

COUNCIL *on*
FOREIGN
RELATIONS

WORKING PAPER

Deterrence Misapplied

Challenges in Containing a Nuclear Iran

Frederick W. Kagan

May 2010

This publication was made possible by the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource for its members, government officials, business executives, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other interested citizens in order to help them better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries. Founded in 1921, CFR carries out its mission by maintaining a diverse membership, with special programs to promote interest and develop expertise in the next generation of foreign policy leaders; convening meetings at its headquarters in New York and in Washington, DC, and other cities where senior government officials, members of Congress, global leaders, and prominent thinkers come together with CFR members to discuss and debate major international issues; supporting a Studies Program that fosters independent research, enabling CFR scholars to produce articles, reports, and books and hold roundtables that analyze foreign policy issues and make concrete policy recommendations; publishing *Foreign Affairs*, the preeminent journal on international affairs and U.S. foreign policy; sponsoring Independent Task Forces that produce reports with both findings and policy prescriptions on the most important foreign policy topics; and providing up-to-date information and analysis about world events and American foreign policy on its website, CFR.org.

The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

For further information about CFR or this paper, please write to the Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065, or call the Director of Communications at 212.434.9400. Visit CFR's website, www.cfr.org.

Copyright © 2010 by the Council on Foreign Relations®, Inc.

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

This paper may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form beyond the reproduction permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law Act (17 U.S.C. Sections 107 and 108) and excerpts by reviewers for the public press, without express written permission from the Council on Foreign Relations. For information, write to the Publications Office, Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065.

The acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Islamic Republic of Iran would be an extremely destabilizing event in the Middle East. It would very likely lead to the nuclearization of the region, starting most probably with the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Saudi Arabia. Such an arms race would bring the threat of nuclear war into one of the most volatile areas of the world, and it would bring nuclear weapons into one of the densest concentrations of Islamist terrorist groups outside of the already-nuclearized South Asia. The West, indeed the world, cannot look upon such a development calmly.

It is not at all clear, however, whether the international community or the United States alone will prevent the Islamic Republic of Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, or that the Iranian regime itself will decide not to acquire them. It behooves the United States, therefore, to consider the likelihood of deterring this regime from using nuclear weapons in order to implement a Cold War–like policy of containment. The United States must also consider the degree to which the possession of nuclear weapons would make it more difficult to deter or counteract conventional and unconventional military operations by the Islamic Republic in the region or around the world.

It is impossible to make a convincing argument that the Islamic Republic is structurally designed to facilitate containment—that is, it cannot be said with any certainty that deterring a nuclear Iran from using its weapons will be possible. On the contrary, the opacity of the regime and the potential fluidity of its structure, not to mention its leading personnel, make it impossible to demonstrate that future governments of the Islamic Republic will likely be deterrable, even if the United States could be confident that the current one is. It can, however, be said with a high degree of confidence that it will be more difficult to deter a nuclear Iran from undertaking conventional and unconventional warfare, including terrorism.

Deterring Whom?

The first challenge in considering the prospects for deterring the use of nuclear weapons by the Islamic Republic is determining who, exactly, would control them. The likeliest scenario is as follows: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) would probably have physical control over the weapons and maintain the personnel and infrastructure to fire them on command. The IRGC would most likely establish an elite unit for this purpose. The supreme leader would almost certainly have sole authority to order such a launch. His order would probably go directly to the IRGC commander, or possibly directly to the commander of the nuclear forces, bypassing the IRGC chain of command entirely. It is unlikely that there would be any check on the supreme leader's ability to order the use of the Islamic Republic's nuclear weapons. It is also unlikely that the president of the Islamic Republic would be in the nuclear chain of command (since he does not appear to be in the conventional chain of command, after all).

From the standpoint of deterring the Islamic Republic's use of nuclear weapons, this is the most optimistic scenario. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appears to place an extremely high premium on regime preservation. He does not appear to share the apocalyptic visions of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or extremist clerics such as Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi. Iranian foreign policy

under Khamenei has generally been characterized by cautious aggressiveness similar to that displayed by the Soviet Union for most of the Cold War. Such a history suggests that Khamenei may pursue policies of brinkmanship (as even the arch-pragmatic Soviet leaders did so), and there is always the danger of miscalculation in such policies. It also suggests, however, that Khamenei is likely to seek to avoid nuclear conflict.

