

The United States and the Iranian Nuclear Program: Policy Options

Today, international concerns about Iran's nuclear program have reached fever pitch. At times it seems that a U.S. war with Iran is imminent. But what is the actual status of Iran's nuclear program? And what key concerns must U.S. policy makers weigh as they consider this issue?

Although the U.S.-Iranian relationship today is fraught with tension, for many years the two countries were close allies. In fact, it was with U.S. support that the Iranian government began its nuclear program in the 1960s to produce nuclear fuel. In 1968 Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the international treaty that regulates international nuclear activities and aims to prevent the proliferation, or spread, of nuclear weapons.

In 1979, a popular revolution overthrew Iran's U.S.-backed government and established an Islamic Republic. Under this political system, Iranians elect their president and legislators, but Islamic clerics have final say over all government decisions. U.S.-Iranian relations quickly deteriorated after Iranians took American diplomats hostage at the end of 1979. The relationship has never recovered. To this day, Iran and the United States do not have formal diplomatic relations.

For many years after the Revolution, Iran continued to allow regular inspections of its nuclear program by monitors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Then, in 2003, Iran admitted it had been secretly enriching uranium—a process that is necessary to create both nuclear power and nuclear weapons. In the face of international condemnation, Iran voluntarily suspended its enrichment program. But the suspension was short lived. In 2006, when a deal with the international community wasn't achieved, Iran began enriching uranium again.

Although the IAEA has expressed concerns about Iran's nuclear program, it has stated that there is no definitive proof that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the United States and other governments around the world worry that Iran intends to build nuclear weapons. Iran's President Ahmadinejad has staunchly defended Iran's right to a nuclear program on the basis that it is only developing nuclear materials for peaceful purposes, a right protected under the NPT. The dilemma for the international community is that it is difficult to distinguish between "good atoms" for peaceful purposes like nuclear power and "bad atoms" for military purposes. As a result, many foreign leaders have pressed Iran to obtain nuclear fuel from other countries rather than produce the fuel itself.

The U.S. response to Iran's nuclear program is tied to a number of important issues. The United States has labeled the Iranian government a state sponsor of terrorism for its support of radical Islamic groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories. In addition, the United States accuses the Iranian government of human rights abuses against the Iranian people. During a contested presidential election in 2009, hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets to protest the government. In the crackdown that followed, security forces killed dozens and arrested thousands more. The government later admitted that some of those arrested were tortured in prison. U.S. President Obama sharply condemned Iran's leaders for the violence.

In addition, in the last ten years, the United States has invaded and occupied two of Iran's neighbors: Iraq and Afghanistan. Some observers caution that the United States must take lessons from its recent past. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was justified by claims that Iraq had developed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Those claims were later proved false. The U.S. military overthrew Iraq's repressive dictator, Saddam Hussein, and helped install a new government. The invasion sparked a violent insurgency, and hundreds of thousands of people have been killed in the fighting that continues to this day. The U.S. government has accused Iran of supporting this insurgency. U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq in December 2011 after nearly eight years of occupation.

Israeli security is also a concern for U.S. policy makers. Iranian leaders have taken a hostile stance towards Israel, and Israeli leaders consider Iran to be one of the greatest threats to their country's security. Some observers fear that the Israelis will launch their own attack on Iran's nuclear facilities if the U.S. government does not take a strong enough stance against Iran's nuclear aspirations. This could force the United States, a key Israeli ally, into a military conflict that could potentially spark a bigger, regional war.

At the same time, the economies of the United States and U.S. allies are closely tied to the oil that flows from the Persian Gulf, the region in the Middle East where Iran is located. The continued flow of oil at steady prices is a critical part of the U.S. economic recovery from the financial crisis. Some observers warn that any increase in oil prices could plunge the global economy back into recession. U.S. policy makers must consider the effect that any policy toward Iran will have on the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf.

Finally, the Middle East is currently experiencing a period of major transformation. In what has been called the Arab Spring, democratic protests in countries across the region have threatened and even toppled long-term Middle Eastern leaders, some of them important U.S. allies. Protests continue in numerous countries, including Syria and Bahrain. There have been sporadic protests in Iran as well, but these have been quickly repressed by security forces. Iran, a regional power, has been looking to extend its influence across the region during this period of transition. U.S. policy makers must consider the effects their policies towards Iran may have on this increasingly turbulent and economically vital region.

U.S. policy toward Iran is a key issue in U.S. foreign policy today. Several major questions complicate the issue.

