

Conflict Studies Research Centre



Iranian Nuclear Politics: Change of Tactics or Strategy?

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Key Points

- * The main nuclear debate in the Iranian leadership is over what kind of latent indigenous nuclear capability Iran should possess.
- * Former President Mohammad Khatami, former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Hasan Rowhani and the head of the Expedient Council, Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, have been the most prominent advocates of a capability which could enable Iran to construct only a limited nuclear arsenal over the next decade. They saw this as a means of strengthening Iran's deterrent capability vis-à-vis the West. Rowhani's report to Khatami on the nuclear negotiations with the EU made clear that Iranian leaders entered the talks with the EU because of their fear of US attack and not because they were prepared to give up Iran's nuclear programme in return for economic concessions. Indeed, they saw the nuclear programme as the regime's main insurance policy, which would guarantee its survival.
- * Prominent opponents of this triumvirate, led by the current secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani and the head of the Atomic Energy Organization, Gholamreza Aqazadeh, who were most probably supported by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, have been intent upon constructing a larger, industrial scale, nuclear capability which would enable Iran to produce much greater quantities of weapons grade material. This policy is closely intertwined with Khamene'i's preferred grand strategy which is aimed at establishing Iran as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf and reducing US influence in Eurasia. This strategy gained increasing support from late 2004 onwards and the EU's and US' opposition to indigenous Iranian enrichment and Mahmud Ahmadinezhad's victory in the Iranian presidential elections enabled proponents of this strategy to begin to implement it.

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Introduction

The Iranian case provides ample proof for Colin S. Gray's contention that "weapons don't make war".¹ In his analysis of the "second nuclear age", Gray has argued that analysts of strategic affairs should concentrate on political factors, such as major security concerns, which lead polities to try to acquire a nuclear capability.² Iran provides an important case study in the sense that it illustrates that the security concerns of Iranian officials led them to embark upon a nuclear programme. However, despite their similar threat perceptions, senior Iranian officials had different perceptions of what constituted a deterrent and, as a result, recommended vastly different remedies for resolving Iran's security concerns. As far as Iranian officials are concerned, the most significant problems in the nuclear talks with the EU-3 were the lack of reliable security guarantees which would ensure the survival of the Iranian state and the EU's refusal to support Iran's indigenous nuclear programme. These two concerns constitute the core of Iranian state strategies in the nuclear case and because of their enormous implications for the survival of the Iranian state they have also had a significant impact on domestic policy debates. Unfortunately, many analysts of the Iranian nuclear programme have not taken account of such debates. The most recent such examples are the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)' assessment of Iran's strategic weapons programmes and the US National Defence University's recent paper on implications of a nuclear Iran for the international system.³

Neither study takes account of the rival state strategies in Iran despite voluminous evidence that the debate over state strategies, as well as over grand strategy, has pitted senior Iranian politicians against one another. For example, the IISS study argues that there is some evidence that Khamene'i might have tried to derail the EU-Iran talks as part of "a complicated gambit" to ensure that Rafsanjani would be defeated in the Iranian presidential elections.⁴ It also refers to various break-out and sneak-out options open to Iranian decision-makers, but discusses them in terms of hypothetical scenarios, arguing that an industrial-scale enrichment programme would enable Iran to attain a nuclear weapons programme much more rapidly. It also cites unconfirmed reports that in late 2004 some evidence had surfaced regarding Iranian intentions to acquire nuclear weapons. Some Iranians interviewed by IISS indicated that they wanted their country to have a latent nuclear weapons capability rather like Japan because they did not want to arouse the suspicions of their neighbours.

In fact, as the author argued in earlier CSRC papers,⁵ the debate over the choice of strategy intensified in late 2004. Basically, the debate was over the nature of Iran's latent nuclear programme and Iran's posture vis-à-vis the US. This was closely intertwined with the debate over what constituted Iran's minimum deterrent. Rowhani, Khatami and Rafsanjani seemed to believe that any kind of latent nuclear capability produced by indigenous sources was sufficient as a deterrent. They were

firm believers in the concept of soft balancing vis-à-vis the US and did not seek to construct a regional coalition against the US.

