

Policy Options

The U.S. and Iran: Confronting Policy Alternatives

News about the U.S. relationship with Iran and Iran's uranium enrichment program appears frequently in the headlines these days. The United States and other governments around the world, worry that Iran wants to build nuclear weapons. Iran claims it is only developing nuclear power, which it has a right to do under international law.

The Iranian government claims the right to develop nuclear materials for peaceful purposes. Iran's President Ahmadinejad has staunchly defended Iran's right to a nuclear program. Meanwhile, his assertion that Israel should be "wiped off the map" has increased international anxiety about Iran's intentions. The dilemma for the international community is that it is difficult to distinguish between "good atoms" for peaceful purposes like nuclear power and "bad atoms" for military purposes. In 2006 Iran restarted its uranium enrichment program in a move that increased concern around the world.

There is much debate internationally about how to respond to this issue. The United Nations Security Council has imposed sanctions and worked to resolve the conflict through multilateral talks for several years.

There is also disagreement in the United States on how best to deal with Iran. Some advocate a hard-line policy to bring about change in Iran's leadership, including military action. Others believe that a policy of diplomatic engagement is a better course.

At the end of October 2007 the United States announced it would impose new, unilateral financial sanctions against Iran and labeled a portion of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Quds Force, as well as four state-owned banks as supporters of terrorism.

In December 2007, an assessment by American intelligence agencies concluded that Iran froze its nuclear weapons program in 2003. The assessment also stated that the agencies "do not know whether [Iran] currently intends to develop nuclear weapons." This finding has not quieted concern about the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran. Further, many remain unconvinced by the intelligence assessment.

Several major questions complicate this issue:

- Does Iran plan to build a nuclear weapon, or just to develop nuclear energy?
- If the former, how long does the international community have to respond to the threat before Iran succeeds?
- If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, what are the consequences?
- If Iran only wants nuclear power, should it be allowed to enrich its uranium itself, or should it import nuclear energy materials from elsewhere?
- How do Iranian citizens view this issue? How do they view the United States?
- Is it possible to address other issues on the U.S.-Iranian agenda simultaneously, such as human rights and terrorism?

As you develop your own option for U.S. policy on Iran, think about the following:

- What is the history of U.S. relations with Iran? With the wider Middle East?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this issue?
- What steps should the United States take in the coming months?
- What should our longer term goals be?
- What values are important to you?
- What are the strengths of your option? What are the arguments against it?

“The U.S. In Iran: Confronting Policy Alternatives” is a Teaching with the News online resource published by the Choices Program at Brown University. Online resources are updated frequently.

It is important to understand that no one Option as it is framed here reflects the views of any one organization or national leader. It is your job to sort through the three Options, think about their concerns and values, discuss these with yourr peers, and then frame an “Option 5 “ that reflects your own views. When you have done this, we encourage you to read the papers, listen to the views of others, think about the ways in which you agree and disagree, and look for areas of common ground.

Lesson Plan, Extension Activities, & Additional Web Links are available from the Resources section of the Choices Program web site—www.choices.edu/resources

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OPTION 1: Use the U.S. Military to Achieve Regime Change.

Iran's government threatens the United States, Israel, and vital U.S. interests in the Middle East. We should not underestimate Iran's aggression. It clearly seeks a greater role in the Middle East. It wants to flex its muscle by intimidating others into accepting its dominance. And it will not be dissuaded from pursuing nuclear weapons. It also has threatened to "wipe Israel off the map." In fact, its revolutionary Islamist ideology is incompatible with international peace and cooperation. As Iran develops its nuclear capabilities with the intent of one day making weapons, we must recognize that the only guarantee of blunting Iran's hostile intentions is to change its government completely, and to do so now. The population of Iran overwhelmingly is made up of young people under thirty years old, and the evidence shows that these citizens would like a better relationship with the United States. They are tired of the hard-line leaders they have. Demonstrations against the government over the past few years show not only that many are dissatisfied, but that the population is willing to express its dissatisfaction. There are several dissident groups inside and outside Iran whom we should support so they can gain more power. All people worldwide deserve democracy and the freedom to choose their leaders; Iran is no exception. A democratic Iran would be a welcome friend for the United States and an example to the smaller countries of the Middle East, and furthermore, it would not seek nuclear weapons. A democratic Iran also would stop destabilizing Iraq and instead help improve the situation there. We must take immediate steps to change the regime in Iran.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 1

- Iranians deserve the liberties inherent in a democratic system.
- With or without nuclear weapons, the current government in Iran will remain a danger to the United States and the Middle East.
- Iranians would feel positively towards Americans after we help them overthrow their hard-line regime.
- Iran's current regime is a threat to Iraq's young democracy and to the Middle East as a whole.