- Does Iran plan to build a nuclear weapon, or just to develop nuclear energy?
- If the former, how long does the international community have to respond to the threat before Iran succeeds?
- If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, what are the possible consequences?
- If Iran had a nuclear weapon would it attack Israel?
- If Iran only wants nuclear power, should it be allowed to enrich its uranium itself, or should it import nuclear energy materials from elsewhere?
- How do Iranian citizens view this issue? How do they view the United States?
- Is it possible to address other issues on the U.S.-Iranian agenda, such as human rights and terrorism, simultaneously with the nuclear issue?

What should U.S. policy be toward Iran today?

In the United States views on this issue differ widely. As you consider the future of U.S. policy toward Iran, think about the following:

- What is the history of U.S. relations with Iran? With the wider Middle East?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this issue?
- What steps should the United States take in the coming months?
- What should the longer term goals be?
- What values are important to you?

You will now be considering four different options for U.S. policy towards Iran. It is important to understand that no one option as it is framed here reflects the views of any one organization or national leader. It is your job to sort through the four options and think about their concerns and values, risks and trade-offs. When you have done this, we encourage you to read the papers, listen to the views of others, think about the ways in which you agree and disagree, and look for areas of common ground.

OPTION 1: Use Military Action to Destroy Iran's Nuclear Facilities

The threat from Iran's nuclear program is real and it is immediate. It is clear that Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons. The United States must act, alone if necessary, to destroy Iran's nuclear production facilities. By some estimates, Iran is months away from acquiring a nuclear weapon. If Iran gets nuclear weapons it might use them against Israel, an important U.S. ally. As a state sponsor of terror, Iran also may pass nuclear weapons on to radical Islamic groups that it supports such as Hezbollah and Hamas. In addition, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the region may feel that they need nuclear weapons for their protection if Iran succeeds in acquiring them. We must address this threat immediately. But we must also learn from the past and avoid the pitfalls of a military invasion or occupation. Our experiences in Iraq made clear the very negative and uncontrollable consequences that full-scale wars can have. Our top priority is to end Iran's nuclear program, not to get involved in Iran's domestic affairs. We must focus our efforts on strategic, surgical military actions aimed at destroying Iran's nuclear facilities. With targeted military strikes, drone attacks, and cyber warfare we can irreparably harm Iran's nuclear capabilities. This will send a clear signal to rogue countries around the world that nuclear proliferation will not be tolerated. At best, this policy will convince Iran's leaders to reverse course and abandon their nuclear program. At the very least, it will destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities and set back the program by a number of years, giving us more time for other economic, diplomatic, and military actions. While it is preferable to work with the international community, we are running out of time. If we wait until Iran has developed further nuclear capabilities, it will be too late to disable their nuclear weapons program. The United States should take immediate military action against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 1

- Iran's nuclear energy program is intended as a basis for developing nuclear weapons. This is a danger to U.S. national security.
- The United States has a responsibility to take action to support our closest allies, like Israel, against those who violate the IAEA and international nuclear agreements.
- Iran's government can be convinced to change course and abandon its nuclear weapons program.
- Full-scale invasions and occupations are costly and ineffective ways to deal with global problems. The U.S. military is best used in a precise and limited way.

Goals of Option 1

- Destroy Iran's known and suspected nuclear facilities and damage Iran's capability to develop nuclear weapons, hopefully forever.
- Send a clear message that the United States will uphold the NPT and will act to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons.
- Protect Israel and maintain stability in the region.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Act quickly, and alone if necessary, to launch military airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.
- Sabotage Iranian nuclear facilities covertly, for example through targeted assassinations of nuclear scientists, drone attacks, and cyber warfare.

Arguments for Option 1

- A crisis with Iran is coming sooner or later. Better to deal with it now and on U.S. terms.
- Waiting through another round of negotiations or for trade initiatives to take effect would take too much time. Iran could be only months away from developing a nuclear weapon.

- Airstrikes would limit U.S. troop involvement.
- These policies will ensure that the NPT regime remains intact. More than twenty thousand exist in the world today—enough to destroy humanity many times over. As the NPT is the only international treaty governing nuclear weapons, it is critically important.
- By targeting only nuclear facilities we can avoid creating political upheaval and instability in a region already rocked by protest and change.
- It is important that Israel knows we are doing something to address this threat and ensure its safety.