Opponents of the Rowhani-Rafsanjani-Khatami approach, led by the current secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani, seemed to believe that Iran had the capability to engage in industrial-scale enrichment. They saw this as a means of constructing a coalition against the US as a first step in the direction of reducing US power and influence in Eurasia in general and the Persian Gulf and South Asia in particular. The IISS study does not highlight the intense policy dispute at the highest echelons of the Iranian state. Thus, though excellent in terms of its detailed description of Iran's technological progress in the WMD field it falls short of making Iranian decisions understandable.

In earlier CSRC papers, the author argued that the dispute over strategy transcended factional rifts and that the increasing influence of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps on Iranian strategy had compelled Rowhani and other nuclear negotiators to accommodate their concerns. Rafsanjani, who still had ambitions despite having served for two terms as president, entered the recent presidential election as a candidate who was above party politics. Moreover, he sought to portray himself as the only candidate who was capable of preventing the militarization of Iranian polity, resolving the nuclear issue and normalizing relations with the US.

Rafsanjani's opposition to the militarization of Iranian polity was coupled with efforts to cultivate reformist supporters of President Mohammad Khatami. In the period between the first and second rounds of the Iranian presidential elections, the Rafsanjani camp sought to portray Ahmadinezhad as a threat to the country's nuclear strategy. During a televised debate between their respective representatives, Hoseyn Mar'ashi and Mehdi Kalhor, on 20 June. Mar'ashi claimed that Iran's chief negotiator, Hasan Rowhani, would not agree to serve under the Ahmadinezhad government because he did not believe that Ahmadinezhad was sufficiently senior to be the chief executive. Kalhor disagreed, arguing that he had known Rowhani for a long time and that the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, had said that everyone had to serve the state.⁶

Undoubtedly, Rowhani's position was also affected by his close association with Rafsanjani. After the second round and Rafsanjani's complaints about the smear campaign against him, Rowhani tacitly supported Rafsanjani. He declared that it was important that the president should be elected with a large number of votes because the country needed "a strong president" who could stand up to "foreign enemies" and resolve domestic issues.⁷ Commenting on what he described as "organized acts of defamation", Rowhani hinted that those responsible may well have been state officials when he said that some may not be "bad people". More importantly, Rowhani called for a review of "the makeup of groups and fronts" and ensuring that "differences of opinion" between them would not become "gaps".⁸

After Ahmadinezhad's election victory, Western officials expressed concern about his commitment to the nuclear talks with the EU. Israeli officials were even more concerned. Even before the second round was held some Israeli sources were speculating that the elections would be rigged and that Ahmadinezhad would win. Those Israeli observers argued that Khamene'i had instructed senior clerics and revolutionary organizations to vote for Ahmadinezhad. They argued that Khamene'i was influenced by Revolution Guards Corps officials in his inner circle who wanted to crush the dissident movement and continue to pursue nuclear and missile programmes.⁹ They argued that Rafsanjani had been thinking about withdrawing

from the race and speculated that Khamene'i was trying to humiliate Rafsanjani because he feared that the latter would "amend the Islamic constitution to limit the spiritual ruler's authority and powers".¹⁰ Other Israeli sources, however, speculated that Khamene'i was actually trying to engineer "a stunning victory" for Rafsanjani and that he had chosen the lacklustre Ahmadinezhad to ensure Rafsanjani's victory.¹¹

After the elections, Israeli officials were alarmed at the situation in Iran. According to a statement by the Israeli government's press office, Vice-Prime Minister Shimon Peres declared that the elections had not been free and were "contests between extremists".¹² The head of the Defence Ministry's Political-Security Department, Amos Gilad, who had been dealing with the Iranian issue for several years,¹³ was more pessimistic. Israeli army radio quoted him as saying that "Iran will witness a religious radicalisation in coming years...The election of the new president completes the elimination of the reformists striving for change in Iran. His election will further illustrate the threat contained in the combination with such a radical regime. At the same time, Iran is also a threat to the whole world."¹⁴

These concerns were also reflected in Iranian media coverage of Ahmadinezhad and the nuclear issue. Significantly, an Iranian Hebrew language broadcast after Ahmadinezhad's victory quoted the president-elect as saying: "Those who are conducting the negotiations are scared. Even before they sit down to negotiate, they give up 500 km. A strong, popular government will change that. No country, no matter how strong, can attack Iran."¹⁵ The broadcast also quoted the secretary of the Guardian Council, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, as saying: "Every vote in these elections is a bullet aimed straight at the heart of the United States."¹⁶

