

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

MAHDI AND THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR THREAT

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ABSTRACT

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Is the Iranian Government attempting to set conditions for the return of the 12th Imam in accordance with Shiite beliefs? If so, what threats are associated with these actions and how can the West counter these threats?

For the last several years, much of the world has been trying to figure out what Iran's motives are. It is clear that the Theocracy is attempting to increase its influence over much of the Middle East, as well as other portions of the world. The Iranians refuse to fold to international pressures concerning their nuclear program, covertly and overtly back radical Shiite Groups, and respond with ever increasing confidence to any international criticism. As these actions continue, one must ask what the ultimate aim is of these Iranian Strategies.

This paper explores allegations that the ultimate purpose of Iranian actions may be to set the stage for the coming of the "Mahdi" (or 12th Imam), in accordance with Shiite beliefs. The author will look at the nature of the threat, define the belief in the Imam's return, focus on possible strategic motives for the Iranian nuclear program and discuss what may be done to counter any threat to the West.

MAHDI AND THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR THREAT

In 2005, Iran surprised the world and probably itself by electing a hard-line candidate to become its president.¹ The candidate easily defeated the perceived front runner and former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a moderate. After winning the election with 62% of the vote, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, a former Mayor of Tehran and devout hard-line Islamist, wasted no time in making sure the world knew what his priorities were. In a speech given on October 26th, 2005, Ahmadinejad declared to students in Tehran that "Israel must be wiped off the map."² Although the remarks were widely condemned by the United States, Russia and the European Union³, and renounced by the Iranian Foreign Ministry several days later⁴, these provocative statements have become cause for concern. The continuing rhetoric, coupled with the strong eschatological views of the Iranian leadership and a seemingly irreversible desire to develop a nuclear program⁵, casts doubt on Iranian claims that their program is to be used solely for peaceful purposes. The president of Iran does not sound like a peace broker in the way that he antagonizes and threatens governments with which he disagrees.

Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad has a history of involvement in Islamic activism. Born in 1956, President Ahmadinejad is the son of an Iranian iron worker. Mahmud moved to Tehran at an early age and later attended the university, studying civil engineering and later receiving a doctorate in engineering and transportation planning.⁶ It was during this time that he became involved with pre-revolutionary Islamic activism, and has been alleged to have taken part in the 1979 United States Embassy siege, although this was never proven.⁷ What is known is that Ahmadinejad belonged to ultra-conservative Islamic groups, some of which had a part in the embassy takeover.⁸ During the Iran/Iraq war, Mahmud participated in the fighting, developing a sound reputation as a soldier and later launched his political career by becoming the Governor of Maku. Following this position, he was appointed the mayor of Tehran, moving that city back towards stricter Islamic law.⁹ With the apparent backing of the conservative Iranian Guardian Council, as president, he may now be attempting to set the same course for the country.¹⁰

Nuclear ambitions and predicting the destruction of other nations is enough to make prudent men worry about actual intentions, but the fact that Ahmadinejad and other Iranian Government officials may be driven by their belief in an apocalyptic religious idea, further adds to these concerns. In the town of Jamkaran, Iran, there is a well that holds thousands of petitions to an honored figure of Shiite Islam.¹¹ The petitions are designed to bring blessings, wisdom and guidance to those who write them and deliver them to the well. The figure that provides the blessing is known as the 12th Imam, the hidden Imam or simply Mahdi and is currently in hiding

until such a time that he will return to pass judgment on the world and lead a worldwide Islamic Government. A recent addition to the petitions at the bottom of the well in Jamkaran is that of the Iranian President, signed by himself and his entire staff.¹² In addition to the petition, Ahmadinejad has declared that his “revolutions main mission is to pave the way for the reappearance of the 12th Imam, the Mahdi.”¹³ He also stated that while giving his speech at the United Nations in the autumn of 2005 (one which was laced with frequent references to the return of the Mahdi), he was surrounded by a mysterious “green light” which kept his listening audience mesmerized throughout the speech.¹⁴

It would be easy to disregard such rhetoric as the ramblings of a madman, but the world has learned from the increasing number of violent attacks internationally by radical Islamic groups and those inspired by their ideologies, that such beliefs can also prove to be deadly serious. As if the aforementioned issues are not enough of a reason for concern, one also has to consider a distinct difference within the Shiite “twelvers”, the majority branch of Shiite Islam in Iran, who believe in the pending return of the 12th Imam. While all believe that serious misfortune will befall the earth prior to the Mahdi’s return, some believe that his return can be expedited by initiating death and destruction upon the world. In other words, they believe they can act through violence in order to set the stage for the return of the 12th Imam.¹⁵ If the belief of the ultra-conservative Guardian Council and the Iranian president is the latter, than negotiations seeking compromise will not succeed, and U.S. threats of mutual assured destruction will fail as a deterrent.

