



Policy Brief

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Realism, Strategic Interest, and Moral Responsibility Regarding Iran

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Executive summary

A core fact of the Iran situation is that the United States and Israel pose a far more serious threat to Iran than Iran does to them, but none of the respective threats is plausibly decisive. This unyielding reality imposes sharp restraint both on the outcome that can be achieved and on the methods for achieving it. Iran cannot be coerced into accepting inequitable restrictions on uranium enrichment activities, but neither can it resist restrictions that are equitable. Strategic and moral issues underlie this conclusion. With the basic principles set as solidly as they are by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, whoever establishes the more credible adherence to the terms of the treaty will win the critical battle for global support. Iran could not reverse its renunciation of nuclear weapons without compelling reason, and the only reason that would be generally accepted as compelling would be external aggression. In addition, traditional just war principles do not justify in moral terms the initiation of violence against Iran under current circumstances. The burden of proof ought to fall under these circumstances on those asserting that Iran is an implacable enemy, but that change of attitude is far more likely to be the eventual result of settlement than a facilitating condition.

Introduction

Comprehension and responsible management of the situation in Iran has to be based on fundamental physical realities. The core facts are that separately, and especially in combination, the United States and Israel pose a far more serious threat to Iran than Iran does to them, but none of the respective threats is plausibly decisive. In principle, the United States over the course of a year or more could mobilize a military force capable of invading and occupying Iran at the cost of trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of total casualties. That action cannot be justified and will not happen. Nor could the massive firepower of nuclear weapons provide a more feasible substitute. Sheer destructiveness does not confer the ability to exercise

constructive control. In general, none of the three countries poses a realistic existential threat to the others. Indeed, the entire concept of an existential threat is irresponsible emotional rhetoric.

Implications

These unyielding realities impose sharp restraint both on the outcome that can be achieved and on the methods for achieving it. Iran cannot be coerced into accepting inequitable restrictions on uranium enrichment activities, but neither can it resist restrictions that are equitable. The meaning of equitable has been authoritatively defined by the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) adhered to by 189 states. Under the terms of the treaty, Iran has the right to enrich uranium under international inspection but does not have the right to acquire nuclear weapons. Iran also has the right to protection against external assault as long as it adheres to the terms of the treaty. Israel has not signed or ratified the treaty but cannot alter the international norm it establishes. Contempt for that norm would reinforce the international antagonism that is already a danger to Israel.

The formal legal provisions of the NPT define the only legitimate outcome of the ongoing dispute over Iran's enrichment activities. Iran's right to conduct enrichment for peaceful purposes will have to be affirmed as an instance of the NPT principle. There is no globally acceptable basis for making Iran an indefinite exception to the general rule. But Iran will have to carry a burden of reassurance regarding its compliance with the categorical prohibition on the acquisition of nuclear weapons. It has already admitted to violations of disclosure rules regarding uranium enrichment and plutonium production activities, and there is appreciable evidence of an historical effort to explore the technology of weapons design. Iran can reasonably be asked to limit its accumulation of enriched uranium and plutonium and will have to answer detailed questions about weapons design exploration to the satisfaction of IAEA inspectors. But if the questions are answered, the IAEA will have to certify compliance in order to reinstate Iran's rights under the treaty, which were suspended in reaction to evidence of violation. At that point the United States will have to explicitly apply to Iran the negative security assurance generally issued to those parties to the NPT – 183 in all – who have accepted and convincingly implemented the obligation not to acquire nuclear weapons. That means the United States will have to assure Iran that it will not initiate attack as long as Iran follows the NPT rules and does not itself initiate attack.

Working out the details of NPT adherence will assuredly require direct bilateral negotiations between the United States and Iran, and that process will have to be sustained for a considerable period of time given the animosities that have accumulated over more than three decades of diplomatic isolation. Direct, sustained negotiations have not been established. The evident outcome is not yet being seriously pursued.

Predominant hostility

Meanwhile unrealistic belligerence dominates political discussion in all three countries. Judging from what government officials are saying, the United States seems to imagine that sticks alone in the form of economic sanctions, political isolation, and ultimate military threat will force Iranian capitulation with no need for any serious carrots. Iran has fixed on resisting capitulation as the central imperative, asserting that acquiescence to intimidation ultimately threatens national survival. Israel also proclaims fear of an existential threat and indulges in fantasies of a decisive military strike, as if that would be the end of it. It is possible that all this talk of war is actually political theater meant to confer bargaining leverage, but even then there is danger that the blustering of one party might exceed the practical tolerance of one of the others. To the extent that the threats of military action reflect serious intent, the situation is commensurately more dangerous.

Whatever the real state of official intent, it is ominous that in the two self-proclaimed democracies public discussion of the situation is almost exclusively devoted to the exercise of pressure and the wielding of threat. In the United States there is a virtually unchallenged presumption that Iran is intrinsically aggressive and virtually no acknowledgment that Iran has reason to fear the substantial threat that is posed by American military forces. The extensive record of Iranian attempts to induce discussion of the evident compromise outcome is largely ignored. The fact that the religious leader of Iran has categorically rejected the acquisition of nuclear weapons on moral grounds is dismissed as inherently incredible. That belligerent bias misconceives both the strategic and the moral imperatives of the situation.