Hatef news centre quoted Asadollah Athari, a senior researcher at the Middle East Research Centre, as saying: "What the Europeans must understand is that different voices are no longer heard in Iran. All the people who live in Iran want peaceful activities to continue in Iran. That is because this issue concerns our national interest and it is important just like the oil issue."¹⁷ Athari said that the new presidency would not change Iran's nuclear policies because this was an issue concerning "high politics" and decisions regarding it were taken at the highest echelons of the state by the supreme leader and the Supreme National Security Council and the Expediency Council. Athari argued that Iran's goal was to continue the enrichment programme and to make use of "peaceful nuclear technology". He declared: "The Europeans must know that the chasm in our society no longer exists and Iranians can go forward with strength."¹⁸

In fact, after Ahmadinezhad's victory, the Iranian state immediately took a tougher line on the nuclear issue. On 29 June, the Judiciary announced that the trial of "nuclear spies" would be held on 20 August because one of the defendants needed surgery. This was very convenient for the government given the fact that the EU was expected to put forward its proposal in late July. The next day, one of Ahmadinezhad's key allies, Hoseyn Allahkaram, who is also the leader of the country's largest vigilante organization, Ansar-e Hezbollah, declared that the Ahmadinezhad government would not abide by the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).¹⁹

However, Iranian officials repeatedly stated that Ahmadinezhad would not change the country's nuclear policy.

The policy debate was undoubtedly further complicated by US sanctions on the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and a number of other Iranian bodies. In an

attempt to counter US statements and reports on Iran's clandestine nuclear installations, Iranian Intelligence Minister Ali Yunesi claimed that the Iranians had "double crossed" the Americans and that much of the intelligence provided to the US was false. Yunesi claimed that US officials had tried to disguise their true source of information by claiming that they had received their intelligence from members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization.²⁰

Iran's chief negotiators sought to take advantage of Ahmadinezhad's victory to improve Iran's bargaining position in the negotiations with the EU. What actually transpired went far beyond tactical moves. By late July Iran had fully adopted a strategy of nuclear opacity. Soon after the elections, Iran's chief negotiators, Sirus Naseri and Hoseyn Musavian, declared that they would resume the enrichment programme if the EU's proposal did not satisfy them. The Iranian negotiators, particularly Naseri, saw the debate about the European constitution as an opportunity for Iran to further its own interests. "Perhaps the Europeans were imagining things after the presidential election," Naseri said; Iran would reject the EU's proposal if it did not say anything about the resumption of enrichment. However, Naseri argued that the EU was well aware of Iran's "importance" and that it also badly needed an agreement for internal reasons because the rejection of the EU constitution meant that the EU could not afford another political defeat. He contended that failure to reach agreement with Iran would exacerbate "the crisis" facing the EU and do "irreparable harm" to it.²¹

Naseri contended that the Europeans' statement that they needed more time to get to know the new Iranian government was merely "a pretext" to delay the negotiations because Ahmadinezhad had already made it clear that he would remain committed to the basic principles of Iranian foreign policy. Naseri wanted the EU to know that the government enjoyed "strong popular support" and that, therefore, it would be able to make "important decisions". The EU could only reach agreement with Iran if it "fully recognized Iran's rights".²²

The head of the information dissemination committee of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Aqamohammadi, argued that there was unanimity among Iranian officials on the nuclear issue. He admitted that there had been "serious differences of opinion at the beginning," but he claimed that those differences had now been resolved. He contended that the Iranian elections had been "a warning" to the EU which indicated that "they will not be permitted and they will not be able to oppose the will of the Iranian nation".²³ However, by now the dispute over the choice of nuclear policy and strategy had become so serious that Hasan Rowhani decided to go public and reveal the assumptions on which Iranian strategy was based.