This paper will explore the dangers of this and other radical Islamic motivations, look to Iranian actions which could lead one to believe this is a true danger, determine potential worldwide impacts of a nuclear Iran and explore options for dealing with the problem. While it is impossible to know men’s hearts with absolute certainty, this paper will attempt to “connect as many dots” as possible and form a conclusion to the reality of this threat.

Radical Islamic Groups’ Motivations

Within the Islamic world, there are a variety of views as to what constitutes a jihad and when its use is legitimate. A commonly accepted definition of jihad is “to struggle or strive (in the way of God) or to work for something with determination”.¹⁶ The word jihad itself does not mean war or holy war; this is a commonly held misconception. Jihad can be divided into a “greater jihad”, which is a more personal and internal struggle in the attempts to resist evil and remain on the divine path of God and a “lesser jihad”, which entails a physical, external act of confronting evil or injustice.¹⁷ According to Muslim scholars, a lesser jihad should only take place in order to

defend the Muslim community (ummah) against oppression, eliminate an evil force that is oppressing people or remove any barrier to the free flow of calling others to Islam (da'wah).¹⁸ It is the twisting of the interpretation of these three causes for lesser jihad that radical Islamic groups (RIGs) use to incite violence and gain followers. In recent decades, there has been an increase in these religiously and politically oriented RIGs, focusing on demands for jihad in order to create an Islamic society or state, while destroying all those the RIGs perceive as non-Islamic or unjust to the religion of Islam. These jihads occasionally justify the use of suicide bomber tactics and even glorify such actions as the highest form of sacrifice one can give to Allah.¹⁹ The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and Lebanese Hezbollah are three examples of such groups, interpreting the rules of jihad in order to meet the goals of their specific organizations and attempting to force their interpretations of the Islamic religion on those who believe differently.²⁰

There are a variety of motivations and visions sought after by radical Islamic groups, most of which involve local, regional or worldwide domination in some form or fashion. From the caliphate dream of al Qaeda to the destruction of Israel envisioned by the Iranian President, these visions are described by some Middle Eastern scholars as “fantasy ideology.”²¹ This ideology is defined as one which seizes the opportunity offered by a lack of realism in a political/religious group and makes the most of it.²² It uses symbols and rituals designed to permit its members to indulge in a fantasy role-playing.²³ Although many may discount these ideologies as utter foolishness, the dreams are anything but so to those that are driven by them. Historic examples of the power of fantasy ideology include Mussolini's attempt at reviving the Roman Empire or Hitler's fantasy of reviving German paganism in his one thousand year Reich.²⁴ In the world of radical Islamic groups, fantasy ideologies commonly take the form of a worldwide Islamic Government (Caliphate) or in the minority Shiite belief in the return of the twelfth Imam. Many in Iran, being a majority Shiite state, believe in the inevitable return of Mahdi. So, who is this “hidden Imam” and why do the Shia Muslims believe in him?

Shiite Islam and the 12th Imam

Shortly after the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD, a split formed within the Islamic religion. The largest group of Islamic believers became Sunnis, who make up over 80% of contemporary Muslims.²⁵ This group held the belief that the successor to Mohammed could be chosen and appointed by men. Sunni's appointed the first three Caliphs, which led Islam from 632-656 AD.²⁶ The minority group, the Shiites, who make up approximately 15% of today's Muslims, rejected the committee appointed successors, instead believing that the leader

of the Muslim community must come through a descendant in the direct bloodline from the Prophet Mohammed.²⁷ Rather than acknowledge the Sunni appointed Caliphs as legitimate, the early Shia opted to follow Mohammed's son-in-law and cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, believing him to be in Mohammed's bloodline and legitimate heir to their religion. Ali eventually became the 4th Caliphate and was ultimately murdered while praying in the town of Kufa, Iraq in 661 AD.²⁸ The martyr's death of Ali and the subsequent murder of his son Hussein are forged into the psyche of the Shia and the two are remembered and honored frequently by the Shiite devout. Following the death of Ali's son Hussein in 680 AD, the Shiite Muslims were mostly excluded from major leadership roles in the Muslim Community and were often persecuted as the minority within Islam.²⁹ Shia Muslims continue to insist on leaders from the direct blood line of the Prophet Mohammed, and call these leaders Imams.³⁰ While the Shia themselves disagree on the number of imams which have succeeded Mohammed, the vast majority believe in a succession of twelve, and are thus called "twelvers".³¹ Most of the Shia living in Iran and Iraq subscribe to this belief. The most mysterious Shiite belief rests with the 12th Imam, who is currently in hiding or "occultation", and will remain as such until he returns to lift the Shiite Muslim people to a position of honor and spread Islam throughout the world.³² It is the power of this eschatological viewpoint that causes an extreme devoutness in many Shia, but it can also be cause for concern.³³

