclear explosive device by early 2011; under less optimal conditions, the date will be pushed back to the second half of 2012. This is the assessment of the intelligence community in Israel and the United States. However, most of the indications are that Iran is not proceeding at full speed, but is rather constructing a widespread infrastructure of nuclear capabilities that will allow it to break out to nuclear weapons when it so chooses. While there is no doubt that Iran is building the capability to develop nuclear weapons, for now there is no hard evidence that Iran has already decided concretely to produce them,

and it may well be that for now it prefers to wait on the threshold until it feels that the time is right.

The primary consideration likely to affect the Iranian decision relates to Iran's fundamental future nuclear policy: will it prefer to produce nuclear weapons or will it prefer to remain on the threshold and, from that position, generate some of the advantages while avoiding the high risks? The basis of Iran's calculations will also be affected by some practical questions: will Iran conclude that it needs immediate, available nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis its enemies and will therefore break out towards nuclear weapons? Will Iran be ready to pay the price for making the transition to a stage that will leave no room for doubt that it has in fact decided to produce nuclear weapons? How will it assess the value of remaining on the threshold versus the value of having nuclear weapons in hand? Should it decide to cross the threshold, will it prefer to let it be known – through an announcement or even a nuclear test – or will it avoid publicity and adopt a policy of ambiguity?

The Political Efforts to Curb Iran

The Obama administration heralded an important change in the political efforts designed to curb Iran's attainment of nuclear weapons. The Bush administration did not reject direct dialogue with Iran about the nuclear question out of hand and in practice, on several occasions, held talks at working levels on some regional issues such as Iraq and Afghanistan. However, supported by European governments, it set a firm condition for dialogue on the nuclear question: Iran would have to suspend its uranium enrichment activities before talks started. In practice, this condition prevented any direct negotiations between the American administration and Iran on the nuclear issue, and they have been conducted primarily via various European governments with the United States coordinating its positions with them.

Even before entering the White House, President Obama announced a different approach and said he would strive for direct dialogue with Iran on the nuclear issue. From the outset the administration did not seem overly optimistic about the prospects for direct talks, but it felt they were important for two reasons: the previous approach of avoiding direct talks

had not produced results, and the idea of direct talks had widespread support in the United States and Europe. Therefore, the administration sought to promote Obama's initiative in order to fully explore this route, however inauspicious, and in order to gain solid ground for international support to apply pressure on Iran should talks fail.

However, with an eye to the talks the Obama administration made several important concessions that played directly into Iranian hands. In addition to conceding the suspension of uranium enrichment as a precondition for talks, the administration also conceded time limits. From the outset it did not set a timetable for negotiations, and when it set dates for concluding the talks it failed to keep them. The administration accepted the Iranian position that talks should start only after the Iranian presidential elections in June 2009, thereby granting Iran more than half a year in which no negotiations were held and no pressure was exerted. Still, the most severe mistake on the administration's part in this context was freezing military action against Iran. Even during the last months of the Bush administration, senior American security officials made it clear that under present conditions they were opposed to a military move – American or Israeli – against Iranian nuclear sites, although they professed that all options against Iran remained on the table. This approach continued and even intensified under Obama, and by mid-2010 it became clear that the American administration is not considering the military option, at least at this stage.

Yet despite the efforts and concessions by the Obama administration, the attempt to conduct direct talks with Iran has come to naught. The American administration failed to develop a significant dialogue with Iran, partly because of the strong mutual distrust that for years has cast a pall on relations between the two countries. Thus the talks with the Iranians, which took place in the fall of 2009, were conducted primarily by European governments and the IAEA, and focused on a circular deal: Iran would transfer to Russia about 80 percent of the LEU it had amassed to date (based on the IAEA's report of November 2009, Iran at that point had some 1,800 kg of LEU) in a process that would last about a year; Russia would enrich the uranium to a 20 percent level and move it to a third country such as France, which would process it into nuclear fuel rods, which would then

be returned to Iran for use at the small research reactor in Tehran, serving mostly civilians needs.

The deal was apparently limited in nature and contained significant advantages for Iran. It did not deal with the Iranian nuclear program as a whole and was not designed to halt it. It touched on a portion of Iran's enriched uranium in an attempt to neutralize it temporarily. It did not in any way ban further uranium enrichment in Iran and seemed to grant legitimacy to – and acceptance of – such enrichment. Within less than a year Iran would again be able to enrich uranium in quantities similar to those it would transfer to Russia. The deal did not address the nuclear installations in Arak, nor did it touch either on the plutonium track Iran is developing in tandem with its uranium track or on the enrichment facility discovered in Qom. The plan did not threaten Iran with sanctions should Iran fail to cooperate with Western governments.