Yet the Iranian election of 2009 and its aftermath has cast doubt on even this optimistic scenario. The Iranian regime has always been opaque, and any discussion about how decisions are made or even who makes them is fraught with uncertainty. The fraudulence of the election and Khamenei's unprecedented direct intervention in support of Ahmadinejad have created fissures in the regime and generated changes in the balance of the Islamic Republic's various power blocs. Ahmadinejad and the IRGC have gained strength, while the "pragmatist" camp of which Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani was a prominent member has been both fractured and weakened. The street demonstrations following the election unsettled the regime's elite profoundly, leading to an immediate crackdown followed by a determined effort to ensure that no "velvet revolution" was in the offing. Khamenei replaced the commander of the Basij militia (a paramilitary organization reminiscent of the Komsomol) with a former Qods Force officer who fought in Lebanon and in Bosnia. President Ahmadinejad's selection of Qods Force founder Ahmad Vahidi as defense minister was another unsettling indicator of the possible rise in power not simply of the IRGC, but of the radical element within the IRGC that has devoted itself to spreading the revolution abroad. Although Khamenei appears to be reestablishing his position as the Green Movement protests are dying down, it is difficult to remain confident that Khamenei alone has his hands firmly on the levers of power, or to predict what he might do or who might influence him even if he did.

Khamenei will not always be supreme leader, moreover, and the question of deterring his possible successors is more complicated. First, there is the question of the interregnum—who will control the Islamic Republic's nuclear weapons following Khamenei's death and before the selection of his successor? There is no vice supreme leader, after all, and the process of selecting a new one is deliberative and can be slow, especially if Khamenei outlives obvious candidates such as Ayatollah Rafsanjani. Possible scenarios include the devolution of control over the nuclear arsenal to the head of the Assembly of Experts, as the closest stand-in for the supreme leader in his absence; to the president; to the head of the Guardian Council; or to that body in a conciliar fashion. It is highly likely that the Islamic Republic will make arrangements for this obvious contingency in advance, but it is not inevitable that any such arrangements will proceed smoothly upon Khamenei's death.

Second, there is the question of Khamenei's successor. It is impossible to predict now who that will be or what views he will hold. Nor is it inevitable that there will be a supreme leader after this one. Some Iran experts argue that the institution of the supreme leader, which is not in principle essential to the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, or "guardianship of the jurisprudent," that forms the religio-ideological basis for the regime, may not survive Khamenei. The supreme leader could be replaced by a council of clerics, for example, the composition of which it is not possible to predict at all. Others argue that the waxing influence of the IRGC itself may threaten meaningful clerical control over the Islamic Republic. The president could come to eclipse a future supreme leader or, more easily, clerical leadership council and acquire, *de facto* if not *de jure*, control over Iranian foreign policy. Statements by Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, a strong ally of President Ahmadinejad, that the presidential election (and therefore the president) was also an extension of the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of

the jurist) opened the door to an increasing role for the presidency in a post-Khamenei Islamic Republic.

Any change in the leadership structure of the Islamic Republic would profoundly affect deterrence calculations. As President Ahmadinejad's tenure shows, the position of president is open to candidates with extreme views. Although it is impossible to predict who will be the next supreme leader, the pool from which he will come is known and can be analyzed. It is much more difficult to determine the pool of potential presidents two or three elections into the future—Mir Hossein Mousavi, for instance, was a most unlikely candidate to become President Ahmadinejad's primary opponent in this most recent election.

It is worth noting, on the other hand, that Ayatollah Khamenei was a most unlikely selection to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini. Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri was Khomeini's designated successor until he fell from favor. At the time of Ayatollah Khomeini's death, Ayatollah Rafsanjani appeared the most powerful cleric; Khamenei, in fact, had not even achieved the religious level of ayatollah, being merely a *hojjat-ol Eslam* at the time of his elevation (*hojjat-ol Eslam* is the clerical rank below ayatollah in Shia Islam).

All of which is to say that it is difficult to predict who will lead the Islamic Republic over the coming decade, let alone decades. Nor is it possible to state with certainty that the ruler or rulers will have a worldview with definable limits. A number of very pragmatic revolutionaries who would likely be as open to deterrence as any leader of a fundamentally ideological state are strong candidates. But so are a number of leaders with apocalyptic worldviews, such as President Ahmadinejad.

