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Iran Under Pressure

Ephraim Kam

Iran has recently come under increasing domestic and international pressure stemming from three primary factors. The first is the changes to Iran's strategic environment that resulted from the American operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, some of which have been positive for Iran but most of which have been negative. The second factor concerns new revelations about Iran's progress towards acquiring nuclear weapons, sparking a great deal of international pressure on the country. The third factor is domestic unrest within Iran, characterized primarily by student protests against the policy and leadership of the ruling regime. The fact that these three sources of pressure emerged in the same period in effect links them and causes each one to influence the other, and their interplay makes it difficult for the regime to resolve them.

Changes in Iran's Strategic Environment

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in the United States, and to a great degree as a result of the attack, Iran's strategic environment has changed significantly. In most ways, these changes increased the American threat towards Iran and heightened the external pressures on the country. The fact that the Bush administration insisted on embarking on a war on terrorism positioned Iran as a possible target for American action, given that since 1984 Iran has consistently been defined by the United States as the country most involved in terrorism. Iran's links to al-Qaeda operatives and to Hizbollah – also marked by the Bush administration as a possible target in its war on terrorism – and its ever increasing encouragement of Palestinian terrorism against Israel

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contributed to Iran's inclusion in the so-called tri-polar "axis of evil."

The American military operation in Afghanistan in late 2001 increased external pressure on Iran. Although the campaign resulted in the toppling of the hostile anti-Iran Taliban regime and presented Iran with an opportunity to strengthen its influence among the Shiite minority in western Afghanistan, a regime linked to the United States was established in Afghanistan and American soldiers were positioned just across Iran's western border. The message that the United States sent to Iran was equally important: the United States has taken military action in order to topple a Muslim regime – a neighbor of Iran, no less – because it sheltered a terrorist organization. The inclusion of Iran along the axis of evil and the operation in Afghanistan, steps regarded as threats to Iran's Islamic regime, caused shock in Iran, forcing the regime to regard the possibility of an American and/or Israeli military attack as greater than before. Based on this concern, and based on emerging signs that the United States might in fact undertake military action in Iraq, Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani announced in December 2002 that Iran would increase its military spending for 2003 in order to better prepare itself for a possible war in the region.

The war in Iraq brought about the most important change in Iran's strategic environment. On the one hand, the war yielded some positive developments for Iran. The American operation toppled the regime of

Saddam Hussein, with whom Iran had a long and bloody account to settle. Iraq would no longer be able to threaten Iran with conventional weapons or weapons of mass destruction. Iraq's disappearance as a central player in the Middle East, at least for a significant period of time, leaves Iran as the major force in the Gulf region. The outcome of the war also presented Iran with new opportunities for expanding its

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influence in Iraq, primarily among Iraq's Shiite population, who recently started undergoing a process of ethnic awakening; Iran might even try to create a new Iranian-Iraqi Shiite center of gravity.

On the other hand, Iran's strategic posture was damaged by the war, primarily due to the significantly increased American threat. A large American force was stationed in Iraq, with no sign of leaving in the immediate future. The American administration is attempting to stabilize an American-sponsored regime in Iraq that will cooperate with it. It is also possible that the United

States will attempt to rebuild Iraq as a counterbalance to Iran, not only politically but militarily as well. Iran will thus be surrounded on almost all sides by countries with regimes linked to the United States, most of which have American forces stationed on their soil. The toppling of Saddam's regime also weakened the group of radical countries in the region, which includes Iran, and increased the power of American deterrence. Furthermore, the message sent by the American operation was no less significant: the Bush administration has gone to war again – this time, despite significant international opposition – in order to topple a Muslim or Arab regime that crossed a red line in terms of American interests. The campaign in Iraq also demonstrated the fundamental difference between a modern army and an army like that of Iraq or Iran.