The 12th Imam, also known as al Mahdi, the "Hidden Imam", Sahib az Zaman (Master of the Age), al Qa'im (the one to arise), Baghiyyat Allah (remnant of Allah) and Imam al Muntazar (the awaited Imam),³⁴ is believed by Shiite Muslims to have vanished into a cave in Samarra, Iraq in 874 AD. Shia believe that this 12th Imam is in occultation in two phases, the first short and the second a longer period of time.³⁵ The shorter of these two periods, also known as the "minor occultation", took place from approximately 873-939 A.D., and was characterized by the Imam's ability to speak to devout Shiite followers through four appointed deputies.³⁶ The last of these deputies, Abul Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad al-Samarri, announced the end of the minor occultation period just prior to his death.³⁷ The "major occultation" began upon the death of the fourth deputy and will continue until Allah commands the Imam to reappear.³⁸ Shiites believe that the 12th Imam will reappear on the Day of Judgment and avenge atrocities which have plagued the Shia people as well as restore justice to the world.³⁹ What this justice looks like is subject to various interpretations, but the common picture is that the world will be in great turmoil before the Mahdi's return. Muslim scholars anticipate great morale demise and bloodshed, with Imams predicting five out of every seven persons on earth being killed by "red death" (means of killing) or "white death" (epidemics).⁴⁰ Noting that the Mahdi will rise with a

“sword”, some Islamic scholars believe that this sword is just a metaphor for warfare and do not discount that the 12th Imam may use “weapons of the day” or even create new weapons to overpower enemies on earth.⁴¹ These Shia scholars believe that the return of the 12th Imam will make it possible for Islamic nations to put aside differences and unify under the banner of God (tawhid), thus adopting and implementing the Koran as the constitution of this pan-Islamic society.⁴² When the Mahdi appears, Shiite Muslim scholars believe that the entire earth will be filled with justice and equity, administered to the world through a unified Islamic government. The world will become a utopia, and Islam will become the official religion of the world.⁴³ People will choose Allah over sin, and the 12th Imam will distribute great knowledge to his chosen people, greatly enlightening them.⁴⁴ For the Shia, with the Mahdi’s return comes the promise that the righteous servants shall inherit the earth, as promised in the Psalm of Anbiya’, 105.⁴⁵ As discussed in Islamic traditions, the twelfth Imam returns in order to expand and revive Islam and the importance of the Koran.⁴⁶ All is well as long as individuals subscribe to these beliefs, but those who doubt are labeled disbelievers and their fate is grim. Once the Mahdi launches his movement, he will annihilate all oppressors and disbelievers,⁴⁷ thus forcing all on earth to worship in accordance to Islamic beliefs (with a possible exception of Jews and Christians, who may have the option of paying a tax and living as a lesser citizen of the pan-Islamic society). One may be struck by the irony that the long awaited savior of one man’s religion, in this case the Shiite Muslim, sounds a great deal like the anti-Christ found in the Bible’s book of Revelations; believed by many of the Christian faith. Other Christians also point to the 38th and 39th chapters of the prophet Ezekiel which names Persia (Iran) as one of the actors in a great coalition that will attack Israel in the end times.

Having explained the belief of the return of the 12th Imam for devout Shiite Muslims and what that means to the world, a potential troubling scenario begins to take shape. While it is absolutely impossible to completely judge individuals religious beliefs with complete certainty, through their actions, a pattern may form which causes one to at least contemplate the issues and focus on the potential. Iran is a devout Shiite Country, whose leadership subscribes to the belief in the return of the 12th Imam as well as the pan-Islamic world that goes with the vision. Ahmadinejad continues to speak as one who actively seeks to destroy Israel and “the Great Satan”, while promising to export any nuclear technologies it gains throughout the Islamic world.⁴⁸ The Iranian President also continues to resist United Nations opposition to his country’s nuclear program, discounting any “carrots” offered to cease nuclear development⁴⁹, while appeasing the world with claims of using nuclear technologies only for peaceful purposes such

as energy. This claim is made despite the fact that Iran has a great deal of oil resources at its disposal.⁵⁰

Looking at the threats and listening to the menacing words is probably a wise thing to do at this juncture. One cannot know if Iran would sacrifice all for their belief in the 12th Imam, but the possibilities are at least worth considering. In addition to overt Iranian action, the country can use surrogate forces to help spread their will or could even use a “marriage of convenience” with non-Shia terrorist organizations in order to accomplish their goals.⁵¹

The proliferation of nuclear technologies in the Middle East increases the chances of materials and technologies falling into the hands of RIGs or other rogue organizations and could ultimately destabilize the region and possibly the world. It is troublesome to imagine a massive WMD attack somewhere in the world while suspected nations deny participation. While one may discount such bleak scenarios as overly alarmist, it is clear that Iranian interests currently include pushing the Shiite agenda for purposes of religion, politics, and power within the region and possibly the world. Their speeches also indicate support for the destruction of Israel, as well as the United States, and support for a pan-Islamic movement.⁵² These threats could become more substantial with the reality of a nuclear Iran.