Goals of Option 1

- Oust the dangerous, non-democratic, conservative regime and install a democratic government in Iran.
- Continue efforts to democratize the Middle East.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Encourage and support Iranian resistance groups.
- Use information to sway the Iranian population towards supporting regime change.
- Use military force as needed, including air raids and Special Forces units on the ground in Iran.
- Encourage other nations to tighten sanctions in order to cut off funds that prop up the regime.

Arguments For Option 1

- Many people in Iran are looking for regime change.
- Installing a new government in Iran will eliminate the region's greatest threat to peace and security.
- A new regime in Iran will be a vast improvement over the current one which supports terrorism, abuses human rights, and is trying to hide its nuclear weapons program from the international community.

- Increasing the number of democratic, friendly states in the Middle East will have long-term positive effects for the United States.
- Achieving regime change quickly will halt Iran’s nuclear weapons program before it develops a bomb.

Arguments Against Option 1

- The problem with Iran is narrow: the possible development of nuclear weapons. Regime change is destabilizing. It is also unnecessary to resolve this problem.
- The United States is overstretched militarily and cannot undertake another action.
- Any attempt to overthrow the Iranian regime will unite the Iranian people against the United States.
- There is not a unified, significant opposition force or group in Iran to lead the change.
- “Regime change” will not be any more successful in Iran than it has been in Iraq. As we saw in Iraq, there are too many unforeseen and potentially very negative consequences to this kind of policy.
- Any effort to overthrow the Iranian regime will damage already strained relations with other countries. Military action against Iran, without full cooperation of other nations, will make the United States a pariah.

OPTION 2: Use Military Action to Destroy Iran’s Nuclear Facilities.

The threat from Iran’s nuclear program is real and it is immediate. It is clear that Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons. We must act, alone if necessary, to destroy Iran’s nuclear production facilities while limiting civilian casualties and reducing Iran’s ability to counter-attack. Iran has hidden its nuclear enrichment program from the international community for many years. The International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) has been working diligently for years to discover what exactly Iran has achieved in its nuclear program. Iran has not always cooperated with the IAEA, making it difficult for the IAEA to provide accurate reports. President Ahmadinejad routinely speaks out against the United States, fueling hatred against us and thwarting our diplomatic efforts. Indeed, the diplomatic efforts of the Bush administration have not been successful with Iran because of the Iranian government’s radical and belligerent stance. Iran has threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If Iran gets nuclear weapons it might use those weapons against Israel, our important ally in the Middle East. As a state sponsor of terror, Iran may also pass nuclear weapons on to groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Additionally, an Iran further emboldened by nuclear weapons will pose an additional danger to the fragile democracy in Iraq and will put millions of people in peril. An Iran with nuclear weapons is a serious threat demanding serious and immediate action. But we must target the action to the specific threat and be careful not to destabilize an already dangerous region. We should take immediate military action against Iran’s nuclear facilities.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 2

- Iran’s nuclear program is intended as a basis for developing nuclear weapons. This is a danger to our national security.
- An Iran with nuclear weapons would be more dangerous than other nuclear states including Pakistan, India, and China.
- The United States has the right and a responsibility to take action against those who violate the IAEA and international nuclear agreements.
- Threats from Iran towards Israel are not empty ones; they need to be taken seriously.

Goals of Option 2

- Destroy Iran’s known and suspected nuclear facilities and eliminate Iran’s capability to develop nuclear weapons forever.
- Protect Israel and maintain stability in the region.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Act quickly, and alone if necessary, to launch military air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.
- Sabotage Iranian nuclear facilities covertly.