Rowhani's assessment of Iranian strategy

Rowhani, who had already indicated that he would not work with Ahmadinezhad, hinted that Iranian nuclear policy would change. In an interview after the presidential elections, Rowhani was asked, albeit in a somewhat circuitous fashion, about the influence of the anti-NPT current on the Ahmadinezhad government. The interviewer argued that "certain critics" of the country's nuclear policy in the media might have moved closer to the executive branch. Rowhani said that one could not argue that the presidential elections or the composition of the next cabinet would not have any effect on the country's nuclear policy. However, he qualified his remarks by saying that "the basic principles of the case" would not change much. Rowhani indicated that there were differences of opinion over the most important

aspect of the case, the issue of “the suspension” of Iran’s enrichment activities. However, he sought to downplay the significance of the dispute:

I think that no-one opposes the negotiations or our decision to continue the negotiations. It is possible that there may be certain differences of opinion with regard to the issue of suspension. It is possible that such differences of opinion will be put into action. However, there will be no change in the underlying principles. No one opposes negotiations or our decision to continue the negotiations with the Europeans. However, there may be slight differences of opinion over certain other matters.²⁴

Rowhani denied that he had ever tendered his resignation or that he was contemplating doing so. He said that his term of office would automatically come to an end when the new government took over, adding that he had a separate position as the supreme leader’s representative on the Supreme National Security Council. He contended that the nuclear issue was the most important national security issue which Iran has had to deal with after the Iran-Iraq war and that the US might be “hatching plots” against Iran. He said that Iran was facing 35 nations known as members of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and that it had to contend with the entire Western world at the same time. He argued that Iran’s nuclear diplomacy had been highly successful because it had prevented the formation of a consensus of opinion on the Iranian nuclear issue which was no longer being dealt with as a special case by the IAEA.²⁵ He said that Iran had no choice but to negotiate because the country had been isolated and there was no economic investment because both the EU and Japan were hesitant about doing so. He said that the US was preparing itself for turning Iran into “a second Iraq” and that was why Iran had to act. Iranian strategy, according to Rowhani, was aimed at driving a wedge between the EU and the US and creating a space between them no matter how small that space was. He said that Iran had been highly successful in that regard, citing as an example Iran’s economic relations with Germany and Iran’s accession to the World Trade Organization.²⁶ Moreover, the NPT review had not led to any changes and Iran had also succeeded in improving its nuclear capability.²⁷

Rowhani admitted that Iran had chosen the second best option because the EU was not as powerful as the US. He delineated his argument in terms of the “life” or “death” of the Iranian nuclear programme and contended that the main difference of opinion between the US, the EU and Russia was over the method of killing Iran’s indigenous nuclear programme. He said that the US was trying to do so through exerting pressure on Iran whereas the EU, and perhaps even Russia, had sought to do so through diplomacy. He said that he had informed French President Jacques Chirac that he would not be able to deny Iran access to nuclear technology, but he also told Chirac that Iran would promise that it would not produce atomic bombs. He had given Chirac five proposals and the French president accepted the fourth, namely, working out a formula via an international route. He said that some experts had disagreed and told Chirac that there had been problems with that approach, but the French president and the French Foreign Ministry had agreed with the Iranian approach.²⁸

According to Rowhani, US opposition had stopped the implementation of the plan, and had also influenced British policy towards Iran.²⁹ Rowhani argued that the EU might be convinced that something was logical but it would not necessarily be able to give it diplomatic support. He said that German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder had told him that convincing German officials was not sufficient; others needed to be convinced as well and other channels could be used for that purpose. According

to Rowhani, Schroeder wanted to say that even if Iran managed to convince “the entire Europe”, “we must do everything to convince the Americans”. If this were not done, the EU would “not be able to complete the process”. He believed that this was the EU’s main weakness.³⁰

Significantly, Rowhani argued that despite the fact that the Supreme National Security Council had been tasked with dealing with the nuclear issue, the Foreign Ministry had done most of the work, and that it could now be put in charge of the nuclear issue.³¹ This was clearly aimed at weakening the position of advocates of weaponization since they had seats on the Supreme National Security Council. Transferring the dossier to the Foreign Ministry would also undercut Khamene’i and Ahmadinezhad. However, almost immediately after the elections Ahmadinezhad moved to undermine Rafsanjani by raising the issue of corruption in the country. Rafsanjani was Rowhani’s closest ally and was trying to form a broad coalition to challenge the president-elect.

The conflict between Rowhani and his opponents came to a head during the debate about the resumption of the activities of the UCF facility in Esfahan. This led to a confrontation with the EU over the Iranian nuclear programme. The crisis occurred against the background of an intense power struggle between the Khamene’i-Ahmadinezhad coalition, the strongly conservative Islamic Coalition Party, which disagreed with Ahmadinezhad over some key policy issues, and the “reformist”-Rafsanjani coalition. This issue is beyond the scope of this paper and will, hopefully, be addressed in another CSRC paper.