This warning signal was intended first and foremost for Iran, as the accusations against Iran are much more serious than the factors that motivated the Bush administration to go to war with Iraq. Iraq's involvement in terrorism was limited in the two years preceding the war. It was far from acquiring nuclear weapons, and the extent of its progress in developing chemical and biological capabilities after the 1991 Gulf War has yet to be proven. In contrast, Iran is engaged heavily in terrorism and is in contact with al-Qaeda operatives. More than ever before, Iran is involved in encouraging and directing Palestinian terrorism against Israel and thus in sabotaging the Bush

administration efforts to end the current Israeli-Palestinian crisis and restore the conflict to the diplomatic track. Iran has chemical weapons and, apparently, biological weapons as well. Most importantly, it is on the way to acquiring nuclear weapons. The American administration also accuses Iran of disrupting other important components of its Middle East policy – by harboring al-Qaeda operatives who escaped from Afghanistan and by interfering with American efforts to stabilize Iraq. As a result, some voices in Washington are in favor of adopting a tougher policy towards Iran, even to the point of taking military action for the sake of regime change.

Since the end of the Iraq War, the Bush administration has been trying to take advantage of the war's outcome in order to pressure Iran to change its behavior. On a practical level, the United States has demanded that Iran sever its ties with al-Qaeda operatives and extradite those who found refuge in Iran. It has also insisted that Iran refrain from interfering and developing spheres of influence in Iraq, primarily among the Shiites. But the United States has also raised more general issues, such as demanding that Iran cease its involvement in terrorism and, most importantly, that it put a halt to its program of nuclear weapons development.

The New Stage of Iran's Nuclear Program

In light of recent findings, American pressure on Iran since the beginning

of 2003 has focused on the issue of Iranian nuclear development. The Iranian nuclear program made no significant progress during the 1990s. Plans to construct a nuclear power plant in Bushehr proceeded slowly, and plans to build a large research facility did not progress at all. Iran did not succeed in building a central nuclear facility that could contribute directly to the development of fissile material through uranium enrichment

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ment or plutonium separation. The difficulties in implementing the plans stemmed both from the weakness of Iran's scientific and technological infrastructure and from America's partial success in obstructing the transfer of nuclear equipment and technology to Iran.

However, since 2001 a significant change has occurred in this realm, apparently with the help of Pakistan and North Korea, as well as research institutes and commercial companies in Russia and China. It became evident that Iran has constructed a number of nuclear facilities that are highly significant for the attempt to

acquire nuclear weapons, and that it plans to build more. Some of these facilities were discovered by Western intelligence agencies and made public by Iranian opposition groups and the American intelligence community. Others were discovered during visits of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials to Iran during the first half of 2003. For its part, Iran had refrained from declaring to the IAEA the existence of most of these facilities, as well as providing information on additional nuclear activity, until it was recently pressured to do so. These facilities include:

■ A gas centrifuge uranium enrichment facility at Natanz. The plant also houses a pilot plant for the enrichment of uranium that was slated to begin functioning in June 2003, and a large uranium enrichment facility with more than 50,000 centrifuges, the construction of which is to be completed in the next few years.

■ A workshop of the Kalaye Electrical Company in Tehran, which was disguised as a watch factory and used as a cover for secret activity relating to the centrifugal enrichment of uranium. Iran initially refused to allow IAEA inspectors to visit the site, and when they did, part of the facility remained off limits. It is suspected that unreported testing with nuclear material was carried out at the site, violating the international Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). An Iranian opposition group also reported two other secret facilities related to uranium enrichment.

■ A heavy water production plant in Arak, in advanced stages of construction, and a 40 megawatt research plant to be powered by heavy water and natural uranium, which Iran announced would be built at the site in 2004.

■ A uranium conversion plant at Isfahan that China began constructing in the 1990s; construction was halted in 1997 due to American pressure. Iran recently announced that it will soon complete the plant and start operating it, and that it is also about to begin mining natural uranium at the uranium deposits discovered in central Iran in the 1990s.

■ Iran likewise acknowledged that it received 1.8 tons of natural uranium from China in 1991, which it had not declared to the IAEA as was incumbent on it. Part of this quantity was stored in a nuclear laboratory in Tehran, which Iran did not declare either. A small portion of this uranium, imported in the form of UF₆ gas, was not to be found in the cylinders that were presented to the IAEA, and it is suspected that Iran used it for uranium enrichment tests.