Arguments against Option 1

- Iran does not have a record of unprovoked aggression. Even if it has a nuclear weapon, Iran is likely only to attack others when its security is threatened.
- Eliminating all of Iran's nuclear sites, some of which are underground, will be very difficult, if not impossible. We also risk harming Iranian civilians in the process.
- A military intervention will not stop Iran from trying to acquire nuclear weapons. In fact, the very threat of military intervention makes Iran more likely to try to acquire them.
- Iranian officials have said they will retaliate against any military action. We must not risk the escalation of this conflict, particularly in a volatile region undergoing massive transformation.
- Military strikes are likely to cause a disruption in the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf and price increases. With the fragile state of the U.S. economy and other economies worldwide, and our dependence on oil from this region, these changes would likely delay or derail our economic recovery or even spark another global economic crisis.
- Any military strikes will fuel anti-U.S. feelings and serve as a recruiting tool for terrorist organizations.
- If we take military action without the support of the international community, we risk losing the respect and support of our allies.

OPTION 2: Use the U.S. Military to Overthrow Iran's Government

Iran's current government cannot be dissuaded from acquiring nuclear weapons. But nuclear weapons are only one piece of a larger problem with Iran. As long as the current regime is in power, the world will not be safe. The United States is threatened not only by Iran's nuclear ambitions but also by its actions in the Middle East. Iran's government supports terrorist groups in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories. It supported a violent insurgency in Iraq that killed scores of U.S., Iraqi, and coalition troops and Iraqi civilians. Iran has also used threatening language against Israel, a key U.S. ally. As the region is shaken by the protests of the Arab Spring, Iran is looking to extend its influence. In recent months, as its leaders grow bolder, Iran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, a shipping lane in the Persian Gulf that is vital to the economic security of the United States and U.S. allies. The United States should not underestimate Iran's aggression. We must recognize that the only guaranteed way to blunt the hostile intentions of Iran's leaders and protect U.S. interests in the region is to force a total change in Iran's government. Even if it were possible to destroy all of Iran's nuclear facilities with tactical strikes—something that would be extremely difficult and impossible to verify—Iran's leaders will never stop seeking a nuclear weapon. We must use military force to overthrow this hostile regime and establish a democracy in Iran. This is something that Iran's people will support. Huge demonstrations against the government in Iran in 2009 showed not only that many are dissatisfied, but also that people are willing to risk their lives to express their dissatisfaction. A democratic Iran would be friendly to the United States and would not seek nuclear weapons. Although this policy may be unpopular with our allies, it is necessary for the peace and security of the world. The threat from the current regime is too great to ignore; we must take immediate steps to change Iran's government.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 2

- The current regime will continue to seek nuclear weapons until it is forced out of power.
- Iran's government is a danger to the United States, Israel, and the rest of the Middle East.
- The best way for the United States to bring peace and stability to the Middle East is to spread democracy to the region.
- As a world power, the United States has a responsibility to maintain international security.

Goals of Option 2

- Oust the dangerous, nondemocratic, conservative regime and install a democratic government in Iran.
- Create a new ally in an important region that is undergoing major transformation.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Use military force, including air raids and Special Forces covert units on the ground, to overthrow Iran's government.
- Encourage other nations to tighten sanctions in order to cut off funds that prop up the regime.

Arguments for Option 2

- Overthrowing Iran's government is the only way to protect U.S. access to oil in the Persian Gulf in the long run.
- Installing a new government in Iran will eliminate the region's greatest threat to peace and security.
- Overthrowing Iran's government will not only remove the hardliners seeking nuclear weapons, it will also end a regime that abuses human rights and supports terrorism.

- This policy will keep the hostile Iranian regime from extending its influence and meddling in the new democratic governments across the region. It will also lend U.S. support to Iranian democratic protesters and throw U.S. weight behind the Arab Spring.
- Increasing the number of democratic, friendly states in the Middle East will have long-term positive effects for the United States.
- If we wait until Iran has the capability to build a nuclear weapon, it will be too late to stop it.

Arguments against Option 2

- Foreign military operations in Iran will make Iranians feel less safe and more likely to seek nuclear weapons, whether or not the current regime is in power.
- The U.S. public is weary of war and unlikely to support another military action.
- Any attempt to overthrow Iran's government will unite the Iranian people against the United States. It will also be strongly opposed by the international community.
- There is not a unified, significant opposition force or group in Iran to lead the change.
- We should learn from our past mistakes. "Regime change" would be difficult and costly and may be impossible to achieve from the outside. As the United States saw in Iraq, there are too many unforeseen and potentially negative consequences to this kind of policy.
- Military action will convince other countries in the region of the United States' hostile intentions. This would inflame anti-American sentiment and could lead to increased terrorist attacks on the United States and our allies.
- Past experience shows us that warfare in the Persian Gulf increases the price of oil, often very significantly. This could have serious repercussions for the U.S. economic recovery and the economic health of our allies.

