

The Iran Threat: Public Perception vs. Reality

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According to nationwide survey, a majority of Americans feel that Iran is the chief threat to the interests of the United States and world stability. Rhetoric from both Iran and the United States reinforce this fear and have led to major foreign policy adjustments. Experts in missile technology and foreign policy, however, paint a less alarming view of an Iranian threat. The findings in this article demonstrate the stark differences between what weapons and foreign policy experts believe about an Iran threat, compared to what the public and political leaders think in the United States. This suggests that our foreign policy leaders may be misrepresenting the actual threat that Iran poses to the public.

According to Gallup polls, a full 61% of Americans believe that Iran's nuclear program is either a "serious" or "somewhat serious" threat to the United States (Gallup, 2009). When asked an open-ended question to name a single country they believed to constitute the greatest threat to stability in the world, the majority of Americans said Iran, with 35% of the country claiming so (Carroll, 2007). Other Gallup surveys show that 80% of Americans have an unfavorable view of Iran and distrust the government in Tehran (Ibid). An even more recent survey by NBC News and the Wall Street Journal shows that 52% of those surveyed would favor military action by the United States in the event that Iran develops a nuclear weapon (Hart & McInturff, 2009). These nationwide surveys confirm a public attitude toward Iran that is highly negative, distrustful, and aggressive. But is this perception of an Iran threat justified? There are many experts in missile defense, intelligence agencies, and foreign policy who claim the opposite—that the Iranian threat is not as serious as many would believe. Another important question that polls and government officials never appear to explain is that of Iranian intent. What would a nuclear Iran gain by using a nuclear weapon belligerently and potentially killing hundreds of thousands of fellow Muslims? This piece will show the history of the Iranian threat, demonstrate the differences between public perception and that of experts, and clarify how the Iranian threat is exaggerated.

HISTORY OF IRAN/UNITED STATES RELATIONS

Americans have had a highly unfavorable view of Iran since at least 1990 (Gallup, 2009) and the origins of Iranian distrust can be traced to the Iranian Revolution in 1979. It was at the end of President Jimmy Carter's administration that turmoil struck the Middle Eastern country and the pro-Western

monarchy was overthrown. It was also during this time that 66 Americans were taken hostage in the embassy in Tehran (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009). This event would ultimately prove to be President Carter's undoing, being unable to secure the release of these hostages before the 1980 election. Twenty minutes after President Ronald Reagan's inauguration the hostages were freed. After barely registering in the minds of American public consciousness through most of the 20th Century, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the hostage crisis left the American public with a highly unfavorable view of the new regime in Tehran (Wolf, 2000).

Since the Revolution, the United States has had no official relations with Tehran. Further stressing the relationship between the United States and Iran, Iran has never officially recognized Israel, and some of Iran's leaders have publicly called for its destruction (Yoong, 2006). Israel, of course, is a very close ally of the United States. Outside of the United States and Israel, though, Iran has diplomatic relations and trade agreements with many countries around the world (Kuppusamy, 2007) including China, who holds veto power in the United Nations Security Council (Wright, 2004). Shortly after the attacks on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush named Iran as one of the key sponsors of terrorism and a part of the "Axis of Evil" along with North Korea and Iraq in his 2002 State of the Union address. Today, the CIA currently classifies Iran as a "State Sponsor of Terrorism" even though Iran's leaders publicly condemned the September 11 attacks shortly after the incident (Muir, 2001). This icy history between Iran and the United States has cemented an adversarial American foreign policy towards Iranian leadership.

SOURCES THAT SUPPORT THE IDEA OF A MAJOR IRANIAN THREAT

Most recently and visibly, the Bush White House supported the view that Iran is a major threat. As part of the “Axis of Evil,” Iran was charged by President George W. Bush with pursuing a nuclear weapons program and supporting terrorist groups such as Hezbollah who share a border close to Israel (Calabresi, 2003). These statements certainly did not eliminate any fears in the mind of the American public of an Iranian threat and even implied that a nuclear device could reach the hands of terror groups. Deepening America’s perception of threat is Iran’s President Ahmadinejad himself, continuing openly to call for the destruction of the Israeli state while actively pursuing a nuclear program—which they claim is civilian in nature (Time, 2009). Funding terrorist groups, pursuing a nuclear program, and calling for the destruction of a close ally in the region understandably validates many fears. Iran’s rhetoric, coupled with the statements made by the White House, would appear to justify the theory that Iran is a major threat to U.S. interests.