These findings have grave implications from a number of angles regarding Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons. First, the enrichment facility in Natanz will give Iran the capacity to produce fissile material through uranium enrichment. While the large facility at Natanz will only be completed in a few years, Iran will be able to enrich significant quantities of uranium before its completion. In addition, the pilot plant can already enrich small

quantities of uranium. Even if – as Iran claims – the plant produces low-enriched uranium intended for future power plants, it will be able to direct some of its capability towards producing a significant quantity of military quality uranium, which would be enough to produce 2-3 nuclear bombs per year.

Second, Iran has proven that it is capable of disregarding its obligations to the NPT and of secretly building

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nuclear facilities. It can be assumed that Iran did not intend to declare the facilities it built, but rather some were exposed by an Iranian opposition group and others were reported due to the pressures exerted on the regime. And just as Iran secretly built the enrichment facility at Natanz, so it might build a smaller secret facility for the enrichment of military quality uranium elsewhere, in a location that would be difficult for the IAEA to find. In fact, it is possible that Iran has already built such a facility secretly (perhaps this is actually the Kalaye facility), as the facility constructed at Natanz is so large and so sophisti-

cated that it could have only been built after Iran built and operated a smaller enrichment facility, thereby violating the NPT. Indeed, in July 2003, IAEA inspectors discovered traces of highly enriched uranium in Natanz. In a clumsy attempt to explain the NPT violation, Iran told the inspectors that the uranium came into the country on contaminated equipment purchased abroad,

Iran thus exploited the loopholes in its present obligations to the NPT. It was the only signatory country that by 2003 had not accepted the IAEA's requirement of 1992 that countries report the construction of new nuclear facilities prior to the beginning of construction. After a great deal of pressure, Iran undertook this obligation for the first time in 2003, and this will make it more difficult for the country to build additional facilities clandestinely. However, even after accepting this obligation, Iran can, in violation of its commitment, still attempt to build nuclear facilities secretly, especially as long as it has not signed the Additional Protocol, a document that grants the IAEA stricter supervisory authority. Without this authority, the IAEA does not have the tools necessary to identify and locate undeclared nuclear activity or to determine whether Iran has built secret uranium enrichment facilities.

Third, indications thus suggest that through its recent actions, Iran has been establishing the potential to acquire fissile material through uranium enrichment in two possible ways: by enriching military quality

uranium at a secret enrichment facility that is difficult to detect (especially if Iran continues to evade adopting the Additional Protocol, but even possibly if it does sign it); and by withdrawing from the NPT with ninety days notice as construction of the large enrichment facility in Natanz progresses, and quickly produce a significant quantity of highly enriched uranium.

Fourth and no less disturbing is Iran's announcement that it will soon start building a large research plant fueled by heavy water and natural uranium. While Iran has offered a general explanation for its need for such a plant, based on its plans to establish a complete nuclear fuel cycle, it is clear that the main objective of building the plant can only be the production of plutonium. This means that while Iran is apparently striving to acquire nuclear weapons primarily through uranium enrichment, it is also making simultaneous efforts to move forward on the plutonium separation track, should it become evident that progress can be made in this direction more quickly.

These serious findings both surprised and worried the American administration, which quickly publicized the fact that Iran was progressing towards nuclear weapons much more rapidly than was previously believed. Similar to the assessments of Israeli intelligence agencies, sources within the American intelligence community estimate that Iran will become capable of acquiring nuclear weapons within three to four

years. In the wake of these assessments, senior administration officials have begun making tough statements against Iran. President Bush called on the international community to make it very clear that it would not tolerate the production of nuclear weapons by Iran. In addition, a senior government official said that while a military operation against Iran is currently a low American priority, it remains an option.

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For now, the administration is focusing on diplomatic efforts to bring the Iranian nuclear program to a halt. Some of these efforts are directed at the IAEA and at Russia. The American administration tried to persuade the IAEA to declare unequivocally that Iran has violated the NPT and to set a detailed timetable for rectifying the situation. Such a declaration would enable the administration to bring the issue to the Security Council and demand that it take steps against Iran, including an export embargo on all nuclear materials to Iran.