This situation contrasts strongly with the nature of Soviet leadership during the Cold War. Although there was actually an apocalyptic strain of thinking even within the Soviet ruling elite, the nature of the post-Stalin Soviet oligarchy powerfully militated against extremes. The essence of Cold War Soviet leadership was collective decision-making. Communist Party general secretary Nikita Khrushchev was removed from power by the Politburo in 1964 not simply for his reckless brinksmanship during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but also for having moved beyond the realm of *primus inter pares* that the post-Stalin Politburo members had agreed would be the general secretary's role.

The tenures of Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Konstantin Chernenko, and Mikhail Gorbachev, therefore, were all marked by a determined effort on the part of the Politburo to retain an oligarchic style of rule. In such a system, marked by deliberation and the search for consensus among an elite that was conservative to begin with, extremes were rare. Soviet-American crises over the decades show the evolution of this oligarchic conservatism: the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 resulted from an aggressive action by Khrushchev aimed at changing the correlation of nuclear forces dramatically through a coup-de-main. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which prompted the next most serious crisis in relations, was a reflexive and defensive action undertaken largely out of fear of the consequences of the failure of the socialist regime that had taken power in Kabul in 1978 but seemed unable to hold onto it. The last serious Cold War crisis resulted from the shooting down of Korean Air flight 007 in 1983, apparently a mistake made by lower-level officials that led to panic in the Kremlin at the thought of how President Ronald Reagan might react. Subsequent Cold War crises—the attack on Tbilisi in 1989, the invasion of the Baltic States in 1991, and so on—were all desperate attempts to keep the Soviet Union together.

It is not possible to argue by analogy, however, that the Islamic Republic will inevitably develop into a similarly conservative oligarchy. It is not now an oligarchy in the Soviet sense—the supreme

leader acts to balance competing power blocs against one another while remaining above the fray (something he notably failed to do in the most recent elections, however, possibly increasing the odds that his successor will not be a single person). His control over Iranian foreign policy, in particular, appears to be almost absolute, whereas in the Soviet model foreign policy required at least as much elite consensus as domestic policy did. Depending on the future development of the regime, the Islamic Republic may become a more oligarchic system, but it may also become more autocratic if a strong president backed by the IRGC eclipses the clerical elite. It is, in other words, simply too soon to tell how the Islamic Republic will be ruled, who will rule it, and whether there will be any structural imperative to ensure that it will be deterrable.

Visions of the Apocalypse

American political and analytical elites have a hard time accepting the notion that there might be Iranian leaders with truly apocalyptic world views, or that such views could matter in major decisions. There is no need to argue this point on the basis of Islam or the peculiarities of Shi'ism. Apocalyptic visions have emerged in at least three modern Western regimes in the past century, leading one of them truly to an apocalypse.

Post-World War I Germany was the first to see the rise of real apocalyptic thinking. The original intellectual leaders were Erich Ludendorff and Joachim von Stülpnagel, not Adolf Hitler. Their notion, based on the dire circumstances of a nation they believed should be dominant, was that Germany would triumph in a real global struggle risking all for all, and that failure and complete destruction in such a conflict would be more honorable and worthy than muddling along as a third-rate power. As Stülpnagel said in 1923, Germany must mobilize all of its resources to “guarantee us either victory or destruction together with the enemy.” Their ideas perhaps inspired or simply merged with Hitler's own apocalyptic visions. When Hitler was chancellor in the early and mid-1930s, these apocalyptic visions did not seem important to many—and the West believed that Germany and Hitler was deterrable. And they may have been, although probably not in the long run. But the successes that Hitler achieved in gamble after gamble persuaded him that he really had destiny in his grasp. The decisive moment, from this perspective, was Hitler's order to invade Czechoslovakia, taken against the advice of his military chief of staff, who represented the pragmatist view of the German military. Hitler's success in this endeavor led him to launch Germany on the course toward a real apocalypse.

