

The Iranian Nuclear Threat: Summary and Talking Points (July 2009)

Iran is an irresponsible state actor that sponsors terror, foments conflict in the region, flouts its obligations under multilateral treaties, undermines the Middle East peace process, suppresses the human and political rights of its own people, provides support to anti-U.S. fighters in Iraq and threatens US allies in the region. A nuclear armed Iran will only be more inclined to engage in such behavior. Unfortunately, reports state that Iran may obtain a nuclear weapon by as soon as this year. *The New York Times* recently reported that Iran now possesses 7200 uranium-enrichment centrifuges and has enough enriched uranium for a bomb.¹

- Iran’s illicit nuclear program represents a threat to the national security of the United States and its allies.
- Iran has kept many key components of its nuclear program secret for 17 years, including its heavy water reactor at Arak, which can be used to produce plutonium. These activities—which were found to be in violation of the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Safeguards Agreement with Iran—were exposed in 2002. Since then, the IAEA has repeatedly and consistently noted a ‘pattern of concealment’ and has been unable to verify that Iran’s nuclear program is intended for peaceful purposes.²
- Because of its noncompliance with its obligations under multilateral treaties such as the NPT, Iran is currently under numerous U.S. and UN Security Council sanctions. Since 2006, the UN Security Council has passed multiple resolutions expressing its ‘serious concern’ with respect to Iran’s nuclear program, demanding that Iran halt its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities and approving and applying sanctions on Iran.³

The Iranian Regime

- For at least the past 30 years, Iran has been an irresponsible state actor. According to the U.S. State Department, Iran is the world’s number-one state sponsor of terrorism, and has provided financial support and training for organizations such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and anti-U.S. insurgents in Iraq.⁴ Iran is responsible for the bombings of the Israeli Embassy (1992) and the Jewish community center (1994) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which killed over 200 people and wounded hundreds more.
- After the disputed 2009 Iranian presidential elections, the government’s security forces cracked down on peaceful demonstrations throughout the country. According to the Associated Press, the Iranian regime’s brutal measures—especially the efforts of the Basij paramilitary force—led to the deaths of at least 20 people and the arrest of over a thousand more.⁵
- The Iranian government continues to divert billions of dollars into its illicit nuclear program, even though Iran’s economy is suffering under the burden of high inflation, high unemployment,

and high poverty.⁶ This has directly impacted the everyday lives of ordinary Iranians and continues to hamper the country's economic development.

A Direct Threat to America

- Iran has provided material and financial support to anti-U.S. forces in Iraq. Much of this assistance is provided by the Qods Force, an elite unit of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The U.S. Treasury Department has called the Qods Force the Iranian “regime’s primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists and Islamic militants to advance Iranian national interests.”⁷
- According to U.S. State Department, Iran is already a major proliferator of conventional weapons and it has exported rocket and missile technology to terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas.⁸ If Iran were to acquire a nuclear arsenal, there is a threat that Tehran could then export its nuclear knowledge, technology, and material to irresponsible state and non-state actors alike.
- In particular, Iran could provide terrorist groups with a nuclear weapon that could be smuggled into the country through a variety of methods. *The New York Times* recently expressed its concerns regarding “an attack...staged not from a missile silo but from a basement or a cargo container.”⁹ The Council on Foreign Relations has already expressed its concerns over the state of port security, calling current policy a “house of cards.”¹⁰
- As a world leader, key sponsor, and stakeholder of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the U.S. has an interest and responsibility in ensuring the viability and effectiveness of the international arms-control regime that has been in place since 1968. The nuclear arms race that would result from Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon could ultimately undermine the efficacy of the international non-proliferation regime.
- Iran already has the ballistic missiles necessary to hit U.S. and allied troops stationed in the Middle East and parts of Europe.¹¹ If Tehran were allowed to develop nuclear weapons, the threat to American military personnel would increase dramatically.
- Diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran have been broken for the last thirty years. During the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran violated two of the most sacrosanct principles of international relations: 1) by invading the American embassy, a violation of basic state sovereignty, and 2) by taking hundreds of American diplomats hostage—a violation of the principle of diplomatic immunity. According to the Associated Press, “Death to America” rallies are a common sight in the streets of Iranian cities.¹²
- Iran also provides extensive financial and military support to the terrorist group Hezbollah, which acts as its proxy in Lebanon. According to the U.S. State Department, Hezbollah has

taken U.S. citizens hostage and caused the deaths of hundreds of civilians and military personnel through its various campaigns—including the Beirut barracks bombing that took the lives of 241 American servicemen in 1983.¹³