The Debate over the Choice of Strategy

The confrontation with the EU over the resumption of the activities of the UCF facility in Esfahan was a major step backwards. Negotiating with the EU and selective bandwagoning with the US on issues of Iraq and Afghanistan was aimed at reducing US political and economic pressure on Iran to create an environment which was more conducive to the pursuit of the nuclear programme. The policy of negotiating with the EU was pursued because of Iranian officials’ perception of the rift between the EU and the US over Iraq.

Some Israeli reports before the Iranian elections argued that Iran had come to the conclusion that neither the US nor Israel could stop it from acquiring a nuclear bomb and that the Bush administration had decided to pressure the Iranian regime by supporting a secessionist guerrilla movement in Iran’s Khuzestan Province. According to such reports, the US, the UK, Iraq, UAE and Kuwait were backing the guerrillas. However, they were “not strong enough yet to stand up to the Iranian army or seriously damage Iranian oil production”.³² Indeed, in August Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi accused the UK of destabilizing oil-rich Khuzestan Province and the US of destabilizing north-western Iran.³³

Asefi claimed that those responsible for the unrest in Khuzestan “had been trained in bases in British-controlled areas of Iraq” and then entered Iran. He said that Iran had “protested to the British on different occasions”, including at the talks held in London and Tehran.³⁴ As far as the US was concerned, Asefi linked US policy towards Iran to US failure in Iraq: “It is quite clear that the Americans have been caught up in a quagmire. Their efforts to destabilize the region are ridiculous. We shall definitely protest against America on this matter.”³⁵

It appears that while opposing Rafsanjani’s moves towards normalization of relations with the US and his policy towards the armed forces, his opponents,

particularly Ahmadinezhad's allies, also wanted to shift Iran's nuclear strategy to a different variant of the bomb in the basement strategy, based on the concept of opacity. The most vocal spokesmen for this strategy were member of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Manuchehr Mottaki, the head of the Majlis Research Centre Ahmad Tavakkoli and former deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Larijani. This group was part of the Ahmadinezhad coalition. It would be an egregious error to ignore these individuals' purchase on policy. They brought significant political pressure to bear on Iranian negotiators, particularly Hasan Rowhani. Thus despite the façade of unity during the dispute with the EU over the resumption of activities at Esfahan, the crisis also brought to the surface the sharp divergence of opinion over the choice of strategy.

The available evidence suggests that these figures managed to influence the course of Iranian policy because of their perception of a change in the French position prior to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to France.

The crisis with the EU coincided with a conference on nuclear energy sponsored by the Majlis Research Centre. Despite the fact that the organizers of the conference were vehemently opposed to Iranian policy towards the EU, the conference was held at the Foreign Ministry's Political and International Studies Centre.³⁶ The head of the Majlis Research Centre Ahmad Tavakkoli, Majlis Speaker Gholamali Haddad-Adel, Mohammad Javad Larijani, former deputy foreign minister and a brother of presidential candidate Ali Larijani, were among those who addressed the conference. Tavakkoli said that Iran should make an announcement that it was not interested in manufacturing nuclear weapons and in return the world should recognize Iran's right to pursue a nuclear programme.³⁷

Majlis Speaker Haddad-Adel declared that every country had to "incur certain costs to ensure its independence", adding that Iran could not continue to rely upon oil as a source of energy. He declared that Iran was not interested in military applications of nuclear technology. Haddad-Adel contended that pursuit of a nuclear programme had become a symbol of Iran's independence and Iran's indigenous nuclear programme would not be abandoned.³⁸

Mohammad Javad Larijani, whose brother had sharply criticized Rowhani for his policies before the elections, contended:

Our dispute with the West and the [International Atomic Energy] Agency was over the production of atomic weapons, not gaining access to the nuclear fuel cycle and nuclear energy. However, today, the situation has deteriorated to the point that they are getting involved in a dispute over the supply of fuel for enrichment systems. This was a big strategic mistake. We should not have allowed this debate to take place because it is basically about whether we should have nuclear technology or not.³⁹

Larijani lambasted Iranian officials for their decision to negotiate with the EU. Undoubtedly he adopted a harsh tone to maximize the political impact of his remarks.