Current Iranian Actions of Concern

In light of a growing realization that Iran will not yield to western pressures and will continue to pursue nuclear capabilities, there have been some signs and indicators which are troubling to the United States and many of its allies. Although Iranian officials continue to claim that their nuclear capabilities are for peaceful purposes, the actual motivation of their ambition to procure nuclear capabilities is suspect. In addition to a myriad of lies, half-truths and deceptive statements spewed by Iranian officials in the last decades, they have been caught attempting to develop nuclear programs in covert manners, in complete disregard to International Atomic Energy Agencies (IAEA) safeguards agreement.⁵³ In addition to deceitful practices, it is clear that Iranians are heavily involved in sponsoring multiple surrogate forces and terrorist organizations in order to further spread their influence.⁵⁴ The extent to which Iranians are involved was recently displayed by the amount of armaments the country shipped to Lebanon in support of Hezbollah. An estimated 10,000 rockets supplied to Hezbollah by Iran, were used to shell Israeli cities and villages during Hezbollah’s 2006 conflict with Israel.⁵⁵ Iran has also been involved with Palestinian terrorist organizations, to include Hamas, and is also instrumental in backing Shiite Militia operating within Iraq.⁵⁶ Other troubling indicators come from the voices and activities of Iranian Government officials through speeches, interviews and sponsored events. It is often

stated that Adolph Hitler spilled out his future plans within the pages of *Mein Kampf*, and while this may or may not similarly be the case with Iranian officials such as Ahmadinejad, it is at least prudent to analyze what they are saying.

The Iranian effort to develop nuclear capabilities began over two decades ago and until recently were predominately a covert effort. From the mid 1980s until after the millennium, Iran developed an infrastructure of laboratories and industrial facilities designed to support its efforts to produce weapons grade nuclear materials.⁵⁷ In 2002, the IAEA issued several reports which described how Iran had participated in multiple covert nuclear activities, issued false statements to IAEA inspectors and took numerous steps to deceive inspectors as to their nuclear related activities.⁵⁸ What is known is that Iran is experimenting both with uranium enrichment and plutonium production, two methods which can be used to create nuclear weapons, thus leading to suspicions as to the intent of their nuclear ambitions.⁵⁹ If the Iranian nuclear program is for producing power only, it should be asked why its program has been pursued covertly and deceitfully, rather than seeking the assistance of the IAEA and international community overtly, which would eliminate suspicion and ease the process. From 2003 through early 2006, members of the European Union (EU-3) worked to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, only to be met with an increasing defiance on the part of Iran.⁶⁰ This defiance resulted in a United Nations Security Council statement urging Iran to abide by IAEA obligations, which was considerably weakened through Chinese and Russian opposition to tougher measures.⁶¹ In the summer of 2006, the permanent members of the Security Council presented Iran with an incentives package, seeking to have Iran suspend its uranium enrichment and begin new rounds of negotiations with the EU-3 and the United States.⁶² This effort was also ultimately rejected by Iran. The continuing rejection of diplomatic efforts leads one to question why a country is so intent on suffering political, diplomatic and economic setbacks in order to produce nuclear energy for electricity only. This is especially confusing in light of the extremely large oil and natural gas reserves that the country possesses.⁶³ The covert and deceitful record of Iran, coupled with its production research methods and reluctance to work diplomatically towards a solution in regards to its nuclear research, leads many to believe that the true goal is to produce nuclear weapons. The American intelligence agencies have significant gaps in building a true picture of what is going on with the Iranian nuclear program, and largely due to the fallout over the flawed analysis of Sadaam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, may be overly cautious in any analysis of their nuclear capabilities.⁶⁴ Despite a need for more precise intelligence to fill the significant gaps on the

Iranian program, the intelligence communities have analyzed enough indicators to build a current assessment of the Iranian threat.⁶⁵

In his 2006 Annual Threat Report, the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) provided his assessment of the Iranian threat.⁶⁶ American intelligence agencies have recognized the need for more clarity in their intelligence, but have concluded that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons and likely has offensive chemical and biological weapons programs. These agencies also point out that Iran possesses the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East, provides training, weapons and support to terrorist organizations in the region and elsewhere, and provides support to the current insurgency in Iraq.⁶⁷ The intelligence agencies also acknowledge that they are concerned with the major gaps in information that they have concerning the Iranian nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs.⁶⁸ This lack of knowledge has led to a variety of estimates to exactly when the Iranians will be able to produce nuclear weapons. Worst case scenarios estimate they will have the capability in 2007, while most estimates state 2010 or later into the next decade.⁶⁹ While analysts disagree as to the exact timeframes for Iranian nuclear “breakout” capabilities, most feel that Iran has set a course to produce not only peaceful nuclear power, but also nuclear weaponry. If this assumption is true, some clue as to what Iran might do with these weapons may be found in the speeches and interviews of their leaders.