The Soviet Union also had its share of apocalyptic thinkers, even during the nuclear age. The final conflict Karl Marx predicted, in which socialism would overwhelm and destroy capitalism, appealed to some senior Soviet leaders more than the cautious aggression of Stalin and his heirs. Some of them saw in nuclear war the possibility to trigger and win this final conflict once and for all. They believed that the unavoidable mass casualties in such a war would be worth it to ensure the final destruction of capitalism, which they held to be the source of all human conflict. They argued that the Soviet Union had suffered twenty million casualties during World War II and not only survived, but gained in power and ability to advance the socialist cause. They were willing (in principle) to contemplate the fifty or one hundred million casualties they believed might ensue from a nuclear exchange if the benefit

were ending human strife forever. Soviet apocalyptic thinkers, fortunately, never persuaded their colleagues, and the oligarchic nature of the system kept them from implementing their theories. But that strain of thought was present and was more dangerous to the stability of the nuclear “balance of terror” than many in the West imagined then or since.

Does Mahmoud Ahmadinejad find the prospect of nuclear exchange with Israel appealing because he believes it will bring about the return of the twelfth imam and the day of judgment? Some of his statements would suggest that he might. Hitherto, it has been the position of Western analysts that it does not matter too much because of his limited influence in Iranian foreign policy and the pragmatism of a supreme leader who does not seem to share his vision. But Ahmadinejad is not the only Iranian leader with an apocalyptic worldview. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi represents that view among the clerical elite, and both men have followings and supporters among their respective bases. The wedge of Iranian leaders who hold such views is probably very small, but so it was also in Germany in the 1930s. The impossibility of predicting exactly what the structure of the Islamic Republic will be, let alone who will lead it, and the fact that one leader with an apocalyptic worldview has already made it to the presidency is grounds for concern.

Once again, it is not possible or appropriate to argue that an apocalyptic strain of thought will lead the Islamic Republic to seek or even accept nuclear war. Neither, however, is it possible to demonstrate with confidence that any kind of structural limitations within the regime or its process of selecting leaders will exclude such a possibility. Therefore, it is impossible to assess with confidence that future leaders of the Islamic Republic will be deterrable even if present ones are.

Deterring What?

What would the objective of an American deterrence strategy be? Is the aim simply to deter the Islamic Republic from attacking the United States with nuclear weapons? Would the United States also seek to deter Iran from attacking Europe with nuclear weapons? Israel? Saudi Arabia? Is the objective to deter Iran from using its weapons at all? These questions are directly related to the danger of the rapid proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East: If the United States cannot credibly deter Iran from attacking Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, or any other state in the region, then the likelihood of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East increases dramatically.

The record of using a “nuclear umbrella” to prevent allies from acquiring their own weapons is spotty. During the Cold War, both Great Britain and France felt that American nuclear predominance was not sufficient protection for them, and both developed independent nuclear forces that they retain to this day. Germany and Japan did not do so, but the situation was rather different for them—after World War II any attempt by either state to acquire nuclear weapons would have created a global crisis. Nor was America’s demonstrated commitment to Israel sufficient to convince Tel Aviv to refrain from acquiring a nuclear arsenal. Will the United States offer treaty guarantees to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Gulf States, and Israel similar to those that failed to persuade Britain and France to remain weapons-free? It seems most unlikely.

It is far from clear, in fact, that the United States would extend a “nuclear umbrella” over any regional state if it means that the United States would undertake to use its own nuclear weapons against Iran in retaliation for an Iranian nuclear attack on a third party. Persuading the Islamic Republic that the United States would nuke Tehran if Tel Aviv were attacked could be extremely difficult. Persuading the Israelis that a U.S. statement of policy will deter Iran from attacking Tel Aviv would be almost impossible. The recently released U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) has added legalistic complexity and uncertainty to the value of any American nuclear umbrella, moreover. Although the NPR states that “the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons, which will continue as long as nuclear weapons exist, is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners,” it also declares that “the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear weapons states that are party to the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations.” It adds, “Yet that does not mean that our willingness to use nuclear weapons against countries not covered by the new assurance has in any way increased. Indeed, the United States wishes to stress that it would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.” These statements are compatible with a tacit or declarative policy of providing a nuclear umbrella to partners in the Middle East. They are, however, significantly weaker than the alliance commitments and explicit statements of willingness to use nuclear force in defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies that failed to persuade Britain and France to remain nonnuclear. At issue is not so much the Obama administration’s intentions, but rather the way that regional actors are likely to perceive those intentions.