Even before the Bush White House, reports were published concluding that Iran posed threats to United States’ interests. Sarah Kreps, a former research fellow for the International Security Program, researched the impact and differences of National Intelligence Estimates produced by the National Intelligence Council. A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) developments in 1995 had upset many members of Congress with charges of politicization and downplaying major international threats (Kreps, 2008). The 1995 NIE concluded that “in the next 15 years no country other than the major declared nuclear powers will develop a ballistic missile that could threaten the continuous 48 states or Canada” (Kreps, 2008, 614). According to Kreps, this estimate was the justification for President Bill Clinton vetoing the 1996 defense authorization bill that provided funding for missile defense. This prompted former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to launch the Rumsfeld Commission to reexamine the 1995 NIE. Here, the Rumsfeld Commission concluded that “ballistic missiles armed with WMD payloads pose a strategic threat to the United States” and that Iran would likely present these ICBM threats to the United States within five to 10 years (Kreps, 2008 617). A week after the release of the Rumsfeld Commission’s report in 1998, North Korea launched a Taepo-Dong I missile over Japan with a range of 1,000 miles (Ibid). This in effect confirmed the results of the Rumsfeld Commission report and pressured President Bill Clinton to increase the national missile defense budget by \$6.6 billion in 1999 (Ibid).

Another NIE in 2005 concluded that “left to its own devices, Iran is determined to build nuclear weapons” (Kreps, 609). This NIE was a source of justification for the hard-line stance toward Iran and persuaded many members of the United Nations to endorse sanctions against Iran (Ibid). The results of the NIE also validated fears of a major Iranian threat

in the eyes of the public. It is important to remember that NIEs are based on incomplete information, and threat is measured by qualifying and probabilistic language (Analyst, 2009). NIE reports use words such as “highly likely” or “very unlikely” to describe the odds of a particular set of events occurring, and it is impossible to predict the future (Ibid). Former director of the Office of National Estimates (ONE) Shaman Kent once said “estimating is what you do when you do not know” (Kreps, 2009, 610). There are often major policy implications of an NIE, despite an impossibility to predict the future. As Kreps demonstrated, these estimates have influenced vetoes, budget authorizations, and public perception (2009).

In 2008, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iran had begun processing small quantities of uranium and this act was “not consistent with any application other than the development of a nuclear weapon” (American Society of International Law, 2008, 665). This was a key justification in the strengthening of sanctions against Iran that same year (Ibid). The United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1803 which called out Iranian financial institutions that were supporting the nuclear program and instructed member nations to avoid conducting business with supporters of a nuclear Iran. In addition, the resolution called for member states to inspect all cargo originating from an Iranian source in any international seaport or airport, as well as restricting travel of individuals who are known supporters of the Iranian nuclear program (American Society of International Law, 2008). These intelligence estimates and agency reports often have a profound impact on public perceptions of the Iran threat as well as shaping policy according to these reports. Political leaders use NIEs and other intelligence estimates to justify their rhetoric. According to some, “war-mongering” rhetoric has a profound impact on public perception (Analyst, 2009). Frequently though, NIEs, government experts, and specialists opinions contradict the idea of an Iranian threat. These expert assessments dispute the rhetoric of political leaders and policy makers, showing another reality to the situation.

SOURCES THAT CHALLENGE THE IDEA OF A MAJOR IRANIAN THREAT

Just two years after the 2005 NIE that justified much of the Bush White House foreign policy toward Iran, the 2007 NIE was released. The 2007 NIE was essentially dismissive of the Iranian threat and set off a political storm similar to that of the 1990s. The 2007 NIE declared with “high confidence that in Fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program ... and with moderate confidence that Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid 2007” (Kreps, 2008, 618). The impact of this NIE was just as powerful as the 2005 NIE the Bush White House had used as justification for its foreign policy. Similar to the 1995 NIE, there were charges of politicization and erroneous results. Hillary Clinton and other defenders of the 2007 NIE refer to its conclusion as evi-

dence that the Bush White House had “exaggerated the Iranian threat” and used the prior estimate to pursue “ideological ends” (Ibid, 620). Like Donald Rumsfeld in the 1990s, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton asserted that the intelligence community was engaging in “policy formulation” rather than intelligence analysis (Ibid). This estimate caused the Bush White House to lose some support in Congress and abroad, but did not justify changing the hard-line stance toward Iran.