The argument in fearing Iranian religious beliefs such as the world domination of the 12th Imam can be strengthened by the zeal of the Iranian President and other key leaders of Iran’s ultra-conservative government. In his recent letter to President Bush, Mr. Amadinejad appealed to the American President in largely religious terms, questioning his Christian faith and appealing to him to more effectively serve God.⁷⁰ Amadinejad’s consistent reference to God assisting in the destruction of Iran’s enemies and quotes such as “...with the force of God behind it, we shall soon experience a world without the United States and Zionism”, is hardly reassuring that he intends to use nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes.⁷¹

How will the demise of America and Israel occur? Will it be through God and the return of the Mahdi, or will nations such as his assist in the destruction with nuclear weapons? Whichever the case, the structure of the Iranian Government provides both additional fear and hope. Even though he is president, Amadinejad is not the most powerful individual in Iran. The President must maintain the support of the Supreme Leader (rahbar), who is currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The bad news is that he appears to largely support the views of the President. In a meeting with the Syrian Premier which took place in Tehran in November 2000, the Supreme Leader stated that “certainly the region will witness the day when the Zionist regime will cease to exist...” and during the same interview with Iranian TV, also stated “...and just as many

events that seemed impossible occurred, the establishment of a Palestinian State and the destruction of Israel will certainly occur.”⁷² Even with the most powerful spiritual leader in agreement with the President, there is not complete unity within the Iranian Government. The government consists of a 290 member National Assembly (Majlis), and although all members must be approved by a 12 member Guardian Council and form a relatively weak body, they do have representatives ranging from hard-line conservatives, to moderates and reformists in their ranks.⁷³ There is also a more powerful Assembly of Experts, which is tasked with the selection of the Supreme Leader.⁷⁴ While this body is normally conservative, there are disagreeing views within the group on how to handle international and domestic issues, thus somewhat limiting the power of the Supreme Leader. Despite the power of the ultra-conservative movement, the people also get a vote in the form of government. Especially critical of domestic issues, but at times also international issues, the people can change leadership through elections. The bottom line is that without popular support and majority support within their own government, Iranian leaders may not be able to accomplish any dubious desires they do have. Despite this positive note, analysts must still pay close attention to the words of the Iranian leaders in order to understand their intentions.

The elimination of Israel appears to be a common theme, and has been since the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979. A world without Zion is a commonly expressed goal and the Iranians also discuss the punishment and demise of European countries that stand in their way with sanctions, as well as the impending destruction of the United States, Israel’s greatest supporter. This hatred of the nation of Israel appears to be completely engrained in Iranian ultra-conservatives, but is also present in moderates and some reformers.⁷⁵ If the religious beliefs involving setting the world stage for the 12th Imam are believed to be the primary motive behind Iran’s nuclear quest, there is no further need for negotiations, for the Iranian Government will continue to pursue the worldwide Islamic revolution despite the costs. But if one believes that the frequent references to the Mahdi are designed to strengthen political ambitions and empower Iran vice destroying it, then the risks of reckless nuclear escalation may outweigh any benefits gained by the country. Yet if one is to believe the words of Iranian officials, once nuclear technologies are achieved, the technologies will also be exported to both Islamic and non-Islamic nations allied to Iran. ⁷⁶In pursuing this course of action, Iran may seek to supply surrogate or other organizations nuclear means while maintaining plausible deniability. This method could lead to devastating consequences.

Iran has been known to support terrorist organizations and other Shiite based organizations. Historic examples include Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas, Palestinian

Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). The primary goals of these organizations are the destruction of Israel and the spread of Islamic rule. The Iranians are also supporting Shiite Militia within Iraq, specifically the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), with its Badr Corps militia and Jaish al Mahdi (JaM). The Iranians are suspected of providing support and training to these organizations through the al Quds force, a branch of the shadowy and powerful Iranian Revolutionary Guard Council (IRGC), which specializes in intelligence operations and unconventional warfare.⁷⁷ Within Iraq, the SCIRI organization is the leading Shiite political organization and yields great power within the newly formed Iraqi government. SCIRI's militia, the Badr Corps is estimated to have the strength of about 25,000 and is suspected of killing U.S. Soldiers as well as conducting "ethnic cleansing" against fellow Iraqis.⁷⁸ The other major militia group with ties to Iran is Jaish al Mahdi (JaM), led by anti-American cleric Muqtada al Sadr and numbering approximately 10,000.⁷⁹ Just as its competitor SCIRI/Badr, JaM members have also been accused of killing Americans and conducting ethnic cleansing against Sunnis and Kurds throughout the country. The danger to the lives of U.S. Troops stationed in the region would increase dramatically if either of these two Iranian proxies were provided WMD. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is currently under the leadership of Hassan Nasrallah, and the organization has grown in power and prestige in the last decade. Dedicated to the destruction of Israel, Hezbollah was instrumental in the earlier 2000 withdrawal of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from Lebanon and have also claimed a strategic victory in its recent 2006 conflict with the IDF.⁸⁰ Hezbollah leaders have long acknowledged the importance of Iranian support, stating that it would have taken them another half-century to achieve as much without it.⁸¹

