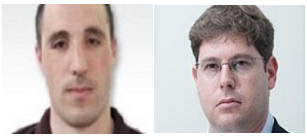
IRAN MATTERS
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How rational is Iran?

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Avner Golov and **Yoel Guzansky** explore the limits of rationality in Iran's nuclear decision making. They argue Iran's leaders, while likely individually rational, face structural and cultural circumstances that would lead them to act irrationally as part of a nuclear deterrence regime.

By Avner Golov and Yoel Guzansky

How is it possible to measure a state's rationality and its compatibility with deterrence? This theoretical exercise holds immense implications to the debate between two schools of thought on the best policy response to Iran's nuclear aspirations. Experts, usually those who advocate a containment policy vis-à-vis Iran, point to its past rational behaviour as corroboration of the official American intelligence assessment that Iran's leaders, despite their fanatical rhetoric, are fundamentally rational. Because Iran's leadership is not suicidal, they argue, it is highly unlikely that a nuclear-armed Iran would deliberately use a nuclear device or transfer one to terrorists, an assumption under which a deterrence strategy against a nuclear Iran is feasible. Scholars who reject this assumption point out that the rationality of Iran's leaders is of a religious nature; thus, the cost-benefit calculus guiding them is based on different priorities than the West's, and the deterrence of a nuclear Iran would consequently require complicated measures as well as expose the world to an immense risk of nuclear war breaking out in the Middle East.

Despite the dichotomous nature of this discussion, the relationship between the nature of decision-making and deterrence strategy is anything but black and white. Human decision-making, regardless of its nature, is subject to the strategic environment: external factors that can significantly influence the process and change its outcomes for better or worse. What is the nature of the Iranian strategic environment and is it expected to support strategic stability in case of nuclear Iran? Here is a partial analysis of three main elements characterize the atmosphere where Iranian decision makers operate.

The international system is the broadest environment in which national security decisions are made. Deterrence regimes hinge on each side's ability to study and grasp the other's way of thinking, to communicate clear and credible signals in response to any violations of banned actions, and to punish any such action. In view of the non-centralised nature of today's international environment, the rising power of non-state actors, and the threat of vertical WMD proliferation, it has become increasingly difficult and risky for all the actors concerned, including Iran, to understand their rivals' mind-set and thus to be able to predict their policies and tailor an appropriate deterrence strategy.

Moreover, the Middle East is one of the world's most unstable regions in an already innately unstable global system, thus further diminishing the likeliness of being able to deter the Iranian regime. Its ties with terror organizations such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas, along with its continuously tense relations with Sunni neighbours such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar and regional rivals such as Turkey and Israel further contribute to the proneness of the regional system in which Iran operates to crises.

The technical nature of the decision-making, that is to say the procedures, is another important aspect to consider in analysing the decision-making environment. The procedures determine the 'rules of the game' and affect decision-makers' ability to collect, assess, and incorporate information into policy alternatives that maximise the potential utility to the decision-maker. Though the optimum model cannot be implemented in reality because of time constraints and psychological and organisational biases, the more closely the actual decision-making processes adhere to the model, the greater the likelihood that deterrence signals will successfully influence the cost-benefit considerations of the challenger.

Iran's national security decision-making system comprises multiple organisations with overlapping areas of responsibility. Chiefly in competition are the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), who coordinates the country's intelligence and is subordinate to the president, and the intelligence service of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who has been reporting directly to the supreme leader. Thus, there are actually two intelligence systems in Iran: one subordinate to the supreme leader and the other, to the president—an arrangement that reflects the tension between the two heads. The dual-structured system is designed to reduce the likelihood of one or the other growing strong enough to threaten the regime. Therefore, those individuals with the power to mediate between the various organizational entities and resolve their conflicts play a crucial role in Iranian decision-making. The most striking example is the supreme leader, whose formal and informal influence have made him de facto the pivot. The tense political framework riddled with rivalry which surrounds them most probably increases the risks of misperceptions or miscalculations.

Finally, the strategic environment in which decision-makers operate is shaped by the strategic culture of the leadership. The underlying assumption of a deterrence strategy is that decision-makers, if forced to choose between life or death, will calculate their decision on a cost-benefit basis and choose the former. The power to deter diminishes if a decision-maker's culture is not averse to incurring great human loss or causing serious

harm to the decision-making organisation. Two important aspects of the Iranian strategic culture could hinder a future non-conventional deterrence strategy against the current Shiite Iranian regime.

The first aspect is the impact of religious-messianic motifs on Iranian decision-making. In 2008 for example, Supreme Leader Khamenei publicly prognosticated the return to this world of the Shiite messianic figure associated with 'the end of the days', known as the Twelfth Imam or the Mahdi, to save humanity—adding that his own efforts would be dedicated to this purpose. Former President Ahmadinejad also frequently mentioned the return of the Hidden Imam, as does the current president, Hassan Rohani. According to the former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, Khamenei informed him in a private conversation in 2000 that 'an open confrontation against the United States and Israel was inevitable, and that he was working for Iran to prevail in such a confrontation'.

Messianism is not limited to the regime's upper echelon but also prevails among the political leadership and within the IRGC; the clerics' fundamental role in the regime accounts for the fact that religious ideology shapes the identity of all those involved in decision-making and influences the overall process.

In light of Iran's ideological apparatus, the viability of a stable deterrence regime is doubtful. Iran's justification of self-sacrifice, for example, thwarts efforts to formulate an intolerably costly deterrent measure. The former president Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani called on Muslims to use nuclear weapons against Israel, proclaiming his conviction that achieving Israel's destruction was worth incurring the severe consequences to the Muslim world that would follow, which, however, would not be annihilation. Thus the messianic influence on Iranian decision-making should be seriously weighed, as opposed to relying exclusively on Western concepts of 'rationality' or 'irrationality'.

Another important aspect of Iranian strategic culture is the importance attached to honour. Cultures of honor, such as the Iranian one, encourage leaders to escalate in response to deterrent threats, which suggests that the use of deterrence can be counterproductive. In the eyes of Iranians, the honor of the regime and in turn the Iranian nation stands foremost in every decision. In March 2013, Khamenei, for example, attacked the United States for trying 'to cripple the Iranian nation and to bring it to its knees'. In the same speech, he declared that Iran's performance in face of the international economic sanctions that were imposed on it 'will reveal the Iranian nation's pride and honour'. Similarly, the Iranian chief of staff, Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, declared that 'whenever [sic] 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'. Any country that seeks to effectively threaten the current Islamic Iranian regime must therefore keep in mind that severe threats that are not accompanied by concrete overtures may threaten Iran's face-saving posture. If a proposal that takes into account Iran's cultural characteristics is not forthcoming, Iran might opt to take risks in order to uphold its national pride.

Taken altogether, this analysis demonstrates that Iran's leadership operates in an environment that is unsupportive of deterrence regimes, making it difficult for Iran's decision-makers to maintain stability, even if they themselves are rational individuals. This conclusion does not reconcile with the claim that a nuclear Iran would strengthen a stable deterrence regime in the region. Rather, if certain developments indeed arise, it is highly likely that such a regime would fail.

It is vital that the dichotomous perception of Tehran's rationality be replaced in order to better evaluate the threats and opportunities that Iran's strategic environment offers. Those who view Iran as rational and favour, on that basis, a containment policy should not overlook the limits of Iran's rationality, thus misrecognize the risk that deterrence stability in the Middle East with a nuclear Iran entails.

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