On the other hand, the American administration and the European governments saw the deal as having a twofold advantage, given the lack of any better option for halting the Iranian nuclear program. Were Iran to accept the deal, it would effect the immediate removal of most of the enriched uranium Iran had amassed from Iran's borders for about a year, during which time it would be possible to conduct negotiations over the future of the nuclear program under a more extended timetable. The deal would also build trust with Iran and enable a better setting for dialogue. If Iran rejected the limited deal, it would make it easier for the administration to enlist the support of the Russian and Chinese governments to impose harsh sanctions against Iran, as the failure would prove that dialogue with Iran was an exercise in futility.

Iran ultimately rejected the deal, notwithstanding its inherent advantages, primarily because Iran did not trust the United States and the Western governments to return the nuclear fuel after it transferred the enriched uranium from its territory and was then more vulnerable to pressure. Therefore Iran made the deal conditional on its taking place on Iranian soil, on exchanging the enriched uranium for the fuel rods at the same time rather than a year later, and on transferring only a small portion of the enriched uranium it had amassed rather than most of it. The rejection of the deal was also affected by the internal crisis in Iran, which led to a hardening

of positions on the nuclear question and strengthened the opposition of the regime's radical wing, headed by Supreme Leader Khamenei, to dialogue with the American administration.

Iran's rejection of the uranium deal did not leave any room for continued attempts at dialogue with the administration, and in practice, since late November 2009 there have been no significant talks between Western governments and Iran. Given this dead end, the Obama administration has sought to move to the next phase of its plan – to take advantage of Iran's uncompromising position to enlist the cooperation of Russia and China and intensify the sanctions already in place via a Security Council resolution. However, it became clear once again that attaining unanimity with regard to imposing painful sanctions against Iran was quite problematic. From the outset, the Russian government was prepared to impose only minor sanctions against Iran and the Chinese government was opposed even to that; only after extended talks did it agree to join in imposing limited sanctions against Iran.

The rejected deal largely resembled an agreement that was reached between Iran, Turkey, and Brazil in May 2010 about the uranium issue. Iran would move 1,200 kg LEU to Turkey and would, a year later, receive nuclear fuel rods. However, in the meantime circumstances had changed, as did some components of the deal. The Western governments, including the American administration, had no part in the negotiations or the agreement: those involved were only the leaders of Turkey and Brazil, who for their own reasons sought to assist Iran and prevent the imposition of sanctions against it. Therefore, it was not clear how and by whom the fuel rods would be returned to Iran. The agreement also determined that the enriched uranium deposited in Turkey would remain Iran's property, and Iran would be able to decide if the deal was to its liking. Were it to decide that it was not, Turkey would return the uranium to Iran. Equally important, Iran in the intervening months had enriched more uranium and after the transfer to Turkey would need less time to make up the difference in its total amount of uranium. Although in the meantime Iran also started enriching uranium to the 20 percent level, the agreement made no reference to this, nor to the announcement on the advanced centrifuges and the intention to build additional enrichment facilities. These developments to a large degree

offset the advantages that the governments of the West saw in the uranium deal in late 2009.

No wonder, then, that the governments of the West rejected the agreement: it was seen as an attempt to drive a wedge between them on the one hand and Russia and China on the other, and to disrupt the attempt to impose additional sanctions against Iran. The American administration even announced that it was not prepared to conduct a dialogue with Iran unless Iran agreed to a complete halt on uranium enrichment, adding that the goal of the uranium deal of late 2009 was the suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment program. Moreover, the same week that Iran announced its agreement with Turkey and Brazil, the governments of the West – with Russian and Chinese approval – submitted a draft agreement to the Security Council calling for more sanctions against Iran.

In the course of the negotiations with Russia and China, the sanctions originally proposed were diluted, and those that were approved are not as harsh as what the West had hoped for. Nonetheless, these sanctions are the most severe that have been imposed on Iran thus far. They are clearly designed to raise the toll exacted of Iran in face of its defiance of the international community on the nuclear issue.