Israel will certainly rely on its own nuclear forces to deter an Iranian strike. But the development and growth of an Iranian nuclear capability will likely generate an Israeli-Iranian arms race, if nothing else. Moreover, it is important to recall that the “stability” of Cold War deterrence was not so stable—missiles on both sides were kept constantly ready and the time leaders expected to have to decide whether or not to strike first or retaliate was reckoned in minutes. Introducing what Cold War strategist Albert Wohlstetter called “the delicate balance of terror” into the Middle East should give the United States pause.

Among other things, the challenge of deterrence between two blocs with centrally coordinated military decision-making (NATO and the Warsaw Pact) was orders of magnitude more manageable than the problem of managing multiple nuclear states that neither coordinate with nor trust one another. The plausibility of multipolar nuclear deterrence requires, at a minimum, much more careful scrutiny than it has hitherto received.

In particular, the notion that the United States can rely on a doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD) to deter Iran as it did the Soviet Union is extremely problematic. To begin with, the Soviets never actually accepted that doctrine, relying instead on a rational calculus of potential costs, consequences, and benefits that never tipped them in favor of using nuclear force. Even the United States did not always accept or rely on this doctrine, particularly in the early days of the Cold War. On the contrary, President Eisenhower developed the concept of “massive retaliation” to take advantage of America’s nuclear arsenal to save money on conventional forces. According to that doctrine, the United States would respond with overwhelming nuclear force to any conventional or nuclear threat to America or its allies. This doctrine led to a dilemma when the People’s Republic of China threatened two small islands off its coast, Quesmoy and Matsu, and the Eisenhower administration had to wrestle with the question of its willingness to launch a nuclear attack in response. Throughout the

Cold War, the United States refused to announce a doctrine of “no first use” of nuclear weapons because the balance of conventional forces in Europe favored the Soviets.

Still another problem with applying Cold War deterrence theory to present-day or future Iran is the basic requirement in that theory that both sides engage in a mutually comprehensible rational calculus, and that both sides can clearly communicate their intentions to one another. Iranian actions are most likely rational—to the leadership of the Islamic Republic. But rationality is not simply a logical mode of thought. It is a logical mode of thought based on a given understanding of the world as perceived by the thinker. If two leaders reason logically from different perceptions of reality, one will find the other’s reasoning irrational despite its internal logic.

There is good reason to believe that the leadership of the Islamic Republic does not share a common picture of the world with American leaders. American policymakers, even those who see the Islamic Republic in a relatively sympathetic light, often find the behavior of Iran’s leaders erratic and inexplicable. Iranian leaders, for their part, continually refer to various conspiracy theories and make assertions about the United States and its activities that seem outlandish to most analysts. Are the Iranians insane or irrational? Probably not—but their rationality, or at least, the perceptual basis for it, seems to be different from that of the United States.

That difference in perception of the world, common between countries separated by a wide ideological gulf, generates enormous difficulties in communication. Some analysts will leap to point out that the American “failure” to reestablish diplomatic relations with Iran is the cause of these communications difficulties, or at least a major contributor. Setting aside the fact that it is by no means clear that the current Iranian regime desires to reestablish relations with the United States, this mechanical issue is not the sum of the problem. America’s European allies, after all, have full diplomatic relations with Iran. They have also repeatedly found themselves baffled by the actions and statements of the Islamic Republic. Reestablishing formal relations with Iran is rather like setting up a telephone line between two people who do not speak the same language—the improvement in the technical ability to communicate does not immediately translate into an ability to achieve mutual comprehension.

The questions of rationality and communication are critical to the issue of deterrence. Any deterrence strategy relies on a state’s ability to clearly communicate the limits of its tolerance and to signal to the potential adversary when those limits are being approached. It must also be able to communicate clearly when attempting to manage or deescalate a crisis. It is not inconceivable that the United States might manage to both comprehend the rationality of Iran’s leaders and develop clear methods of communicating intentions and perceptions, but it has not managed to do so yet.

Nonnuclear Deterrence

The Islamic Republic has neither the capability nor the doctrine to conduct offensive conventional ground operations, so deterring its invasion of its neighbors is not really an operative issue. It does have a growing capability to conduct air and missile strikes against its neighbors and regional states. It also has significant capability to encourage proxy groups to conduct terrorism, both in the region and

globally. And it has an undefined capability to conduct terrorist attacks globally using its own forces (principally the Qods Force, the IRGC, and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, or MOIS).