Strategic imperatives

As a practical matter, the ultimate outcome in Iran will be determined by the dynamics of justification. With the basic principles set as solidly as they are by the NPT, whoever establishes the more credible adherence to the terms of the treaty will win the critical battle for global support. Having repeatedly renounced any intention to acquire nuclear weapons as the provisions of the treaty require, Iran could not reverse that declaration without compelling reason, and the only reason that would be generally accepted as compelling would be external aggression.

So the strategic logic is locked in for both sides. If Iran initiated a nuclear weapons program in defiance of its treaty commitment and repeated policy declaration, it would indict itself and thereby justify the remote bombardment attacks that the United States and Israel could undertake with their currently available military forces. Attempting to undertake a weapons program clandestinely would only compound the indictment, as the Soviet Union discovered in its deployment of nuclear weapons to Cuba in 1962. Basically if a country has not justified the acquisition of a nuclear weapon, it is dangerous to do it – extremely so if the preemptive attack capabilities of the United States can be brought to bear. On the other hand, if the United States

and/or Israel attacked Iran with its renunciation of nuclear weapons in place and not demonstrably violated, that would justify reversal of the commitment on grounds of supreme national interest, the legal formula allowing withdrawal from the NPT. There would ensue a lengthy tit-for-tat process in which all parties suffered serious but not decisively debilitating damage. The United States, for example, is likely to lose carriers if they attempt to operate in the Persian Gulf. The outcome of such a process is likely to be determined by who cares the most. With the fight being conducted on its home turf, Iran is likely to care the most and would end up with some nuclear weapons capability, which it would come to realize it could not use for any military operations.

Given the well-established logic of the situation, it is in the strategic interest of both the United States and Israel to credit the Iranian renunciation of nuclear weapons very prominently whatever they privately think of it. Holding Iran to that declaration of intent is the key to winning the critical battle of justification. The fact that some officials in the United States have denigrated the Iranian declaration is an unfortunate indication that they are so entangled in domestic politics they do not grasp the overriding significance of global legitimacy.

Moral questions

There are also moral issues at stake inadequately recognized in the prevailing public discussion. Traditional just war principles do not justify in moral terms the initiation of violence against Iran under current circumstances. The compromise outcome has not been seriously explored, and the amount of force realistically available is very unlikely to be effective. One can hope, and even plausibly believe, that a solid majority of the American public implicitly understands that. But on this and on many other prominent matters, there is a serious question as to whether a moderate majority can control intensely belligerent minorities. The fact that belligerent sentiment currently dominates public discussion is not reassuring.

There is a deeper issue as well that applies even to those who do adhere to just war principles. Justification of the entire spectrum of coercion from military action through the various forms of economic and political sanction depends on a presumption that the target country would indulge in aggression in the absence of countervailing force. The idea of an intrinsically aggressive enemy is a powerful enduring legacy of the Second World War. Having failed to confront Hitler when he could and should have been stopped, American security culture has ever since been riveted on avoiding that error and has been insensitive to the opposite error – forcing confrontation on a country seeking equitable accommodation and thereby creating a threat that would not otherwise exist. No other country can match U.S. military capabilities, and no other country is making the investment that would be required to do so, strongly suggesting that the latter error is currently the greater problem. But that is not the prevailing presumption.

The underlying moral issue, then, has to do with the basis for presuming intrinsic hostility and thereby justifying policies of coercion. The specific question is the evidence that should be required for imposing that presumption on Iran. At the moment, flamboyant rhetoric from the Iranian president has been deemed sufficient, but that can hardly meet a serious moral standard. Iran does have historical grievances. The United States was involved in the overthrow of the legitimately elected Mossadegh government in 1953 and was subsequently complicit in the highly repressive rule of the Shah. The United States gave material support to Iraq during the 1980s in the war against Iran that Iraq initiated. In 1988, a U.S. warship shot down a civilian airliner flying a normally scheduled route from Bandar Abbas in Iran to Dubai. The ship's captain, who ordered the attack despite reservations of his crew, was not only exonerated but decorated. Those incidents and the internationally unauthorized invasion of Iraq in 2003 give Iran coherent reason to fear U.S. intentions as well as the substantial superiority of American military forces. Fear of attack and intrinsic hostility are not the same thing.

In principle, the burden of proof ought to fall under these circumstances on those asserting that Iran is an implacable enemy, but that change of attitude is far more likely to be the eventual result of settlement than a facilitating condition. The more practical and more immediate moral imperative is simply the initiation of direct and sustained negotiations without preconditions. That is the inevitable test of constructive intent, and the burden of initiative falls primarily on the United States as the stronger party. We have yet to pass that test, and that ought to be a concern for every American citizen.

About the author

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