Christopher de Bellaigue, the Tehran correspondent for *The Economist* and long-time Middle Eastern journalist, rejects the foreign policy attitude of the Bush White House and opposes the idea that Iran is a major threat to the United States. Bellaigue says that even if Iran had nuclear weapons, they would have no reason for using them aggressively (Bellaigue, 2005). He claims that belligerence with nuclear weapons would be “catastrophic” for Iran. Iran’s clerical regime is based primarily on an unsound economy of oil exports and its apprehensive trade agreements with the nearby European Union and Arab states. Any aggressive use of nuclear weapons would almost immediately collapse the economy of the nation and sever its ties to the outside world. Bellaigue urges an understanding of intent in his arguments and offers ulterior explanations for the actions of the Iranian government that downplay the notion of Iran being a major threat to the United States. The pursuit of nuclear weapons, he claims, is a calculated and reactionary response to the vulnerability Tehran feels by the United States and Israel (Ibid). Iran hid the fact that it was pursuing nuclear weapons because it was of a military nature and was cautious of international scrutiny. The goal of the program is to be able to “go nuclear the moment it feels a U.S. or Israeli attack is imminent” (Ibid 19). This argument would support the idea that an Iranian nuclear program is more for deterrence and not antagonism, which would not represent a threat to the United States. Despite their nuclear intentions, a nuclear-armed Iran does not appear likely to use them aggressively.

Bellaigue attacks other perceptions of Iran as well. One of the views circulating about Iran is that they have no need for nuclear power so their program must be a weapons pursuit. However, Iranian energy needs are rising faster than the government is able to meet them. Some 40% of the energy consumed in Iran is produced locally, and if this number continues to rise, oil revenues would fall and injure the economy. The main goal of Iranian foreign policy, in his view, is to “counter U.S. efforts to isolate it” (Ibid, 19). This mindset explains why Iran has made major trade deals with China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In addition, Iran continues to export energy to allies of the United States despite U.S. government disapproval. These details support the idea that an aggressive nuclear Iran is simply not an option because of its international trade agreements and dependence.

The idea that threat of force or military action is the only way to stop an Iranian nuclear program is also unwarranted,

Bellaigue claims. Iran has responded to threats and negotiations in the past, as evidenced by the halting of its nuclear program in 2003 under international pressure. This shows that Iran is not an unstable and monolithic dictatorship that many perceive, but rather a rational nation-state like most countries. The argument for military action and threat of force may actually backfire and cause Iran to drop out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the opposite result of U.S. intentions. If Bellaigue’s arguments are true, then U.S. foreign policy is not only exaggerating an Iran threat, it may also be the cause of the hostility.

There is also evidence that domestic shifts in Iran may lead to a more pro-Western stance if United States foreign policy remains fairly benign. According to both Bellaigue and others, there is much internal disagreement over the state’s nuclear program (Bellaigue, 2009; Time 2009). President Ahmadinejad is facing harsh criticism from opponents at home (Time, 2009). In response to a recent deal in Vienna that would allow Iran to pursue enriched uranium outside of Iran, Iranian Judiciary Chief Sadeq Larijani denounced the idea of nuclear cooperation as not being in the interest of the state (Ibid). Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Ali Larijani, has criticized the nuclear program as “neither logical nor legal” (Ibid). In addition to this criticism within Iran’s government, Bellaigue argues that even ordinary Iranians do not support their country’s nuclear ambition (Bellaigue, 2008). Citizens of Iran say they do not want the political isolation that would come with a nuclear program and the youth of Iran is exceedingly pro-Western, despite the hard-line stances of its own government (Ibid). Confirming Bellaigue’s personal interactions in Iran, a recent World Public Opinion poll found that 58% of Iranians believe producing nuclear weapons is “contrary to Islam” (World Public Opinion, 2008). The same poll shows Iranians largely supporting the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, with 59% of the population agreeing. These domestic agendas also downplay the idea of an Iranian threat by showing an Iranian regime that responds to political pressure and not the unpredictable rogue state many believe exists. Bellaigue believes Iranian youth and new generations will open Iran to the West. Once again, it appears U.S. foreign policy could be inflaming the situation, rather than lowering any possible threat from Iran.