So far, the American effort has been only partially successful. The

IAEA's report of June 2003 fell short of declaring that Iran violated the treaty, adopting only a compromise statement that said that Iran "failed" to fulfill some of its obligations by not reporting the use of nuclear materials to the Agency and not declaring the sites where the materials were used. However, the Agency did release a disturbing report that depicts Iran as hiding part of its nuclear activity and offering insufficient explanations for doing so. The Agency also determined that the number of times that Iran failed to report its facilities and activities as required gave cause for concern. In light of this, the IAEA urged Iran to take the following steps:

- To commit to greater openness, providing the Agency with wider access to its nuclear facilities, and, most importantly, to sign the Additional Protocol

- To refrain from moving nuclear materials into the uranium enrichment testing facility and to refrain from operating the facility

- To correct the supervisory problems that were discovered and to provide the Agency with additional information on Iran's nuclear activities

- To allow inspectors to take environmental samples at the sites suspected of enrichment activity.

Faced with accumulating pressure, Iran has assumed tactics of evasion and vagueness in order to gain time and defy the pressure. Since Iran recently committed to reporting every new nuclear facility to the IAEA as soon as construction is decided upon, the bulk of the dispute has focused on

the issue of signing the Additional Protocol. Iran has so far refused to commit to signing the document, while attempting to disguise its refusal with a positive attitude and a willingness to discuss the issue. In the final analysis, however, Iran conditioned its signature of the Protocol on lifting the limitations on its ability to purchase advanced nuclear technology and equipment.

The American administration has also been making use of recent discoveries concerning Iranian nuclear activity in order to try to stop Russia's nuclear assistance to Iran. In light of the new information, Russia's position on the issue appears to have changed somewhat. Russia is no longer ruling out – as it had in the past – the possibility that Iran is secretly developing nuclear weapons, and the president of Russia has given the impression that his country would be willing to curtail its nuclear assistance to Iran as long as the latter refuses to accept intensified international monitoring of its nuclear activity. In practice, however, the Russian change of position is still limited. On the one hand, Russia publicly supports calls for Iran to sign the Additional Protocol, but did not suggest it as a condition for the continuation of its assistance to the Iranian nuclear program. On the other hand, the Russians announced that they will not complete the construction of the nuclear plant in Bushehr until Iran signs an agreement attesting to its commitment to return used fuel rods from the reactor, which is a commitment that Iran has been

dodging for the past eight years. Russia has also hinted that, in the meantime, it will not build another reactor in Bushehr.

The American administration has secured a greater degree of support for its position from the European Union countries, which are apparently convinced that Iran is coming increasingly closer to acquiring nuclear weapons. An official document of the French

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government that was leaked to the media attests to this fact, stating explicitly that Iran has been maintaining a secret nuclear weapons development program and will be able to acquire nuclear weapons within only a few years. The Europeans may also be willing to cooperate with the Bush administration on this subject, following the crisis over the Iraq issue, and in order to help Bush succeed with his diplomatic efforts against Iran and prevent him from taking the military route again. In any case, members of the European Union informed Iran that continued evasion of compliance

with IAEA demands will harm their mutual political and economic cooperation.

Internal Pressure

Along with external pressures, Iran is also experiencing internal pressures. Beginning in early June 2003, a new wave of domestic unrest rocked the country, lasting over a month. As in the past, the unrest was led by students. Other than its simultaneous emergence, the recent agitation was not directly related to the external pressures discussed above. However, it is indeed related to two questions regarding Iran as a future nuclear threat. The first is: to what degree will the Iranian nuclear threat be affected by future internal changes within Iran? For instance, what impact would the emergence of a more moderate leadership in Iran or the undermining of Iran's central government have on the shaping of the nuclear threat? The second is: to what degree might American military action be able to upset Iran's radical regime, in order to check the Iranian threat?

Unrest in Iran is not a new phenomenon, and waves of protests and disturbances have shaken the country at various intervals throughout the past decade. They reflect real dissatisfaction and frustration with the political and economic realities of the country since the Islamic Revolution, primarily among the younger generation. The younger generation, which makes up the majority of Iran's population, grew up under revolutionary fundamentalist

rule and therefore has no first-hand knowledge of the realities of life under the shah. The younger generation regards the present situation as unacceptable and wants to build a better future. Its frustration stems from two main sources: the difficult socioeconomic situation that has plagued Iran since the revolution, manifested, among other indicators, by high unemployment rates, including among the highly educated population; and its determination to expand freedoms of political organization and expression, as well as human and civil rights in the country.

