

## Nuclear Iran: A Strategic Culture Perspective

By

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In August 2002, an Iranian opposition group, [Mujahideen e-Khalq](#), held a conference warning the West that the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) was building nuclear facilities in two Iranian cities, Natanz and Arak. Although the news took Western decision-makers, or at least the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), by surprise, the British-American nuclear strategist, [Colin S. Gray](#), predicted nuclear proliferation would still occur and the West should be ready. Instead, Iran is now on the cusp of nuclear weapons as it wages war with Israel. The consequences may very well prove catastrophic.

### Challenges of the New Security Environment

Western decision-makers tend to think about what characterizes the current strategic environment in terms of great-power rivalry. As President Joseph R. Biden's [National Security Strategy](#) asserts, "The post-Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next." Indeed, Russian military aggrandizement and Chinese economic, political, and military expansionism led American decision-makers to think and plan in terms of great-power competition. The problem set is, however, much greater.

### The Islamic Republic of Iran's Strategic Culture

As [Michael Eisenstadt](#) notes, with the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), "The IRI's strategic culture marked a distinct break with the strategic culture of Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah's rule, which was heavily influenced by Western thought and practice." Since then, the Islamic Republic of Iran perceived the United States of America and Israel as its arch enemies. To confront the two enemies, the IRI deployed its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as its main instrument of power.

Over the years, the IRGC's power substantially increased within the Iranian system of government. Indeed, as strategic history shows, in a revolutionary state civil-military relations are in a state of flux. "[Revolutions have a dynamic all their own](#). They begin with high ideals, but conclude with (military) dictatorship." In Iran, the IRGC became so dominant an economic and political power that it has turned the theological system of government gradually into a theological-military system.

At the early stage of its establishment in the 1980s, "The notion of [combating imperialism](#), in all its forms, was central to the operations of the IRGC." Since then, the Revolutionary Guard saw its mission as "exporting the revolution," the practice that is defined as "a form of revolutionary or radical internationalism, which, unlike other forms of internationalism (such as liberal or imperialist), sees international relations through the [lens of \[constant\] conflict](#)."

## Implications

[Kenneth Waltz](#) maintained that Iran should build nuclear weapons because a nuclear-armed Iran would restore stability to the Middle East. Waltz argued that the IRI, like other would-be nuclear powers, is run by rational ayatollahs with no propensity for self-destruction, which would ensure deterrence holds. He also argued, “No other country in the region will have an incentive to acquire its own nuclear capability, and the current crisis will finally dissipate, leading to a Middle East that is more stable than it is today.”

Waltz’s arguments were flawed at the time and remain so. Firstly, the mullahs, unlike leaders in current nuclear-armed states, are willing to use nuclear weapons in certain circumstances that defy deterrence norms. The IRI and its military force, the IRGC, since their establishment, were, and are, engaged in “revolutionary internationalism” by way of irregular warfare and terrorism. As such, they conceive of nuclear weapons as an “equalizer” which compensates for their inferiority in conventional warfare.

Accordingly, nuclear weapons embolden ayatollahs and IRGC generals in their irregular activities against the United States and Israel. This increases malign activities and the “feeling” of having formidable power, which can lead to unintended direct confrontation with the United States. Most importantly, intended conventional confrontation with Israel whom the IRI’s leadership seeks to eliminate.

Waltz believed the nuclear threat against Iran prevents the IRI from achieving its policy objectives. Yet Waltz failed to consider two points. Firstly, any direct confrontation that the IRI finds itself in with Israel becomes a “war of honor.” In that case, the war becomes an ideological war for the religious government in which death for God’s sake is justified. Martyrdom is an important value in Shia Islam.

Secondly, Waltz confined his observations about the political system to the theological, failing to understand that, in strategic history, authoritarian and revolutionary systems of government are subject to political metamorphosis. Waltz was trapped by presentism.

The IRGC with its aggressive Islamic value system is the dominant power in Iran—increasing in power since Waltz originally wrote. The IRGC spends time on the battlefield, outside Iran, fighting American and Israeli forces.

Thus, they can carry with them [the culture of war](#) where “war exercises a powerful fascination in its own right” serving no political objectives. Deterring these ideological military forces poses a great challenge to exercising deterrence.

Additionally, a nuclear Iran could usher in the proliferation of nuclear weapons in an already destabilized region. As [Muhammed bin Salman](#), the Saudi crown prince, has vehemently asserted, “If they [the IRI] get one [nuclear bomb], we have to.” The threat is not in the bomb, but in who possesses the bomb. In the turbulent region where there are various religious Islamic ideologies, and a Jewish state, deterrence is not an easy task.

## Recommendations

The focus of recent American administrations on preventing the IRI from achieving nuclear weapons by pursuing economic sanctions is a failure. The Islamic Republic is [closer than ever](#) to building nuclear weapons. Negotiation, demand for concessions, periodical hold out, and changing tactics are the methods that paid off for North Korea, allowing them to build a robust nuclear arsenal. The Islamic Republic is following suit.

To prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, there is only one option the United States can pursue—military action. There are costs to the use of force, but it is the only option that prevents the mullahs from possessing nuclear weapons. [Force is feasible](#).

However, with the use of force, there are second and third order effects that are certain to follow. Most importantly, the Islamic Republic will launch missile strikes and use proxies against American forces in the Middle East and Israel and will attempt to close the Hormuz Strait. Here, the United States should send a clear message to the IRI that should the Islamic Republic decide to escalate, the United States will opt for the IRI's centers of gravity—the political leadership, IRGC elites and forces, and IRGC bases in Iran. This threat focuses on Iran's centers of gravity and [works](#).

The reason threats against the centers of gravity are effective is not because the IRI is in and of itself afraid of losing its leadership or its forces, but because the Iranian government faces a legitimacy crisis and popular uprisings within the country. The attack on the Iranian consulate in Syria and the limited responses by Iran and Israel may prove the catalyst to change the current state of play.

The ayatollahs and the IRGC worry about being overthrown by the Iranian people once they are at war with the United States. [Carl von Clausewitz's](#) point about the need for support from government, the army, and the people during war is relevant in the case of Iran. The ayatollahs and the IRGC know that support from the people is lacking. Their total war efforts against America and Israel are difficult without the people.

This leaves the United States in a good position to pressure the regime through military strikes and support for dissident groups. In short, the regime is more brittle than many in the West may think. The time to test the regime is now.