There are even reports and estimates within the United States government that are far less alarming than the rhetoric of political leaders and the perception of the population. A Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on Iranian ballistic missile capabilities recently stated that they had been exaggerated (Hildreth, 2009). Iran had released images of an alleged missile test and on closer examination were found to have been digitally altered. As a result, the ‘missile test’ photos were subsequently removed from media sources (Ibid). The Bush White House stated that although Iran did not test any new technologies or capabilities, the launches were evidence of the need for a missile defense system in Europe (Ibid). This report states that Iran could test an ICBM in the

next 15 years only if certain, and quite difficult, criteria were to occur first. First, Iran would “have to rely on access to foreign technology” such as Russia or North Korea, technology that is not easily obtained or given up by technologically advanced nations (Ibid, 2). The CRS report says Iranian ICBM’s are a worst-case analysis of the potential threat from Iran and that “with rare exception this level of threat has rarely turned out to be historical reality” (Ibid, 2). CRS reports are written and fact-checked by many experts in their respective fields and are highly respected for their bipartisan analysis (Analyst, 2009). This report helps puts in perspective just how unlikely the scenario of an aggressive, nuclear or ICBM-armed Iran is. The report details a very unlikely scenario and illustrates the threat Iran poses is not as great as the public perceives.

Another example of a government agency realistically assessing the Iranian threat is the stance of the Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair. In February of 2009, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence held hearings which focused entirely on security threats to the United States (U.S. Senate, 2009). According to the record of the hearings, Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein gave 15 minutes to Director Blair to sum up, the major threats that faced the United States. Blair opened his remarks by saying that the global economic recession was the number one threat that faces the United States. Blair spent roughly a third of this time discussing the problems with loss of productivity in allied countries and the potential for weak governments to become destabilized as a result of poverty. After the global economy, the second most significant threat to U.S. interests abroad was terrorism. There were few sentences actually dedicated to Iran and those statements focused mainly on its support for Hezbollah and Hamas (U.S. Senate, 2009). When given 15 minutes to publicly address the United States Senate about the most important threats facing the United States, the Director of National Intelligence spent little of this valuable time discussing Iran. Director Blair’s unspoken words have significant impact on the assessment of an Iranian threat. The fact that ICBM or nuclear weapons belligerence did not appear in his remarks or elsewhere to the Senate (Ibid) encourages the conclusion that Iran is either no longer, or never was, a significant threat to U.S. interests.

INTERVIEWING A FOREIGN POLICY EXPERT

Lastly, an interview with a Senior Analyst at the Congressional Research Service (CRS) offers a rare insight into the threat assessment of Iran. As a member of the CRS, an analyst’s job is to remain bipartisan and objective in his or her analysis. The analyst interviewed asked to remain unidentified and stressed that the opinions given were not that of the United States government nor the CRS. This analyst has more than three decades of experience in foreign affairs, is a specialist in missile defense, and knowledgeable about missile capabilities. The analyst first discussed the objectivity of government reports and their accuracy, such as

the NIEs mentioned earlier. The analyst responded by stating that it would be very difficult for these reports to be politically charged or politically motivated by staff. This is because those in the intelligence community rely on their reputations and are in their positions longer than most politicians; partisanship is counter-productive to their self-preservation. Appearances of politically-motivated analysis usually surface when a sentence or two in a report is misquoted, despite the wording being meticulously selected.

Much like the CRS report and NIEs mentioned earlier, intelligence estimates are quantified by possibilities and many contingencies that must occur in order for a threat to actually manifest. For example, if Iran wanted to test ICBM technology, it would have to rely on foreign assistance and many other financial, risky, and time-consuming commitments. These reports are also inherently flawed, the analyst claims, for two reasons. First, they lack historical perspective (Analyst, 2009). The analyst explained that estimates often overlook the tremendous amount of work that it took for the five countries that currently have ICBM technology to develop it, and the massive technological challenges that aspiring countries face. Second, they focus mainly on capabilities while ignoring intentions or purpose (Ibid). According to the analyst these reports also lack the value of calculating deterrent forces from the opposing side—the U.S. or Israel in this case—such as economic sanctions, conventional military force, and nuclear deterrence.

In discussing the threat from Iran, the analyst immediately identified North Korea as a far more genuine danger. North Korea, the analyst argues, is not predictable and does not care about its population, which makes the North Koreans incredibly difficult to deter or influence. Even so, the analyst doubts North Korea has the near- or mid-term capability to develop and deploy nuclear-armed ICBMs. In regards to Iran, the analyst says the people of Iran are very pro-Western and have strong cultural and economic ties to the United States and Europe. The problem arises with the theocratic ideologies of the Iranian leadership and their destructive stance towards Israel. The analyst believes that Iran is dedicated to producing a deterrent to Israel, and Tehran understands that a first strike against Israel would be devastating to itself. The analyst also believes that Iran has more technical knowledge than North Korea but also points out that they collaborate with each other. Without the assistance of Russian or Chinese technology, there is little chance of Iran developing long-range ballistic missiles in the near to mid-term future. The analyst was offered to rank the Iranian threat and said they would not put Iran “in the top five or even ten” threats to United States security (Ibid).