This time, the disturbances were characterized by verbal attacks not only against the regime's policies but against the leaders of the regime as well, including personal attacks against spiritual leader Ali Khamenei. Moreover, some of the attacks were also directed towards the leader of the moderate camp, President Mohammed Khatami, stemming from disappointment with his hesitant leadership style and his helplessness in advancing movement toward reform. The regime adopted a mixture of a firm hand and pacifying efforts to address the unrest. It also accused the United States of subversion and incitement in bringing about the disturbances.

The disturbances subsided in mid-July without escalating out of control and without destabilizing the hold of the radical elements in power. While the majority of the Iranian people are apparently in favor of reform, the general public did not join the students, perhaps because they did

not believe that the protest would produce results. The current wave of protest proved once again that the reform movement still has no leadership, is not united, and is insufficiently organized.

Implications

The regime in Iran now finds itself besieged by a combination of different pressures, most of which stem from its weapons of mass destruction

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ambitions, its involvement in terrorism, and its attempt to take advantage of the vacuum created in Afghanistan and Iraq in order to build spheres of influence in those countries. The external pressures on the regime are led, like in the past, by the United States, which has been drawing increasing attention to Iran and attempting to exploit the changes in its strategic environment in order to cause it to change its policies on the central issues.

The nuclear issue lies at the heart of the external pressures. Iran today is under heavier international pressure than in the past to limit its

nuclear activities and accept much closer supervision, primarily by agreeing to the conditions of the Additional Protocol. Iran has thus far refrained from signing the Protocol, which has made it very difficult for the IAEA to locate undeclared Iranian nuclear activity. At the same time, Iran has used a tactic of evasion, by feigning a willingness to cooperate with the Agency and to facilitate transparency of its nuclear program. Until 2003, this tactic effectively hampered US attempts to consolidate international cooperation to stop the Iranian nuclear program. However, the exposure of crucial components of Iran's nuclear activity since the summer of 2002 has raised questions that Iran is having trouble answering. Moreover, Iran's behavior in response to the information that was uncovered – its attempts to conceal facilities and activities and hinder the Agency's investigations, and its partial and insufficient answers to the questions it was asked – has made the regime's position on its nuclear program appear less reliable. For this reason, Russia and certain European governments have joined the United States in pressuring Iran, albeit in a more limited manner.

Under these pressures, Iran has two possible courses of action, neither of them easy. If it continues to dodge full cooperation with the IAEA, the American administration is likely to bring the issue to the Security Council in order to apply sanctions. If Iran signs the Additional Protocol, it will become more difficult for it to continue its secret nuclear activity

without detection. However, it should be pointed out that the Additional Protocol does not endow the Agency with full capabilities to uncover undeclared facilities. Therefore, even if Iran does sign the Protocol, it will retain two possible ways of attempting to produce fissile material: by producing it at an undeclared facility operating alongside a declared facility (in hopes that it is not detected), thus violating the NPT, or by withdrawing from the NPT with 90 days notice and working relatively quickly to enrich military quality uranium or to produce plutonium and separate it.

Iran itself appears to not be taking the mounting pressure lightly. Statements made by its leaders seem to indicate that they are taking into consideration the possibility of American military action, especially the scenario of an American and/or Israeli attack on nuclear facilities in Iran. The degree to which Iran would be willing to yield on the issue of supervision of its nuclear project is still unclear. However, it may be willing to make additional concessions, as long as it retains an ability to maneuver and to continue the program. In order to gain time, it appears that Iran will follow developments in Iraq closely and hope that the American administration becomes entangled in a difficult situation, expends most of its resources there, and eventually is forced to withdraw its forces.