The resolution includes a number of components: increased difficulty for Iran to obtain nuclear technology and continue activities in its missile program; and a ban on Iran's building new nuclear facilities and continuing to build existing facilities for the purpose of enrichment or production of heavy water. The sanctions call for a ban on weapons sales to Iran, including tanks, artillery, fighter plans, attack helicopters, combat vessels, and missiles, and a ban on technical assistance or spare parts for these platforms. This ban has already prompted Russia to announce suspension of the sale of the S-300 air defense systems, signed with Iran in 2007 but not yet concluded. There is to be more rigorous inspections of suspicious cargo bound for Iran via naval vessels and aircraft and the confiscation of suspicious cargo. The sanctions also call for the denial of financial services and a freeze of assets that could contribute to Iran's forbidden nuclear activity; damage to Iran's banking and financial activity by banning new banking ties with Iran, which includes preventing the opening of new branches of Iranian banks outside of Iran if there is any suspicion that they

are linked to nuclear proliferation; limits on business deals connected to the Revolutionary Guards; and stronger limitations on both movement of individuals and actions by companies involved with the nuclear program. Finally, there will be a committee that will monitor implementation of the sanctions.

Because of the weaker sanctions stipulated by the Security Council resolution, the Western governments hope to translate the agreement in principle on sanctions to additional, harsher sanctions. The US administration, backed by Congress, aims to limit the activity of additional Iranian companies that contribute to the nuclear and missile programs, including companies tied to the Revolutionary Guards, Iranian banking and financial institutions, and the oil and shipping industries. Similarly, France, Great Britain, and Germany are trying to spearhead sanctions by the European Union, including a ban on new investments; equipment and technology sales to Iranian oil, gas, and refinery companies; Iran's banks and insurance companies; and its air and naval transportation, including a ban on Iranian ships docking at European ports. These sanctions include a freeze of assets and bank accounts in the EU belonging to Iranian officials and entities linked to the Revolutionary Guards.

On paper, these sanctions are potentially able to significantly increase the pressure on Iran. However, their success depends on two main questions. The first is to what extent these governments and companies will cooperate in the implementation. Clearly there are governments that object to the sanctions and there are companies prepared to violate them. Past experience suggests that it will be difficult to enforce a large portion of the sanctions, especially as Iran has established a whole network to bypass the sanctions. The second issue is whether Iran, even if hurt by the sanctions, will be willing to reconsider its nuclear ambition. Thus far Iran has presented a tough stance and announced that sanctions will not halt its nuclear program – on the contrary, they would even accelerate it. Thus the most likely possibility is that Iran will be willing to pay the price to continue towards its nuclear goal, particularly if some of the sanctions are not implemented. However, if Western governments succeed in enforcing the sanctions for an extended period of time, perhaps Iran will be forced to show some flexibility and will agree to negotiate the issue.

Options for the American Administration

The American administration is still committed to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons, recognizing the risks associated of a nuclear Iran to the stability of the Middle East, to American interests in the region, and to Israel and other US allies. In the summer of 2010, the American administration faces three uncomfortable, unpromising alternatives in face of these risks. The preferred path is to continue to attempt to persuade Iran that attaining nuclear weapons will not advance its security and will come at a heavy price. However, the chances that the administration will manage to enlist international support for sufficiently painful sanctions against Iran – whether through the Security Council or not – are still not very high. The sanctions resolution approved by the Security Council in June 2010 is a step forward but it is still unclear to what extent it will be implemented – or successfully circumvented. In the meantime, Iran seems determined to stay the course and has enlisted the opposition of states such as Turkey, Venezuela, and Brazil to sanctions. At the same time, Iran is taking steps to minimize the damage of the new sanctions, including the preparation of alternative sources for importing refined oil.

The second alternative is to put the military option back on the agenda. The administration has never ruled it out completely and from time to time stresses that this option too is on the table. However, since mid-2008 senior American security establishment officials have expressed clear reservations about this alternative, primarily because of the risks and uncertainty involved, and the assessment that a military move would not eliminate the Iranian nuclear program but would at most delay it for a few years. Because the risks are not expected to disappear with time, it is doubtful whether the American defense establishment would change its mind and support a military move, whether American or Israeli, unless it determines that something has changed in the risk-opportunity ratio relating to such a move, or Iran takes a particularly provocative step with respect to the nuclear issue.