Despite concerns of increasing Shiite dominance in the region by Arab governments, the Shia resurgence appears to have found favor with the "common man" even within countries with Sunni majorities. The threat of the "Shiite crescent" as expressed by Jordanian King Abdullah II and initial condemnation of Hezbollah by Saudi Arabia at the outbreak of the 2006 conflict in Lebanon, have largely been overshadowed by the anger of Muslims at Israel for the destruction and civilian casualties inflicted in Lebanon.⁸² This terrorist organization has shown willingness to fire rockets into Israel and would obviously become even a greater threat if provided nuclear technologies. It could also assist other organizations in the training or procurement of materials needed to produce a WMD. The organization has worldwide reach, making it a threat to more than just the Middle Eastern region. The same fears exist if Iran provides technologies to Palestinian based terrorist groups or even potentially dangerous non-Islamic countries such as some designated as non-aligned countries.

Even more disturbing is the potential for a “marriage of convenience” to form between Iran and a terrorist organization such as al Qaeda. Although traditionally at odds because of religious ideologies, the efforts to destroy America, Israel and other Western countries could facilitate a pact that would ally the two under a sort of pan-Islamic banner. Key leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist group which was founded in Egypt, have acknowledged the possibilities of such an alliance. Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh, a member of its guidance office has stated that the U.S. invaded Iraq to divide Muslims and that it is better to support a Hezbollah-Iranian agenda than an “American-Zionist” one. He went on to say “Let’s combat the American danger on the region before we ‘compete’ with Iran.”⁸³ Iran could well support the idea of the marriage of convenience in order to further its goals of promoting a pan-Islamic movement, destroying its greatest enemies while decreasing the likelihood of retaliation, and propelling itself to a position of great power in the Middle East and possibly world-wide.

As for the threat to America, a chilling fictional account written by Raymond S. Kraft entitled “December 7, 2008,” portrays America under attack through small vessels off the coast firing a series of nuclear rockets into American cities, then scuttling their boats and escaping on pre-arranged freighters of Moroccan and Liberian origin, after terrorist actors are issued crew member identification. While other scenarios such just a frightening have been detailed such as nuclear suitcases smuggled across American borders and detonated in populated areas or bombs actually constructed and later used inside of the country, the fiction can easily become reality if the materials are covertly provided to these organizations. Iran, with its promise to provide Islamic Nations with the technology, its covert and deceptive history, the pan-Islamic or apocalyptic beliefs in the Mahdi, and overtly stated desires to see the destruction of America, Israel and European nations must be taken seriously. The history of mankind just might depend on what actions we take or do not take. The stakes are high.

Possible Global Impacts of a Nuclear Iran

The potential worst case scenario is that Iran continues to develop nuclear capabilities with little oversight or regard for the judgments passed by the United Nations and develops a robust nuclear weapons program. Once weapons are developed, Iranians will increase their political influence and also export technologies to allied countries such as Syria in the Middle East, Sudan in Africa, proxies such as Hezbollah and possibly other non-aligned nations who are not on good terms with the United States. As quantities of enriched uranium and plutonium increase, the Iranians could also supply materials necessary for nuclear weapons production to

terrorist organizations, with the goal of striking Israel, the United States or other western countries.

Authors Peter Zimmerman and Jeffery Lewis have written an article entitled “The Bomb in the Backyard”, which describes how feasible it would be for a well funded terrorist organization and a few devout experts to construct and detonate a nuclear device within the United States. The authors put together step by step procedures, which while difficult, are surely not impossible.⁸⁴ This nightmare scenario continues with ultra-conservative Iranian leadership believing in the ability to influence the timing of the long awaited Hidden Imam. The desire for the return of Mahdi could then outweigh the risks of mutually assured destruction (MAD) through retaliatory nuclear strikes, and lead to reckless actions in order to realize the dream of worldwide Islamic domination.

The Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons might also lead to the proliferation of nuclear weapons by threatened Arab countries in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, further escalating a dangerous nuclear arms race and leading to the increasing destabilization of the region. With the spread of nuclear weapons, the prospect of catastrophic nuclear events in multiple U.S., European, or Israeli cities increases. Given such an event, the western nations would retaliate with nuclear weapons and the world would become embroiled in the Third World War.

The potential best case scenario is that the United Nations Security Council and the world will continue pressure Iran into some form of compliance. Through a series of UN or EU incentives, the Iranians are allowed to develop closely monitored nuclear technologies for power, but are denied their goal of nuclear weaponry. This case depends on the continued unified effort of the United States and the EU-3, as well as improved cooperation from both China and Russia. An encouraging albeit weakened Iranian sanctions resolution was indeed passed by the United Nations Security Council in December 2006.⁸⁵ Although less than the United States had hoped for, it is a good first step towards forcing Iranian compliance on the nuclear issue. Success under this best case scenario also involves a stringent inspection routine by an unbiased IAEA.