As long as Iran continues working to acquire nuclear weapons despite the pressures and the difficulties

involved, the Iranian issue will be a central occupation of the American administration after Iraq. America has made it clear that its focus is on stopping Iran's progress towards acquiring nuclear weapons and on decreasing Iran's attempts to hinder American policy through support of terrorism and involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. The American administration will have a number of possible ways of advancing its

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interests. Clearly the currently preferred method is diplomatic. First of all, now is a more opportune time than in the past to achieve results through diplomatic action, with the possibility of exploiting the pressure produced by the campaign in Iraq and the disclosure of important components of Iran's nuclear program. The American administration is also interested in exhausting the diplomatic track in order to provide the minimal legitimacy required for a military strike in the event that it decides to undertake one. Assuming that three to four years remain before Iran can acquire nuclear

weapons, there is still time for diplomatic activity. As far as can be assessed, pressure on Iran can still be intensified, perhaps via the Security Council. This pressure has already started making it more difficult for Iran to proceed with its nuclear program, and the difficulty will be heightened if it signs the Additional Protocol. However, it is doubtful that such pressure will completely block Iran's nuclear track.

Another possible course of action is attempting to initiate a dialogue between the leadership in Washington and the leadership in Tehran. The Bush administration has not ruled out such a step, and theoretically the war in Iraq might create new reasons for Iran to be interested in such a dialogue as well. The destruction of Iraqi military power, which obviated the primary motive for Iran's military buildup, may cause Iran's leadership to rethink its military plans. In addition, the increasingly serious nature of the American threat and the possibility of military action against Iran may motivate the regime to try and minimize the danger by negotiating with the American administration. The stationing of American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is especially significant for Iran's ruling regime, may also increase its interest in a future-oriented dialogue with the United States. Limited dialogue between the two parties on working levels took place prior to the American operation in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq, and the possibility of expanding these talks in the future

cannot be ruled out. In fact, some Iranian leaders recently signaled that such a step is possible, although the radical leadership still discounts the possibility of genuine dialogue with the American administration. As long as this remains its position, and as long as there is no change in the internal balance of power between radicals and moderates within Iran, any serious progress towards dialogue between the sides is doubtful.

A third possible course of action, which was noted by sources in Washington, is attempting to encourage internal change within Iran that would favor the country's moderate elements. There is a small but real hope in Washington that Iran's domestic unrest will lead to moderation of the Islamic regime in Tehran, thereby reducing the Iranian threat. For this reason, some believe that such internal change should be encouraged. Indeed, while at this stage the radical establishment still controls the key positions within Iran and has so far succeeded in subduing the internal unrest, the long term may witness an internal change based on the fact that the current domestic unrest is coming from below – from

the public at large – and reflects a genuine desire for change. Since change may likely be slow, gradual, and full of obstacles and relapses, it is difficult to estimate when it will come about. Nonetheless, there is a good chance that, ultimately, it will occur, eventually resulting in moderation of the regime. At the same time, it should also be assumed that any movement towards the moderation of the regime in Iran would be the result of internal processes, not external influences. For this reason, attempting to influence the internal struggle within Iran at the present is not a relevant course of action for the United States.

All this means that at this stage, the main course of action open to the American administration is to exhaust the new opportunities for exerting pressure on Iran, perhaps in combination with another attempt at dialogue if conditions permit. However, if these methods do not achieve results, the United States might also examine the possibility of a military strike against Iran. This is the most problematic option. The administration will be faced with great difficulties if it attempts to move

against Iran militarily, and this will certainly remain the case until the situation in Iraq is stabilized and the political success of the Iraqi campaign will be evident. In any event, even if the American administration does consider the possibility of a military strike against Iran at some point in the future, it is difficult to assume that it would be a comprehensive operation. Such a move would be much more difficult and complex than the operation in Iraq, due to the fact that it would involve greater risks and lack sufficient international legitimacy. Even Britain, the United State's primary ally in its campaign against Iraq, made it clear that it would not support military action against Iran. Still, if the American administration concludes that Iran is coming very close to acquiring nuclear weapons, it may consider a limited pinpoint military operation, for example against Iranian nuclear sites. Such a decision will depend not only on military factors and regional circumstances, but also on domestic developments within Iran, and the possibility of starting a genuine dialogue with the Iranian regime.

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