A military move against Iran is the option least preferred by both Israel and the United States. It is complex and problematic, entails many operational risks, and has earned the objections of all states. It is highly doubtful whether an Israeli action would halt the Iranian nuclear program

for an extended period; an American move could perhaps do so, but only on condition that the United States undertakes a series of repeated attacks that would bring Iran to the conclusion that it would be better off giving up its nuclear program. Iran would likely respond to a military move with missile fire at Israel and terrorism, including through Hizbollah, though the Iranian response capabilities are not very extensive. In the case of an American attack, Iran is liable to attack American targets, including the American forces stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and targets of America's allies. Iran has also threatened that in response to a military attack it would close the Straits of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. It is doubtful that it would actually do so because it would be the first to feel the damaging effects, but such a move is liable to increase oil prices. For its part, an Israeli military move would apparently require a green – or at least a yellow – light from the American administration, and this has yet to be given. It is doubtful that with America negating a military move, Israel would be free to act. Finally, it would be necessary to weigh which is the greater risk: making a military move or living in the shadow of an Iranian nuclear bomb.

The third alternative is to consent to Iran enriching uranium at home and recognize the incapability of stopping Iran, accept the scenario of a nuclear Iran, and prepare accordingly. It seems that the American administration has yet to reach this point and still thinks that it is possible to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear. Even if it is forced to accept continued uranium enrichment in Iran, it is still hoping that it is possible to tighten international supervision of Iran's nuclear activity and prevent it from attaining nuclear weapons. However, within the professional community, and possibly also in political circles in Europe and the United States, some are already convinced that the possibilities of stopping Iran are tenuous at best and that Iran is destined to achieve its goal. Should the administration adopt this assessment, its objective then may be to pressure Iran into stopping at the threshold and not building a nuclear device.

If the American administration does come to the conclusion that it cannot stop Iran on its march to nuclear weapons, it will have to create contingencies for that situation, at first maintaining a low profile so as not to signal to Iran that it has given up. The administration's main courses of action may be: persuading Israel not to make an independent military

move; applying pressure on Iran not to cross the nuclear threshold; attempting dialogue with Iran in order to create rules for playing in a nuclear environment should it cross the nuclear threshold; attempting to delay Iran so that it will not amass an operational stockpile; working to prevent transfer of nuclear technology to other elements, including terrorist organizations; strengthening Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis a nuclear Iran; applying pressure on other Middle Eastern states not to join in a nuclear arms race; and perhaps working to realize the notion of a nuclear-free Middle East, which has implications not only for Iran but also for Israel.

The choice among these three alternatives may have to be made in the next year or two. The primary considerations likely to affect the American administration's decision are a clearer picture emerging regarding the possibility and effectiveness of painful sanctions on Iran; a clearer picture of Iran's intentions and the actual progress made in its nuclear program; the position of the American defense establishment regarding the military option; Israel's position on the handling of the Iranian nuclear issue; security conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the exit of the American forces still stationed there; and possibly even the upcoming American presidential election campaign.

The Internal Crisis in Iran

This past year the Iranian nuclear issue shared the stage with the internal crisis. The roots of the crisis are deep, stemming from a feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction of a significant part of the Iranian people with the regime and from disappointment that the promises of the Islamic Revolution were never realized. The unrest permeating Iran for many years reflects the desire, especially among the younger generation and women, to reduce the regime's interference in the private lives of its citizens, to expand political freedom, and to improve the economic situation. The unrest erupted in June 2009 following President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in the elections, extending his term for another four years. The election results were viewed by many as rigged and brought hundreds of thousands into the streets calling for nullification of the elections. Quickly the call was simplified to "Death to the dictator," directed at Khamenei and Ahmadinejad.

The reformist camp is not completely uniform, as it is composed of a few different groups: students and young people, intellectuals and liberal activists, public and religious figures concerned by the growing power of the Revolutionary Guards in the Iranian establishment, and people in the financial and business sector worried about the country's economic situation. These groups have different demands, from holding new presidential elections to ousting the current regime leaders and introducing radical regime changes. Since the violence in June 2009 the scope of demonstrations and riots has decreased but not disappeared, flaring up especially on memorial days and significant dates in the calendar, as the reformist camp seeks to stress that the protest movement is alive and well. Between demonstrations, the reformists are busy organizing and conducting limited local protests, using websites and social networks for communications.