While striving for increased U.N. Security Council cooperation, the U.S. and its allies would also focus on not alienating an increasingly moderate Iranian population, thus encouraging change from within Iran. Just as Iranian dissatisfaction with reformists led to a hard-line government in the 2005 elections, opposition to the hard-line position appears to be increasing, with moderates and reformists making gains during local council elections in December 2006.⁸⁶ The greatest hope for change appears to be through the Iranian people

themselves, but this may suffer a setback if the west becomes too overbearing. In this potentially promising scenario, the world would continue to confront Iran on its support of surrogate organizations in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as reiterating the dire consequences to their nation if they are found to be supporting transnational terrorist organizations.

The United States would also count on the increasing voices and influence of the Arab nations to convince the Iranians that any threat to their sovereignty would not be tolerated. This Arab voice would also add to the perception of credibility throughout the Middle Eastern region, since dialogue would be conducted between Muslim nations. These governments would continue to inform their own populations of the dangers that an over-aggressive Iran brings to the region and continue to reinforce the historic distrust that many Arabs hold towards Persian intentions in the Middle East.

The world would continue to actively confront Iranian officials who make startling threats against other nations and would not passively allow such behavior to continue. The movement of the Iranian people towards a better relationship with the west would decrease tensions, allowing Iran and its neighbors to live in a relatively peaceful state, without threat of military action. This scenario may seem overly optimistic, but progress in even some of the areas will be better than maintaining the current status quo.

The more likely scenario is that Iran will continue to develop nuclear technologies and work towards nuclear weaponry by 2010, if not sooner. Iran will continue to be defiant, yet will rely on diplomacy to meet their goals and diffuse any impending confrontation with the West. Once nuclear, they will use these technologies to further their political aspirations and safeguard their interests within the region. While the threat of nuclear escalation to bring about the return of the Mahdi should be monitored, there is currently no overwhelming evidence that supports the notion that Iran will risk its destruction by attempting to set the stage for his return. That said, the belief in the 12th Imam is powerful amongst the Shiite faithful and will continue to be used by Iranian government officials to gain support from the Shiite masses, both inside and outside of Iran. It should also be noted that some believers may use this belief to justify violence, but the nation of Iran will not risk its political agenda by overtly attacking the United States and its allies through state-sponsored nuclear violence. What remains a real danger is that Iran will covertly support the attempts of others to conduct nuclear violence against mutual enemies. Iranian covert operations will continue, both in support of their surrogates and other terrorist organizations.

Iranian popularity and power throughout the region can easily decrease or increase, but this will largely be dictated by future confrontational events and the effectiveness of Arab

nations to act as a counterbalance. There is certainly hope that the Iranian people will continue their recent trend toward moderation and possibly better ties with the West, but this may well be reversed if they perceive unjust threats to their country.

Iran will continue in its involvement with the non-aligned nations and continue to seek a leadership role in the group. They will also solidify economic ties with China and Russia, while both of these nations resist what they consider to be overly stringent United Nations Security resolutions towards Iran. Iranian officials will continue virulent rhetoric towards both the United States and Israel, but this will likely decrease with a change in leadership towards the moderates in 2008.

Influencing Iran in the Near Term

The United States and its allies must be prepared to use diplomacy, improved intelligence collection, economic initiatives and, if necessary, military action to counter a nuclear threat from Iran. A sound diplomatic strategy coupled with reengagement is the first priority toward this end.

Since the attacks of 911 and subsequent operations into Iraq, the United States has become increasingly seen as an aggressor and a threat by many nations throughout the world. While continuing to be vigilant against threats to our interests, the United States should work to change this perception. An immediate priority is to improve relations with both China and Russia, two key permanent members on the United Nations Security Council. Relationships with both have cooled over the last several years, but this trend is not irreversible. The United States ought to work diligently to improve these relationships, not only considering the American interests, but also more thoroughly understanding those of China and Russia. America must also continue to improve relationships with the European Union, weakened as a result of our invasion of Iraq. Russia, China and the European Union are key allies in the fight against radical Islamic aggression and terrorism, and without their support, America will increase its vulnerability to terrorist threat. These nations, some who have economic and political interests in Iran, must speak with one voice in order to counter the threat escalation of a nuclear Iran.

The United States also needs to press Arab allies from behind the scenes in an attempt to get them much more involved in issues concerning their region. It is not in the interest of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait or other Arab countries for Iran to become the major power in the region, as increasing Persian support for RIGs could lead to the destabilization or demise of their own regimes. These countries must act as an effective counterbalance and deter any efforts of Iran to push its agenda in the name of Islam. It is imperative to convince their populations that it is not in their best interests to back Persian initiatives.