The analyst believes the major source of public perception on Iran to be from policy makers and administrators. The analyst believes that “fear-and-crisis mongering” are effective political tools (Ibid). The source of public perception may come from policy makers but if the threat is real, would the U.S. military be effective in stopping an Iranian

nuclear program? The analyst said, “No one seriously believes that military intervention would stop Iran; all it would do would push off the issue another day” (Ibid). The analyst proposes diplomatic and economic measures with Iran, which has “proven historically to be more effective than military means” (Ibid). The analyst realizes the diplomatic process is incredibly difficult, risky, and time consuming, but “is far more effective” (Ibid). The analyst also believes a missile defense shield would be effective in countering an Iranian missile threat if it were to appear. The Obama administration is “discussing the use of Patriot, THAAD and Aegis ballistic missile defense systems to counter any short and medium ranged Iranian missiles” (Ibid). The analyst acknowledged, though, if Iran were nuclear-armed, one missile would be enough to destroy a small country like Israel. This event, however, would be “very unlikely” to actually occur.

On the subject of nuclear terrorism originating from Iran, the analyst was confident that this scenario was also very improbable. First, the analyst says, “no state has ever sold a nuclear device to a non-state actor” (Analyst, 2009). According to the analyst, when a state sells a nuclear device to a non-state actor, they lose control of that device. This is a very bad thing because nuclear forensics can “eventually trace the origin of a nuclear weapon to its source” (Ibid). If it were found that Iran sold a nuclear device to a terror group, it would mean disaster for the regime in Tehran. Indeed, the International Atomic Energy Agency has reported on the success of nuclear forensics and the ability to trace sources (IAEA, 2002). It was noted earlier that Iran is a state sponsor of terror in supporting Hezbollah and Hamas, but these factions do not operate near the United States. Director Blair listed Al Qaeda as the one major terror threat to the United States (U.S. Senate, 2009) but the Iranian regime and Al Qaeda “absolutely hate each other” (Analyst, 2009). In the highly unlikely scenario that Iran would ever sell a nuclear device to Hamas or Hezbollah though, their target would most likely be Israel. While the rhetoric might match, these groups would not risk killing thousands of fellow Muslims in the region or the world’s wrath (Ibid). This interview confirms much of the earlier findings on the realistic threat assessment of Iran. These experts would most likely agree with the conclusions of Bellaigue, Kreps, and Director Blair.

THEORIES OF RATIONAL DETERRENCE

The idea of a ‘rational deterrence’ is not new and has been debated extensively since the Cold War. The basic thoughts behind rational deterrence rest on the idea that countries are led by rational people who balance international interests with domestic security concerns. These leaders will weigh risks and rewards to calculate foreign policy decisions. Higher risk scenarios tend to prevent aggressive actions, thus deterring a would-be attacker (Downs, 1989). More specifically, Christopher Achen defines rational deterrence as being “unified by a number of working assumptions about human behav-

ior” that set up an explanatory framework of behavior (Achen & Snidal, 150). These main assumptions about human behavior believe rational actors, when given an array of options, seek to optimize their own preferences before others (Ibid). Unique outcomes in international scenarios can be explained by differences in each actor’s preferences, norms, or culture (Ibid). In essence, while risk may differ from actor to actor across the world, leaders will tend to act when risk is low and payoff is high.

Rational deterrence helps explain many of Iran’s actions in regards to nuclear advancement and support of terrorist groups. Bellaigue believes that Iran is fearful of its nuclear armed neighbor, Israel. If possible to see through the eyes of Iranian leadership this is a logical conclusion. The label ‘Axis of Evil’ from the United States, possessing the most powerful armed forces in world history, would put any nation on the defensive—especially after its neighbor was deposed by the said country in 2003. A rational leader in this situation would most likely try to prevent its own country from achieving the same fate as former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. When looking at foreign policy through the eyes of Iran, the rational conclusion would be that the United States and its very close, and nuclear-armed ally, Israel pose a major security threat to itself. No rational leader would succumb to its fate without a fight, so Iran’s best option was to pursue nuclear technology as a deterrent. The same logic applies to Iran’s funding to Hamas and Hezbollah, whose aims are to overthrow Israel—a major security concern for Iran. By funding these groups, Iran can continue its own rhetoric of calling for the destruction of Israel while simultaneously denying direct involvement with the actions of these terror groups.