Arguments For Option 2

- A crisis with Iran is coming sooner or later. Better that we deal with it now and on our own terms.
- Waiting for the international community to act or for trade initiatives to take effect would mean giving Iran plenty of time to develop nuclear weapons.
- Air strikes would limit the amount of U.S. troop involvement.
- Iran’s involvement in destabilizing Iraq would be halted if we increased pressure on Iran by eliminating its nuclear sites.

Arguments Against Option 2

- Iran does not have a record of unprovoked aggression. It is likely only to attack others when its security is threatened.
- Identifying all Iranian nuclear sites will be very difficult as we do not have the required intelligence.
- Achieving complete success in eliminating all of Iran's nuclear sites, some of which are underground, will be logistically very difficult, if not impossible.
- A military intervention will not stop Iran from trying to acquire nuclear weapons. In fact, the very threat of military intervention makes Iran more likely to try to acquire them.
- Iranian officials have said they will retaliate against any military action. Their likely targets would be U.S. forces in Iraq or terrorist attacks against Americans around the world.
- Any military strikes will fuel anti-U.S. feelings and serve as a recruiting tool for terrorist organizations. Even just entertaining the idea of strikes and publicly stating it has increased distrust.

OPTION 3: Engage in Multilateral Diplomacy to Stop Iran’s Nuclear Program.

Iran’s actions surrounding its nuclear program are a concern for the United States and the rest of the world, but we have the time to address these issues. As we have learned from our experience in Iraq, it is important to work diplomatically and to gain the support of the international community when dealing with difficult issues such as these. Additionally, the actions of the United States in Iraq have weakened us. We are no longer in a position either politically or militarily to consider radical options such as regime change or massive military strikes. Either could prove militarily disastrous. Furthermore, military action of any kind might only serve to embolden Iran’s leaders and further radicalize the country. Instead, we should take the broad approach of multilateral diplomacy, using multiple channels to convey our positions on the several issues at hand. The breakthroughs we have seen with Iran in recent years have come only since European nations became involved in negotiations, offering “carrots” to Iran to complement the U.S. “sticks.” This shows that multilateral action works. Only a calm and concerted effort to work with others on the Security Council and to have real dialogue with Iranians—rather than provoking them—will lead Iran to shut down its nuclear enrichment facilities and accept outside sources of enriched uranium for nuclear power plants. Diplomacy with international support will also allow the United States to raise concerns about human rights and support of terrorism. While the use of force can’t be ruled out as part of a “carrots and sticks” approach to diplomacy, it is a last resort and must be understood and agreed to only within the context of a united international effort. Beginning real international dialogue on all these issues must be our core focus. It will require patience and persistence.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 3

- Iran has exhibited a desire to cooperate. It froze its nuclear weapons program in 2003 and voiced willingness to allow IAEA inspections of nuclear facilities.
- Multilateral diplomacy is the most effective, least dangerous way to deal with this complicated problem.
- Iran may think it necessary to develop nuclear weapons if it feels threatened by the United States.

Goals of Option 3

- Stop Iran’s uranium-enrichment program and eliminate a security threat in an already volatile region.
- Re-establish a positive relationship between the United States and the rest of the international community.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Establish negotiations among allied countries and Iran, pulling in the UN and the IAEA as necessary.
- Open U.S. diplomatic relations with Iran and cease talking about “serious consequences” or using other belligerent language which threatens Iran’s security.
- Pressure Russia, China, and others to cooperate in offering incentives for a non-nuclear Iran and disincentives (such as sanctions) for a nuclear Iran.

Arguments For Option 3

- Iran’s huge youth population has a favorable attitude towards the United States and is our biggest ally against the current regime; anything but diplomacy will alienate Iran’s youth and produce another generation in the Middle East that hates the United States.

- Iran is probably ten years away from developing a nuclear weapon. We have the time to muster a world-wide diplomatic effort.
- The United States can reestablish its credibility as a force for stability and peace by relying on diplomacy.
- A broad diplomatic effort would enable the United States to address issues other than nuclear weapons, such as human rights and sponsorship of terrorism.

