

To Curtail the Iranian Nuclear Threat, Change Tehran's Threat Perceptions

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Change Tehran's Threat Perceptions**

By Greg Thielmann, Senior Fellow Revised April 14, 2009

The Obama administration has made a promising start in diplomatically re-engaging Iran. The United States will participate fully in international talks with Iran over its nuclear activities, but if Washington is to cope successfully with Tehran's nuclear challenge, sensitive and skillful policy implementation must be based on sober analysis. This means considering which Iranian threats are imminent, which are mutable, and how our own actions affect threat perceptions on the other side of the fence. This Threat Assessment Brief seeks to evaluate the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program and by the policies we choose to adopt in response, thereby illuminating viable approaches to threat mitigation.

Highlights

- Iran is *years* rather than *months* away from a credible nuclear weapons capability.
- While Iran wants a full nuclear fuel cycle and the option of quickly producing material needed for nuclear weapons, it does not appear to have resumed its earlier weaponization program.
- A decision to do so would be based on a conclusion that nuclear weapons were necessary to deter attack and/or desirable to increase Iran's influence.
- Tehran's perceptions about the possibility of an attack are the biggest obstacle to preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state.
- The greatest near-term threat to U.S. national security would arise from an attack to forestall Iran's ability to acquire nuclear weapons.
- Iran must be persuaded that building nuclear weapons would pose a bigger threat to its security and prestige than not, and that satisfying the IAEA on safeguards is the best path to achieving its overall goals.
- To alter Iran's threat perceptions, the United States must:
 - Stop identifying "regime change" in Iran as a foreign policy objective and explicitly reject the unilateral use of military force.
 - Seek agreements with Iran in areas of mutual interest such as Afghanistan, even before the nuclear issue is resolved.
 - Support the continuation of UN Security Council sanctions until Iran satisfies the IAEA that it is in compliance with its NPT obligations.

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Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology, and possibly nuclear weapons, stems from its complicated threat environment and the historical grievances it harbors concerning the United States. Tehran now faces large numbers of U.S. troops in its neighbors to the west and east with few regional allies. The most productive path for averting nuclear weapons development in Iran is for Washington to seek to alter Iran's threat perceptions.

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