The framework of rational deterrence is not without its critics. The major point of disagreement will come from the very definition of the word rational. Lebow and Stein argue that some leaders are not rational at all and will take enormous amounts of risk for little apparent gain (Lebow & Stein, 1989). Leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, and Nikita Khrushchev each had different ideas of calculating risk, they claim. These critics will argue in favor of other possible explanations for behaviors, such as risk-prone loss minimizers, risk-averse gain maximizers, and risk-averse gain maximizers (Ibid). These different behaviors by leaders do not show a rational aspect to leaders and decisions, but rather irrational behaviors in spite of all evidence given to them. Examples included are Adolf Hitler launching a war against the world at all odds, Josef Stalin sending millions to their deaths in defense of Russia, and so forth (Ibid). In addition to the criticism on the theory, political leaders in the United States continue to imply through rhetoric that Iran is an irrational, rogue state (Kreps, 2008). Of course, if Iran was an irrational and aggressive state, the rational deterrence framework would not apply in this situation. Once more, the evidence and expert analysis opinion reach a different conclusion.

Foreign policy leaders and others continue to denounce

Iran as an irrational and monolithic rogue state. This however does not appear to be the reality of the situation. Critics of rational deterrence might classify Iran as a 'risk-prone loss minimizer,' citing Iran's heated rhetoric on Israel and its funding of terror groups. But this action in itself shows a certain rational logic to Iran's behavior. By funding terror groups, Iran is diverting its own risk away from the state while actual terror groups carry out their own actions. If Iran was truly irrational and aggressive, Iranian leaders would have no problem being directly involved in the planning and execution of terror strikes. The rhetoric might be loud, but actions always speak louder than words. In Iran's case, the leadership is downplaying their involvement as much as possible to avoid further repercussions from the world at large. More evidence showing Iran as a rational actor is the fact that Iran responded to international pressure and halted its nuclear program for fear of losing trade deals (Bellaigue, 2005). The analyst at the CRS points out that a nuclear device, let alone any weapon of mass destruction, would almost inevitably lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza (Analyst, 2009). The analyst immediately pointed to North Korea as being a far more legitimate threat because of the differences in the rationality of leaders between North Korea and Iran. If Iran were truly irrational and aggressive, the state would simply not care about the consequences and could have easily launched devastating attacks on Israel. The fact that Iran has not taken direct aggressive action against Israel or the United States, in spite of President Ahmajinedad's rhetoric, demonstrates that Iran is carefully calculating its foreign policy decisions and is acting rationally.

CONCLUSION

The rift between public perception and reality of the Iranian threat is apparent. Public perception of Iran appears to originate from policy makers, administration officials, and political leaders. Polling data matches these trends as leaders continue to stress that Iran is a major threat to the United States and a supporter of terrorism. While Iran may support groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, it is highly unlikely and historically unprecedented that a state would sell WMDs to terror groups. Connecting the words "supporter of terrorism" and "nuclear-armed Iran" no doubt cause a quick panic, but rational and expert analysis paint a very different picture.

Many weapons and foreign policy experts reject or diminish the threat Iran poses to the United States. The idea that a nuclear Iran would act aggressively toward Israel or the United States is counterintuitive and lacking historical awareness. There is simply no empirical evidence to suggest that Iran would behave belligerently if it acquires nuclear weapons and there is no historical precedence of such a suicidal move by a regime. It appears many NIE estimates are leaving out two important aspects in their intelligence: intentions and the capabilities of other nations. Iran simply has

nothing to gain by acting belligerently in the region. A WMD strike on Israel would most likely kill thousands of fellow Muslims in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Not only would a strike on Israel potentially kill many Islamic supporters, Iran would incur the world's wrath. Reports that Iran could even acquire the weapons technology necessary for this in the near future is doubted by government officials and foreign policy experts alike. Iran has even doctored photos of a missile launch in an apparent attempt to look stronger. This is not the sign of a significant threat. In the highly unlikely event that Iran could obtain these weapons there is simply no logical motivation for Iran to launch a first strike. Iran understands the risks of a move like this and that the ensuing economic collapse would be the end of the regime. As mentioned by the NIE reports, the future is impossible to predict. But when assessing threats around the world it is important to keep these assessments realistic to guide foreign policy in the right direction and not to mislead the public.

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