Basically, our interlocutor in the negotiations was the United Nations. However, we decided to choose three European countries, which are the most savage elements in human civilization, as interlocutors in negotiations which were supposed to protect our national interests. Those three countries do not have the right to talk to us about nuclear

energy. They can get involved in the debate as a lobby, but it is wrong to sign any agreements with them.⁴⁰

Larijani contended that Iranian officials made “a mistake” when they “signed a document” with the EU-3 in Tehran: “Basically, those three countries do not have the right to talk to us about nuclear energy. That is because when we are talking to three international savages, we cannot include any principles in the negotiations.”⁴¹ Larijani argued that Iran had made significant concessions regarding the level of uranium enrichment, adding that weapons grade uranium had to be over 90 per cent enriched. Above all, Larijani called into question the strategy of renouncing all military applications of nuclear energy and came very close to calling for the pursuit of a policy of nuclear opacity. He declared:

I believe that nuclear weapons cause more problems for us than they are worth. However, it is not right that we should tie our hands when confronting our enemies. In fact, the point at issue is that we will not be the first one to make use of a nuclear weapon. However, for the same reason that we were compelled to acquire other nuclear equipment, we also have the right to have a nuclear defence capability. The law-makers have given us a guarantee that we will have the right to do so. We will not make any deals over our right.⁴²

An Iranian commentator and a member of the academic board of Allameh Tabataba'i University argued that Iranian academics had not managed to define a policy between the two extremes of proliferation and disarmament. He said that Western strategy had actually contributed to proliferation because it compelled countries to seek to acquire nuclear weapons.⁴³ He also criticized Iranian officials for “setting a precedent” in the nuclear debate which would cause problems for other countries.⁴⁴

It was against this background that Iran declared that it would resume its nuclear activities in Esfahan because the EU had failed to take account of Iran's “right” to engage in uranium enrichment. The head of the information dissemination committee of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Aqamohammadi contended that the EU's position breached the Paris agreement because the EU-3 were supposed to submit a proposal to Iran, but they had “evaded” the main issue, namely uranium enrichment.⁴⁵

Iranian officials asserted that economic concessions would not be sufficient to prevent them from continuing the enrichment programme and that they were not concerned about the threat to refer the matter to the UN Security Council. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi declared that Iranian nuclear policy was among policies which were based on “a consensus of opinion” and that “the current president, the next president and all the leaders of the state are duty-bound to implement these policies and, therefore, we cannot procrastinate”.⁴⁶ Ahmad Tavakkoli and a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Majlis, Kazem Jalali, sharply criticized Iran's policy towards the EU. Tavakkoli reiterated the main criticism of the advocates of nuclear opacity, arguing that Iranian officials should have confined themselves to negotiating with the UN and making a statement that the country was not interested in producing nuclear weapons. Aqamohammadi said that Iran was not interested in producing nuclear weapons and such weapons had no place in Iranian military doctrine because “mad men” with bombs had been responsible for many international conflicts.⁴⁷

Rowhani defends Iran's Choice of strategy

Iran's top nuclear negotiator Hasan Rowhani lambasted the EU-3 for making factually inaccurate statements and "issuing unacceptable threats against Iran over its nuclear programme".⁴⁸ In a letter to the EU-3 Rowhani contended that their proposal failed to take account of the agreements reached in Geneva and London.⁴⁹ However, Rowhani was fighting for his political survival, not just his position as the secretary to the Supreme National Security Council. That he chose to present a detailed exposition of the assumptions on which Iranian negotiating strategies were based should not have come as a surprise to observers of the Iranian scene. Rowhani's arguments provide the best account of the assumptions on which Iran's bomb in the basement strategy were based and the place of that strategy in the state's overall geopolitical calculations.

Rowhani, who had already been sharply criticized by radical and conservative political figures, published a letter to President Khatami, defending the decision to negotiate with the EU.⁵⁰ Rowhani's arguments provide a good case study supporting Sir Michael Quinlan's argument that "A nuclear state is a state that no-one can afford to make desperate".⁵¹ Rowhani's arguments made clear that he viewed Iran's nuclear programme as a deterrent which would guarantee the security of the Iranian regime and persuade the US to recognize its legitimacy. Rowhani based his argument on the premise that failure to negotiate would have led the US to attack Iran, thereby jeopardizing the country's territorial integrity and political system. In his letter, Rowhani contended that the US and Europe had sought "to permanently deny Iran access to nuclear energy". He argued that the US had tried to ensure the annulment of Iran's nuclear agreements with other countries such as the UK and France:

This illegal policy was, in fact, only one aspect of Western hostility towards Iran, which has had various manifestations since the victory of the Islamic revolution. The sovereignty of the Islamic state, as well as the national security and territorial integrity of the country, were never really supported, or even recognized, by them over the last 27 years. The West has never liked, and it will never like, the prevailing way of thinking in Iran and the determination of this great nation to establish and encourage the rule of the people on the basis of religious principles and the quest for freedom and justice. Therefore, during no period since the victory of the Islamic revolution have Iran and the West had normal relations or relations in all fields.⁵²

Rowhani went on to argue that US and European policies towards Iran were both aimed at achieving the same objective, namely changing the behaviour and nature of the Iranian state. The only difference was over the tactics to be employed; the US resorted to issuing "threats", whereas Europe chose "critical dialogue". Rowhani argued that the policy of "critical dialogue" never really went beyond criticism of Iran.⁵³ Rowhani argued that Iran had embarked upon a nuclear programme because the country's hydrocarbon resources were declining and it had no choice but to find an alternative source of energy. At the same time, the country was facing huge foreign policy problems since 11 September 2001 because of US military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Under the circumstances, according to Rowhani, the Supreme National Security Council had decided to turn threats into opportunities. Rowhani's defence was that he had been given the nuclear dossier by Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i and President Mohammad Khatami and he had been assisted by Atomic Energy Organization and Defence

Ministry officials. Thus, according to Rowhani, the highest echelons of the state were responsible for the course of action upon which Iran had embarked.

As far as the nuclear issue was concerned, Rowhani argued that US pressure had led to the cancellation or postponement of most of Iran's agreements and only the agreement on the construction of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr had been maintained. Even that had faced problems because of delays in implementation. Therefore, Rowhani believed that Iran had no choice but to seek to create an indigenous nuclear programme.⁵⁴

Rowhani defined the function of the Supreme National Security Council as "preventing and countering internal security threats and foreign threats and enhancing national security through strengthening national power and discovering and foiling enemy plots". He argued that over the last 16 years the council had been rather successful in formulating policies to further Iranian interests.⁵⁵ The centrepiece of Rowhani's argument was that Iran had to be a powerful country to compel the West to come to terms with the Islamic Republic.

The crux of the matter has always been that the hostility of the Western world towards the Islamic Republic of Iran will not end unless the country manages to attain such capabilities in the various political, economic, scientific and technological fields that others will have no choice but to establish balanced and fair relations with Iran.⁵⁶

According to Rowhani, the Iranian nuclear programme was based on the concept that nuclear energy would be the third source of energy for Iran after oil and gas. However, US and international opposition to the Iranian programme led the Iranian leadership to put one person, Rowhani, in charge of managing the crisis. According to Rowhani, Iranian leaders and ministers came to the conclusion that the country had to pursue five objectives regarding the nuclear issue:

- "(1) Managing the crisis and parrying the threat to the country,
- (2) Ensuring the security of Iranian installations and resources,
- (3) Developing and strengthening Iranian capabilities,
- (4) Improving and strengthening the country's legal position and
- (5) Turning threats into opportunities".⁵⁷

Rowhani argued that there were two "extremist" viewpoints in the country. The first option was to ignore the resolution issued against Iran by the IAEA and to confront it directly, which he contended would have led to Iran's withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. According to Rowhani, advocates of this course of action, who were inspired by the North Korean example, believed that Iran's opponents would have backed down and made significant concessions to Iran if Iran issued such threats.⁵⁸ This viewpoint was represented by Khamene'i's representative in the Kayhan Institute, Hoseyn Shari'atmadari, who is a strong supporter of Ahmadinezhad. Rowhani, of course, did not say that in his report. The second option was to follow the Libyan example and to fully accede to "American demands" in return for "certain concessions" by the West. According to Rowhani "the state" did not approve of either approach because "at that juncture the country had not yet prepared itself for confronting all threats and giving up all of our achievements immediately after the first attempt by the enemy to put us under pressure was not consistent with the views of the nation, the lofty status of the country or our national interests".⁵⁹

As a result, Iran embarked upon a policy of preserving and strengthening the nuclear programme, while preparing the country for dealing with “possible threats” and preparing the ground for normalizing Iran’s political situation. What Rowhani did not say to Khatami in his report was whether he expected Iran’s near-threshold nuclear status to deter the US or whether Iran actually had a war fighting doctrine in the event of a major confrontation. Rowhani’s comments, as well as those of other officials, made clear that Iranian officials did think in terms of fighting the US in the event of an attack on their country. Rowhani, however, preferred to think in terms of using Iran’s near-threshold status to reach a modus vivendi.