The United States must also continue to work on the significant problems in Iraq and with the Palestinians and Israel, but they cannot work this alone. The United States should accept help from the aforementioned countries and treat our partners as equals and not subordinates. America is obliged to continue to deal with Iran by walking a fine diplomatic line. While not accepting the rhetoric of hate speech, the United States ought to be cognizant that its actions in the region are scrutinized by the Iranian people and their allies. The United States needs to continue supporting movements within Iran which appear to be leaning towards possible moderation, albeit quietly and indirectly. As mentioned before, the most promise toward Iranian change rests with its own citizens, and the U.S. must attempt to balance firmness with fairness in its approach to Iran's nuclear program. The nations comprising this diplomatic effort should continue to offer substantial "carrots" to Iran while limiting the "stick", unless the ultra-conservative government becomes an absolute threat to the region and the world.

It is also important that America follows through on the recommendations to the intelligence community through the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. These findings include improving analysis, improving coordination on Iran-specific issues, and improving coordination on counterproliferation issues. The committee also recommended enhancing human intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities, augmenting linguistic capabilities, strengthening counterintelligence (CI) efforts, defining goals, and developing metrics.⁸⁷ Only then will America and the world be able to build a true picture on the nuclear program in Iran and be able to counter any threat or potential threat effectively. Of these recommendations, perhaps the most important is to build a robust HUMINT capability within Iran, capable of relaying accurate and precise intelligence about the intentions and true motivations of the Iranian leadership. Without such a program, the United States will react to analysis based largely on assumptions. Intelligence gaps must be closed through a dramatic increase in intelligence gathering effectiveness.

Economic incentives also need to be pursued. These include the timely lifting of sanctions if Iran complies with demands, assisting them with the development of nuclear fuel for energy, and strengthening ties enough to help Iran with infrastructure rebuilding and business ventures. If the Iranian economy begins to falter, economic incentives may be the key to normalizing relations.

The final and least preferred method of dealing with Iran should be through military action. If this element of national power has to be pursued because of the reckless endangerment to other countries by the Iranian government, then every effort should be made to get the United

Nations Security Council, the European Union and other Muslim nations to concur with and support the initiative.

Unilateral action by the United States, no matter how justified, will only serve to diminish our reputation in the world and potentially increase the chances of terrorist attacks on our homeland and other interests worldwide. Unilateral kinetic strikes on Iran should be made only if improved intelligence capabilities tell us that Iran is an imminent threat, and the world refuses to participate despite this threat. If the United States is forced to use military action, it could look to covert, unconventional operations, such as advisory support to Iranian opposition groups that are currently in conflict with Tehran's ultra-conservative government. If this is not feasible, than a major military action may be the only option, but this action will come at an extremely high cost to the United States in both military and political costs. While such an option should be planned for now, it should only be executed as a last resort.

No Turning Back

Iran is a growing threat to the security of the world. Now is the time to effectively deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. Implementing the suggested courses of action in this paper can lead to a long term solution to dealing with a nuclear Iran, but will only come to fruition with a great deal of work and negotiation. These solutions are by no means a quick fix and much of the success will be determined by the reactions of the Iranian government.

Iran will soon have a nuclear capability and the production of nuclear weapons by that country is a probable reality. There is still time for the United States and its allies to influence how those weapons are managed or even eliminated, in order to reduce the escalation of tensions in the region and worldwide. The Shiite will continue to believe in the return of the 12th Imam, and government officials will continue to use religion for support, but there is no conclusive evidence that they would risk the destruction of their nation by attempting to set the stage for his return with an overt nuclear holocaust. As the intelligence community continues to improve its intelligence and HUMINT capabilities in Iran, this picture could change, but based on the evidence at hand, it seems unlikely. The Iranian government has enough of its own "checks and balances" to prevent one man from initiating such an attack, no matter how devout he may be.

The United States should continue to monitor the speeches and analyze the actions of the Iranian government, but the threat of Iran overtly initiating a nuclear holocaust in order to set the stage for the return of the 12th Imam appears to be minimal. Although that eschatological threat seems somewhat unlikely, there remain many lapses in American intelligence with regards to

the actual intentions of the Iranian regime. Until clearer intelligence can be gained, no possibilities or motives should be completely ruled out.

What is clear is that Iran will continue to support Hezbollah, Iraqi militia and other RIGs, and that these organizations pose a clear and present threat to the security of the United States and its allies. The best way of countering this influence is through the cooperation of the Arab and Western world. Monitoring of the Iranian nuclear capability must remain a worldwide priority and their actions should be scrutinized or dealt with if necessary. America's greatest hope is that support for Iran's pan-Islamic ambitions will falter, while citizens within the country make a choice towards moderation. Without effective methods of dealing with Iran now, the world will see an increased threat in nuclear proliferation and ultimately a disaster of apocalyptic proportions, with or without the influence of the Mahdi.

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