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U.S Policy Options towards Iran's Nuclear Program

With the triumph of the Islamic Revolution and the ascendance of Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979, the special relationship between the United States and Iran dissolved, and a long rift continuing to this day opened. The U.S broke off official diplomatic relations with Iran in 1980 following the seizure of the U.S Embassy by radicalized students, and the two nations have only had limited official contact ever since (Katzman). It is in this troubled context wherein the ongoing conflict over Iran's nuclear program is unfolding. In 2002, an Iranian dissident revealed the existence of previously unknown nuclear research facilities and the U.S government accused Iran of attempting to make nuclear weapons. The following year the International Atomic Energy Agency accused Iran of failing to report certain nuclear activities and materials, but also declared there was no evidence that Iran was developing nuclear weapons. Multi-lateral negotiations between Iran, France, Germany and Britain regarding the cessation of uranium enrichment as well as an enhanced inspection regime for Iran's nuclear program also began in 2004. Following the breakdown of these negotiations and the resumption of uranium enrichment the matter of Iran's nuclear program was referred to the United Nations Security Council in 2006 (British Broadcasting Corporation).

Initially, American foreign policy preference appeared to favor regime change along the lines of the U.S policy in Iraq in the early stages of the crisis once the extent of Iran's nuclear program was revealed. President Bush went so far as to label Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil" along with North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq in his 2003 State of

the Union speech. However, the pressing American interest in curbing Iran's nuclear program has led to the de-emphasis of the regime change option in favor of multi-lateral negotiations focused on providing Iran with incentives to discontinue all nuclear activities that could result in the proliferation of nuclear weapons (Katzman).

Although the regime change alternative has apparently receded from the top of the U.S agenda, the Bush Administration has categorically refused to take it off the table. This option can be carried out in multiple ways, the first being an all out military invasion and occupation of Iran similar to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This is highly unlikely, but the main advantages of this option are readily apparent: namely, the U.S can permanently neutralize Iran as a military and regional threat by overthrowing a hostile authoritarian regime, with a friendlier democratic regime. However, there are many downsides which make this option so unlikely, including a certain lack of international support for an invasion by a military already stretched to the breaking point in Iraq. Secondly, as illustrated by the Iraq quagmire, it is doubtful that the U.S can occupy Iran and pave the way for a Western-style democratic regime, if indeed the U.S had the military resources to attempt this, which in all likelihood does not. Another botched Mid-East occupation could spread chaos and terrorism all over the Middle East, destabilizing other regional U.S allies, which would be disastrous to the U.S economy at home because of the almost certain spike in oil prices (Eisenstadt).

If the Bush Administration chooses to go down the regime change path, it will likely take the form of providing financial and other resources to existing Iranian pro-democracy groups whose goal is the overthrow of the current theocratic regime. The U.S has already begun initial moves in this direction by creating Radio Farda, which

broadcasts an anti-regime, pro-Western message inside Iran. The U.S has also boosted the number of Persian speaking diplomats in diplomatic missions around Iran, in order to increase coordination with dissident expatriate groups and foster increased Iranian participation in democracy promotion programs. The weakness of the existing groups committed to regime overthrow make this tempting policy option unlikely to succeed, however. Also, the massive overt support that the U.S would need to provide these groups would likely make them even more unappealing to ordinary Iranians, as they will likely be seen as U.S sponsored puppets (Katzman).

On the surface, a U.S military strike against Iran's nuclear program may be the most appetizing option on the menu for the Bush Administration. The U.S military still possess overwhelming air power capabilities and should be capable of bombing the hundreds, if not thousands, of targets that would stunt, or possibly destroy, the Iranian nuclear program. Closer investigation reveals that this approach may be problematic. These strikes could evolve into a long and complex campaign involving operations to suppress Iran's air defenses and eliminate Iran's ability to retaliate via air or missile strikes. In addition, whatever the physical damage done to Iran's nuclear program may be, the consequences for U.S-Iranian relations must be examined. It is likely the attack of the nuclear program – a program deemed one of vital national importance by Iranian President Ahmadinejad – is equivalent to initiating long-term hostilities with Iran. The U.S must assume that Iran will seek to punish its' attackers, and brace for a response, not just over the short-term, but in the long-term as well, that will challenge the U.S and its' allies (White). Contrary to popular belief, a comparable strike by Israel against Iraq's nuclear program in 1981 did nothing except temporarily set back Iraq's capabilities.

Rather, it reinforced Saddam Hussein's desire for a nuclear arsenal, illustrated by a ten billion dollar investment, and an increase from 400 to 7,000 nuclear scientists after the Israeli attack. There is no reason to believe that an attack on Iranian facilities will result in a different response. Such a strike would likely embolden and encourage Iran's nuclear program in the long-term. Further, a crippling strike on Iran's nuclear program will likely move Iran towards pursuing a covert program, completely removed from IAEA inspections. Such a scenario would be disastrous and avoided at all costs (Salama).

Until recently, the Bush Administration appeared content to sit on the sidelines while multi-lateral negotiations between Iran and U.S allies occurred. After the talks broke down, the matter was referred to the UN Security Council who voted to order Iran to suspend all uranium enrichment or face sanctions. This is where the matter lies today. Critics accuse the Bush Administration of neglecting the Iranian issue and "outsourcing" diplomacy on the matter to allies, whose views may differ significantly from the U.S and are not worried about serving American interests. In the future, the U.S may need to directly engage with Iran, if only to persuade the rest of the world that the U.S is serious in exhausting all possible options and that drastic action in the form of sanctions – or in the worst possible scenario – military action must be taken (Katzman). Undoubtedly, the Bush Administration faces a number of foreign policy issues in theaters around the world. The Iranian nuclear crisis does not have an easy solution, and each policy option presents risks and rewards.

Works Cited

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