The West's record of deterring the Islamic Republic from nonnuclear military undertakings over the past three decades has been spotty at best. The regime was founded on an act of war against the United States (the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and its inhabitants). Since then, Iran has supported Hezbollah in Lebanon; conducted terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia (Khobar Towers) and Latin America (Buenos Aires); armed, trained, and facilitated both terrorists and insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan; supported Hamas and Palestinian Islamic jihad; and conducted offensive naval operations in the Persian Gulf. It has done all of this in spite of American and sometimes international sanctions, appeals, offers to negotiate, and threats to attack.

Would nuclear weapons make it easier to deter the Islamic Republic from conducting such operations? Some have argued that the Islamic Republic seeks nuclear weapons out of fear of the American regime change military operation that is never quite "taken off the table." One could extrapolate from that argument that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would reassure the regime and make it less likely to support aggressive undertakings throughout the region or the world.

The trouble with that argument is that it requires dismissing the ideological basis of the regime and all of the rhetoric of successive Iranian leaders. The Islamic Republic was established as a revolutionary state in the Muslim world whose aim was to reestablish the true faith for all Muslims. The creation of the Qods Force (Jerusalem Force) in the 1980s was an example of this messianism put into practice, just as the Communist International was an example of early Soviet messianism. The statements of Iranian leaders, moreover, show not fear of the United States but rather a desire to be recognized as a hegemonic or at least a leading power in the Middle East (broadly defined to include Afghanistan).

It is possible to distinguish the two motivations in Iranian statements and actions. When the Bush administration seemed to be considering a military option, the Islamic Republic often responded with missile launches, military exercises designed to demonstrate its ability to withstand U.S. air attacks, and bombastic statements about its ability to defeat the United States using asymmetric combat methods. Such statements were most likely reactions stemming from fear of a U.S. strike, and they were intended to deter such an attack. One might imagine, if tenuously, that an Islamic Republic reassured by possessing nuclear weapons would be less prone to such statements and actions—but those statements and actions have been a tiny part of the Islamic Republic's contribution to regional instability.

The greater part of Iranian interventions abroad have positive rather than defensive purposes from Tehran's perspective. The Islamic Republic was founded on the basis of profound anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, and it supports proxies around Israel whose aim is to threaten Israel and, periodically, attack it. Rivalry and conflict between Iran and Iraq are longstanding, so the Islamic Republic has supported proxies since 2003 whose aim it is to establish a government in Baghdad that is not only Shia (that was accomplished in 2004 and again in 2005–2006 with the seating of the government of Nuri Kemal al Maliki) but is also conducive to the interests of the Islamic Republic. Iran attacks U.S. interests (and occasionally forces and individuals) in the Persian Gulf region not simply because it sees them as a threat, but also because the Islamic Republic defines the United States as the heir to the British tradition of colonialism and seeks to expel the United States, the UK, and all other foreign powers from the region. A nuclear Islamic Republic will not lose these interests or objectives.

On the contrary, it will very likely be encouraged to take greater risks in pursuing them, believing that it is safer from American or Israeli retaliation.

Conclusion

The question of deterring a nuclear Iran arises from a recognition of the difficulty (or improbability) of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. There is a strong desire in some circles to argue that Iran can be deterred and contained like the Soviet Union was in order to make the prospect of a nuclear Iran more comfortable, and to reduce the need for the painful consideration of the price the world might pay for allowing Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. It may be that there is no way to stop the Islamic Republic from acquiring such weapons. It may be that the price of attempting to do so is too high. It does not follow, however, that the world can be comfortable with the prospect of a nuclear Iran because it can be deterred.

Too much of the discussion focuses either on the current Iranian leadership—especially the supreme leader—or on generalizations about the pragmatism of most members of the ruling elite in Tehran. The trouble is that once the Islamic Republic acquires nuclear weapons, it has them indefinitely. Therefore, even if it is decided that the current leadership can be deterred, the United States must seriously consider the kind of danger accepting the nuclearization of the Islamic Republic, to say nothing of the region, will pose to coming generations. There is simply no basis to argue with any confidence that subsequent regimes in Tehran will or will not be deterrable. A strategy toward the Islamic Republic that relies on deterring it after it has obtained nuclear weapons, therefore, will be a strategy based on wishful thinking.