

The Breakout Option: Raising the Bar for the Supreme Leader

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Iran Nuclear Brief

Analysis from the "Solving the Iranian Nuclear Puzzle" Briefing Series

By GREG THIELMANN
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The Breakout Option: Raising The Bar for the Supreme Leader

The U.S. intelligence community still assesses that Tehran has not yet actually decided to build a nuclear weapon. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would be the one to give that order and the one who would control the weapons. It is therefore worth pondering what steps could discourage him from proceeding down the nuclear weapons path.

If Khamenei's foremost goals are the survival of the Islamic Republic with himself as supreme leader, developing nuclear capabilities may be seen an asset, even with the damaging sanctions that result. By positioning himself as a defiant defender of Iranian nuclear progress against foreign bullying, he can reinforce the domestic legitimacy of the clerical regime.

If he came to believe that Iran could forestall continuing economic punishment and eventual military attack only by abject capitulation, he might decide that breaking out of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to build a bomb would be the preferred path for restoring Iran's international position and securing the Islamic revolution.

The challenge for the United States is to devise policies that would make it as difficult as possible for Khamenei to retain domestic support and international sympathy if he were to go for a bomb.

HIGHLIGHTS

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Khamenei's foremost concerns are protecting the clerical regime and maintaining his personal hold on power over it.• Iran's nuclear program has been a means for him to win domestic support by enhancing Iran's power and prestige while deterring other countries from military action against Tehran because of the program's latent weapons capability.<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ In order to deflect blame for bringing on increasingly stringent sanctions, he has to convince the Iranian people that foreign powers want to deprive Iran of its rights.• A strategy by Israel and the United States of threatening preventive military attack on Iran may induce caution in Khamenei, but it may also persuade him that he needs an actual bomb to protect the regime. Launching such an attack would be catastrophically counterproductive.• The United States must craft a strategy that would construct obstacles to breakout and steer Khamenei in a different direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Stop threatening a preventive attack, which would not succeed in halting Iran's progress for more than a couple of years.◦ Accept Iran's offer to halt 20 percent uranium enrichment in exchange for refueling the Tehran Research Reactor.◦ Challenge Khamenei to act on his moral condemnations of nuclear weapons by agreeing to interim steps toward nuclear disarmament at the planned 2012 conference on creating a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by all states in the region• A ban on reactors best suited for producing plutonium• A ban on flight tests of missiles with a range of 3,000 kilometers or more◦ Pursue step-by-step negotiations with Tehran on nuclear issues, seeking parallel agreements in other areas where U.S.-Iranian security interests overlap, such as counterterrorism, counterterrorism, and regional stability.
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