OPTION 3: Start to Normalize Relations with Tehran

Iran's actions surrounding its nuclear program are a concern for the United States and the rest of the world. But war will not solve this problem. Instead we must use diplomacy and economic incentives to convince Iran's leaders to abandon any ambitions they have to acquire nuclear weapons. To start, we need to address the underlying factors contributing to escalating tensions. For the past thirty years, the United States has carried out a provocative and ineffective campaign of intimidation and isolation against Iran's revolutionary government. The Iranian government has used the threatening behavior of the United States to justify its repression of the Iranian people. The United States should stop threatening Iran. Military attacks and covert action will only intensify the problem and further convince Iran that it needs nuclear weapons for protection. We must work to normalize relations with Iran and work with other nations to bring Iran back into the fold of the international community. This task will not be easy. Iran's government can be hostile and difficult to work with. But in the short term, this is the only way to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions. Ultimately, the only long-term guarantee that Iran will irrevocably end its nuclear program is a more democratic government in Iran. But as we saw in Iraq, U.S. efforts to change another country's government by force are costly, difficult to control, and have devastating unforeseen consequences. Instead, we must help foster an environment that will allow the Iranian people to be successful in their push for democracy. If we reduce tensions between Iran and the international community, the Iranian government will be unable to use outside threats as an excuse to ignore domestic concerns. These policies towards Iran must be part of a larger effort to reduce nuclear arms around the world, including in the United States. Nuclear weapons make the world a more dangerous place. Only by engaging positively with other nuclear powers and reducing our own nuclear stores can we convince world leaders that they do not need nuclear weapons for protection. By engaging with Iran's government, we will send a clear message that the United States is committed to a more peaceful and secure world.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 3

- Iran's leaders will cooperate with the international community.
- Signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) have the right to enrich uranium to use for electricity as long as they agree to regular inspections.
- Iran may think it necessary to develop nuclear weapons if it feels threatened by the United States.
- As a world superpower, the United States has a responsibility to lead by example. To create a more peaceful world, we must engage more positively with friends and foes alike.

Goals of Option 3

- Greatly reduce Iran's perceived need to develop nuclear weapons as protection against a hostile world.
- Establish a more positive, mutually beneficial relationship between the United States and Iran.
- Foster an environment more conducive to political reform in Iran.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Use a "carrots and sticks" approach to diplomacy in which Iran is rewarded for complying with international agreements with incentives like trade agreements, and punished for noncompliance with sanctions. Sanctions should target the government, and harm civilians as little as possible.
- Support existing international agreements on nuclear weapons and advocate for further nuclear disarmament. To show our commitment, we should also pledge to further decrease U.S. stores of nuclear weapons.

Arguments for Option 3

- Iran's huge youth population has a favorable attitude towards the United States and is the biggest ally the United States has against the current regime. Anything but diplomacy will alienate Iran's youth and produce another generation in Iran that distrusts the United States.
- This policy will allow us to lend our support to the Arab Spring while sending a message that the United States wants the people of Iran and the rest of the Middle East to determine their own future.
- A policy of increased cooperation does not involve dangerous or costly military action.
- A broad diplomatic effort would enable the United States to address issues in addition to nuclear weapons, such as human rights and sponsorship of terrorism.
- It is to the mutual advantage of the United States and Iran to strike a deal on this issue. Both sides need to avoid a war.
- By working with other countries we will have the support of the international community.

Arguments against Option 3

- Trying to engage with a regime that supports terrorism and has an aggressive posture towards Israel only encourages rogue behavior.
- Even sanctions that target the government will inevitably hurt Iranians, the very people we are trying to win over. How can we hope to normalize relations if we are willing to impose this type of punitive policy?
- Iran has used diplomacy as a cover for years, misleading the international community while it develops nuclear capabilities.
- The sanctions, UN resolutions, and other measures imposed have not worked thus far. There is no evidence that such tactics will work now.
- Iran responds to hardline U.S. policy. Retaining the threat of U.S. military action is important for a peaceful resolution to this problem.
- Iran's current unelected leaders cannot be trusted enough to restore diplomatic relations.
- Diplomacy and economic incentives take too long. Iran is months away from having a nuclear weapon. We must address this threat immediately.