Arguments Against Option 3

- The international community will never agree on an effective solution; meanwhile, Iran will develop a nuclear weapon.
- Trying to engage with a regime that supports terrorism and has a belligerent president only encourages rogue behavior.
- Iran has used diplomacy as a cover for years, misleading the international community; meanwhile they have been developing their nuclear capabilities.
- The sanctions, UN resolutions, and other measures imposed have not worked thus far. There is no evidence that such tactics will work now.
- Iran responds to hard-line American policy. Retaining the threat of U.S. military action is important for a peaceful resolution to this problem.
- Trying to negotiate with both the radical clerics as well as the hard-line president in Iran, when it is unclear where central power is really held, complicates diplomacy to the extent that it may be impossible.

OPTION 4: Normalize Relations with Iran and Begin Trade Negotiations.

U.S. relations with Iran are frozen in time. Since 1979, the United States has refused to have diplomatic relations with Iran. The U.S. government has limited investment in Iran, banned many imports and exports to and from Iran, and has advocated for and secured implementation of major sanctions. The Iranian people—most of whom are under the age of thirty—are suffering. Iran's people want jobs, security, and housing. President Ahmadinejad has focused on improving economic conditions in Iran; indeed, developing nuclear energy to supplement the oil industry is part of this plan. Meanwhile, the United States has embarked on a provocative and so far ineffective campaign of intimidation and isolation. We will gain more if we stop threatening Iran and treat it with the respect and cooperation it deserves as a regional power. We have an opportunity to recast our relationship with Iran, develop trade between the two countries, and increase oil production. We should capitalize on the positive feelings most Iranians have for the United States as well their need to improve the economy. Over time we can build the cooperative relationship necessary to resolve the conflicts that exist between the two countries, such as nuclear ambitions, terrorism, and involvement in Iraq. The United States has experience making such bold moves, such as when Nixon made overtures to China in 1972. The result was a restoration of normal relations seven years later. Refusing to talk with an adversary does not achieve anything. We must stop threatening Iran and instead take bold new steps to engage the Iranians economically and diplomatically.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 4

- Iran's suffering economy is contributing to Iranian discontent and fueling a perceived need to develop nuclear energy and potentially nuclear weapons.
- If we threaten military action against Iran, it will only drive Iran to develop weapons as protection against us.
- Prosperity will bring stability and a more cooperative relationship.
- The Iranian people want better relations with the United States.

Goals of Option 4

- Eliminate Iran's perceived need to develop nuclear weapons.
- Improve the Iranian economy in order to encourage reform and cooperation.
- Develop a friendly trading partner in the volatile Middle East.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Lift the sanctions currently in place.
- Renew diplomatic relations with Iran and announce that force will not be used to resolve any current or future disputes.
- Begin trade negotiations and introduce foreign investment options.
- Assist in developing and modernizing Iranian industry, particularly the oil industry.

Arguments For Option 4

- Iran's large youth population would be very supportive of the changes and would embrace American efforts.
- President Ahmadinejad has stated that his main goal is to improve his country's domestic situation; we would have the support of his government (and the Iranian people) if we took this route.

- The United States has a tradition of using trade as a successful foreign policy tool, such as with China in the 1970s. Iran is a good candidate to benefit from this kind of policy.
- A policy of increased cooperation does not involve dangerous or costly military action.
- The increase in trade between Iran and the United States could be economically beneficial to the United States, particularly in the case of the oil industry.

Arguments Against Option 4

- Increasing trade and increasing cooperation takes many years. In the meantime Iran could build and use a nuclear weapon.
- China remains a difficult challenge for the United States. It violates human rights and occasionally threatens U.S. interests in Asia. A policy of détente is no guarantee of results.
- Iran's current unelected leaders cannot be trusted enough to restore diplomatic relations.
- The problem of Iran needs an international resolution. Many nations are involved in this conflict, and if the United States embarks on a radical change of course, we may find more foes than friends.
- Iranians do not have much reason to trust U.S. intentions. The United States installed a corrupt king in Iran in 1953, has called Iran one of the Axis of Evil, and continues to threaten Iran's regime. It is unlikely Iranian leaders will trust Americans enough to open trade.
- By offering trade and other incentives to Iran, other rogue nations will also believe they can threaten world peace and get away with it.