The decrease in the scope of demonstrations reflects the regime's success to date in curbing the protests' momentum. The regime did not lose control at any stage, give in to the reformists' demands, or compromise its positions. Rather, it chose to wield a heavy hand against the reformist camp, including through the use of extensive physical force, especially by the police and the Basij volunteer militia, arresting thousands of reformists and trying some of them in show trials, torturing and executing activists, disrupting organization and communication activities, slandering the leaders of the protest movement, closing newspapers and arresting journalists covering the protests, interfering in university curricula, and increasing the Islamic content of the educational system.

In the face of this massive use of force, the reformists have been forced to lower their profile. However, the protest movement has not been entirely quashed, even if its external manifestations have become more muted, and it enjoys strong support in an important segment of the public. The crisis in which the regime finds itself is deep, revealing a three-fold crack in the regime's foundation: one, a rift between the regime and a significant portion of the people wanting a change in the nature of the Islamic republic; two, a rift in the regime leadership between the radical faction supported mainly by the Revolutionary Guards and the reformists – joined by some of the radicals – who have been pushed out of national leadership positions and

seek liberalization within the framework of the Islamic republic; and three, a crack in the religious elite, in which an important group has reservations about the conduct of the regime's leaders and the power accrued by the Revolutionary Guards, which has become politically, militarily, and economically dominant at the expense of the religious leadership. These cracks also reflect the loss of legitimacy suffered by regime leaders, especially the loss of Khamenei's religious and political authority among some of the Iranian public.

Therefore, although the attempt to generate change has so far failed, the unrest in Iran will likely continue and find violent and non-violent outlets, with organized or spontaneous outbursts from time to time. In the meantime, it is not endangering the regime's survival because the use of force has succeeded in deterring the reformist camp from acting against the regime in the open. Change is likely to come when three factors converge: good organization that includes the entire nation, not just the outburst of spontaneous and/or local protest; charismatic leadership that presents clear goals for the protest movement; and determination to continue to work against the regime despite the sacrifices and cost. This combination is not likely to occur in the near future. However, there is a high probability that change will finally come, because lacking sufficient legitimacy and given true widespread desire for change, it is doubtful that the regime will be able to guarantee its survival even with the use of force alone.

The internal crisis in Iran has a number of implications for the nuclear issue. The crisis is connected to the sanctions because the regime in Tehran has become more vulnerable to pressure due to the internal protest, some of which was directed at the country's economic distress. On the other hand, the concern increased that escalating the sanctions in an atmosphere of internal unrest would trigger a reverse response and result in the United States being blamed for the economic state; this could prompt the population to rally around the regime. The solution adopted by the American administration was to choose economic sanctions that would not directly affect the public at large, rather institutions and organizations connected to the regime, first and foremost powerful economic institutions linked to the Revolutionary Guards.

Beyond this, in the short term the internal weakness is liable to strengthen the regime's unflinching determination to continue to strive for nuclear weapons, in order to strengthen its internal status and show steadfastness in the face of international pressures. Iran's rejection of the uranium deal stemmed in part from its desire to demonstrate resolve in light of the internal crisis. In the long term, should there indeed be a change in Iran and the nature of the regime be altered, this does not ensure that a more liberal Iranian leadership would agree to abandon the nuclear quest, because most of the Iranian public, including the leaders of the reformist camp, support Iran's right to develop its own nuclear program – although it is unclear what their stance is on the development of nuclear weapons. However, the more liberal moderate leadership in Iran is likely to be interested in a comprehensive constructive dialogue with the American administration and other Western governments, meaning that the Iranian threat would change even with Iran having nuclear weapons.

In conclusion, 2009-10 revealed some weaknesses in the Iranian regime: the internal crisis, the unrest, and the reformists' challenge to the regime; economic distress, which has accompanied the regime through most of its existence and is one of the reasons for the internal crisis; the widespread international effort to isolate Iran and present it as a threat to Middle Eastern stability; the public disagreement with Russia, both over the sanctions and the supply of the S-300 system; and the intensification of sanctions in the near future. However, the regime can present some important successes of its own: the protest was suppressed by force, and even if it continues to exist, since July 2009 its open outbursts have been limited; the nuclear program is viewed in Iran as a national project without any real opposition; Iran's impact on the region has become more profound, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip; and Iran has earned help from important nations, such as Turkey and Brazil, working to steer it clear of the danger of sanctions. The bottom line with regard to the balance of achievements and constraints is this: the Iranian regime, at least for now, still has enough tools to continue its present policies, especially with regard to the nuclear issue.