Regional Destabilization

- Iran has consistently acted as a destabilizing force in the already-volatile Middle East. According to the U.S. State Department, Iran interferes in the Iraqi political process and provides money, training and weapons to extremists and anti-U.S. forces in Iraq.¹⁴ Iran also disrupts the Arab-Israeli peace process by providing support to Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups.
- A nuclear-armed Iran poses a threat to America's allies in the Middle East. According to the *New York Times*, Iran's leaders have repeatedly declared that that Israel should "be wiped from the map."¹⁵ Furthermore, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain have also complained of Iranian interference in their internal affairs. Just recently, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak accused Iran of plotting the overthrow of his government, and in the past, Iran has also schemed to topple the governments of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.¹⁶
- A nuclear-armed Iran would spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. According to a recent report given to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "[a]n Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapon or a nuclear weapons capability would dramatically shift the balance of power among Iran and its three most powerful neighbors-Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. This shift in the balance of power could spark a regional nuclear arms race as Iran's neighbors seek to redress the new power imbalance."¹⁷
- A nuclear-armed Iran would likely embolden Iran's already-aggressive foreign policy, resulting in greater confrontations with the international community and support for extremists.

Human Rights

- The Iranian regime persecutes members of a wide range of minorities, social, and religious groups, including Christians, Bahais, homosexuals, women, labor activists, and student groups.
- Under Iran's strict apostasy laws, conversion to Christianity is a crime punishable by death. In the 2008 edition of its annual 'World Watch List,' Open Doors, an organization dedicated to Christian community development and advocacy, rated the Iranian regime as the world's third worst persecutor of Christians - only North Korea and Saudi Arabia were rated worse.¹⁸
- Iran's Bahais cannot publicly practice their religion. Since 1979, Iranian authorities have killed more than 2,000 Bahai leaders, arrested and imprisoned thousands more, and dismissed more than 10,000 Bahais from government and university jobs.¹⁹

- According to Amnesty International, Iran's ethnic minorities are subject to discrimination and, in some cases, persecution. In the Kurdish provinces of the northwest, the Iranian regime has instituted strict censorship on Kurdish-language newspapers and political organizations. The government has also cracked down on its Baluchi minority.²⁰
- Homosexuality is illegal in Iran, and gay sex is considered a capital crime. The Iranian government targets gays with beatings, lashings and execution. President Ahmadinejad has even gone so far as to claim that there are simply no gays in Iran, telling an audience at Columbia University that "in Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country...in Iran we do not have this phenomenon, I don't know who has told you that we have it."²¹
- *Human Rights Watch* recently reported that the Iranian government is escalating its attacks against women's rights activists, subjecting them to arbitrary detention, travel bans, and harassment.²² These activists were all part of a campaign to collect one million signatures to protest discriminatory laws. Women also face systematic discrimination in legal and social matters. A woman cannot obtain a passport without the permission of her husband or a male relative, and women do not enjoy equal rights under Sharia statutes governing divorce, inheritance, and child custody.²³
- Iran's judicial system does not recognize the existence of trade unions, and the government has cracked down harshly on those attempting to organize labor groups. Even though Iran is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right to association, independent labor unions are banned in Iran. According to Amnesty International "union activists are regularly beaten, arrested, jailed and tortured."²⁴
- The Iranian government has also cracked down on student groups. A decade ago, the closure of *Salam*, one of the largest reform-oriented newspapers in the country, ignited the largest public protests since the Iranian Revolution. During the regime's crackdown, more than seventy students disappeared, 1200-1400 students were detained, and Ezzat Ebrahim-Nejad was shot and killed by the regime's security forces.²⁵
- The recent presidential elections in Iran were marked by a fierce and massive campaign of government repression. According to the BBC, hundreds of thousands of Iranians participated in the initial protests against the disputed results of that election. The ensuing crackdown killed at least 20 people, and some protesters claim that the actual death toll was closer to 250. According to the Associated Press, over a thousand students and other protesters were detained, and many have yet to be released.²⁶

Emboldened by a nuclear weapon, the Iranian regime will only become more inclined to engage in such repressive behavior.

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- ⁴ "Chapter 3—State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview." Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State. Available online at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2006/82736.htm>.
- ⁵ Heintz, Jim. "Iran reports more protest arrests." Associated Press, 2 July 2009.
- ⁶ "Iran (03/08). U.S. Department of State. Available online at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm>.
- ⁷ "HP-759: Treasury Designates Individuals, Entity Fueling Iraqi Insurgency." U.S. Department of Treasury Press Room. Available online at <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/hp759.htm>.
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