OPTION 4: Scale Back Tensions and Avoid War

We must not blow this threat out of proportion. Iran with a nuclear weapon is not the doomsday scenario that warmongers are making it out to be. The greatest risk today is not that Iran will get a nuclear weapon, but that the United States will be drawn into another costly war in a volatile region. The results would be catastrophic, and far outweigh the risk of a nuclear Iran. According to the IAEA, there is no definitive proof that Iran has a nuclear weapons program. And even if Iran does acquire nuclear weapons, this is a manageable threat. In the past seventy years, ten countries have acquired nuclear weapons, but no country has used a nuclear weapon since 1945. What this tells us is that deterrence works. It also means that U.S. fears about the Iranian nuclear program are not about nuclear proliferation but about our government's opposition to Iran's revolutionary government. Since 1979, the United States has viewed Iran as a hostile nation, even going so far as to label it a member of the "axis of evil" in 2002. In 2001 the United States invaded Afghanistan, Iran's neighbor to the east. Two years later, U.S. troops invaded Iraq, Iran's neighbor to the west. It is no wonder that the Iranian regime might believe it needs a nuclear weapon. But Iran's leaders are rational. They know that any nuclear strike by Iran would be suicidal, because the United States would respond with a nuclear capability that would destroy Iran. There are also economic incentives for the United States to reduce tensions with Iran. The United States and its key allies are dependent on oil from the Persian Gulf. Any instability in the Middle East could will world oil markets, which are crucial for the economic recovery of the United States and its allies. We must not trade a perceived threat—Iran with nuclear weapons—for an actual one—a regional war in the Middle East and a devastating global economic crisis. The United States must change its position towards the Iranian government and encourage our allies, including Israel, to do the same. We must not use force or any covert action against the Iranian regime. These policies will only escalate tensions. We must dial back our hardline position and avoid war at all costs.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 4

- By international law, Iran has a right to develop nuclear fuel.
- We must make the economic health of the United States and its allies a top priority, even if it means trading with repressive governments.
- Iran's leaders are rational. If they acquire a nuclear weapon, they will not use it.
- The United States should not meddle in the affairs of other countries.

Goals of Option 4

- Improve U.S.-Iranian relations.
- Reduce tensions and avoid a conflict that could quickly spiral into a long and costly military engagement.
- Maintain the stable flow of oil and keep oil prices low.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Begin trade negotiations and introduce foreign investment options.
- Renew diplomatic relations with Iran and announce that force will not be used to resolve any current or future disputes.
- Begin a gradual lifting of current sanctions.

Arguments for Option 4

- Unlike the other countries in the region that have nuclear weapons—Pakistan, India, and Israel—Iran is a signatory of the NPT and has a track record of compliance with this international treaty.

- Pakistan—a country plagued by terrorism and with a weak central government—went nuclear in 1998. For more than a decade, we have managed this threat without going to war. If Iran, a country far more stable than Pakistan, gets a nuclear weapon, we will also be able to manage this threat.
- This policy would not upset oil markets, and thus it would help ensure the economic recovery of the United States and our allies.
- Our already-strained economy and overstretched military cannot bear the cost of another war.
- The Iranian people do not want to go to war with the United States and they are suffering under the current sanctions. We would have their support if we avoid a war.
- This policy will decrease the risk of further instability in a region already undergoing massive political change.

Arguments against Option 4

- Israel, a close U.S. ally, feels particularly threatened by Iran. If we do not take decisive action against Iran's nuclear program, the Israelis will take action on their own—potentially sparking a major regional war.
- If we allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons, it will undermine the NPT and give other countries the green light to acquire weapons of their own.
- If Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, other countries in the region like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt may feel that they also need nuclear weapons. Along with Israel, this would mean four or five countries with nuclear weapons in the Middle East, a region with significant social, economic, and territorial tensions. This would be a recipe for catastrophic nuclear war.
- The Iranian nuclear problem needs an international resolution. Many nations are involved in this conflict, and if the United States embarks on a radical change of course, it may find more foes than friends.
- Iranians do not have much reason to trust U.S. intentions. The United States installed a corrupt king in Iran in 1953, once labeled Iran a member of the “axis of evil,” and have occupied Iran's neighbors Iraq and Afghanistan for much of the past ten years. It is unlikely Iranian leaders will trust the United States enough to open trade and renew diplomatic relations.
- By offering trade and other incentives to Iran, other rogue nations will also believe they can threaten world peace and get away with it.