Iranian officials realized that the US was the country Iran ultimately had to deal with. However, since Iranian officials believed that the US wanted Iran to completely abandon its nuclear programme, they decided not to negotiate with the US directly. According to Rowhani, Iranian officials believed that Russia did not have the capability to stand up to the US and it did not want Iran to have an indigenous nuclear programme either. China and the Non-Aligned countries who were considered to be “good friends” were not considered to have the necessary international credibility to confront the US. Rowhani argued that Iranian officials realized that the EU opposed Iran’s attainment of a nuclear capability, but they decided to take advantage of the “rift” between America and Europe over Iraq because “France, Germany and even Britain did not want a repetition of the Iraq affair in the region”. This, Rowhani contended, had created a very small aperture for a political approach. Rowhani argued that when the foreign ministers of the EU-3 visited Iran, the Iranians were in a difficult situation and that the agreement to suspend Iran’s nuclear enrichment programme “voluntarily” was a major achievement for the country. However, according to Rowhani, the US considered the Europeans to be “simpletons”, and raised the issue of taking military action against Iran.⁶⁰

According to Rowhani, Iran then embarked upon a legal strategy of justifying the nuclear programme by engaging the director-general of the IAEA Muhammad Al-Baradi. Rowhani claimed that the Paris agreement had enabled Iran to suspend its programme temporarily without in any fundamental way undermining its ability to produce its fuel production capability.⁶¹

Rowhani made it abundantly clear in his letter to Khatami that Iran’s nuclear capability had enabled it to gain concessions which it would never have been able to gain otherwise. “Prior to Iran’s acquisition of nuclear technology they consistently rejected these positions and they were not prepared to accept them.” He cited as an example Iran’s negotiations with Western European countries over the last 15 years.⁶² Rowhani argued that Iran had gained important concessions as the result of the Paris agreement such as making “peaceful use of nuclear energy”, European assistance to Iran in “political, economic, security and technological fields”, and attaining observer status at the World Trade Organisation, as well as:

1. Full support for the production of nuclear energy in Iran, including the supply of power stations by Western sources;
2. Guaranteeing long-term supply of fuel for the power stations with the support of [IAEA] and the UN
3. The expansion and strengthening of our capabilities
4. Rectifying and strengthening our legal position
5. Turning the crisis into an opportunity.⁶³

Rowhani claimed that Iranian policy had been so successful that “in the event of any attacks on our nuclear installations and resources, we will still be able to continue the production of enriched gas and fuel”.⁶⁴

Rowhani lambasted the critics for being “unkind” and making “biased” and “destructive” statements, adding for good measure: “I have no doubt that the guidance provided by the supreme leader of the Islamic revolution will ensure that the final stage of this task will be accomplished in a way that will protect the long term interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran”.⁶⁵

Khatami thanked Rowhani for his efforts, declaring that he had indeed managed to “turn a threat into an opportunity” and demonstrated the importance of diplomacy. He expressed his “regret” over Rowhani’s “unfair treatment by certain individuals”.⁶⁶ After leaving office Rowhani continued to insist that he had not been at all interested in accepting the responsibility for the nuclear dossier and that Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i and Khatami had insisted that he must do so.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the political context in which the resumption of operations at Esfahan occurred was a major defeat for Rowhani and advocates of the bomb in the basement strategy. Advocates of nuclear opacity, who were primarily concentrated in the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Majlis, used the resumption of operations at Esfahan to call for the resumption of operations at Natanz and committing the government to undertake uranium enrichment. After the IAEA’s Board of Governors issued a resolution critical of Iran, Mohammad Sa’idi, the deputy for international affairs at Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization, declared that Iran was “not at all obliged to implement the Board of Governors’ resolution”, adding: “We will definitely continue our activities in Esfahan and our future discussions with Europe will be about Natanz”.⁶⁸ Even Hasan Rowhani, who had lost the policy war, declared after a good-bye party in his honour: “Now that we have started our activities in Esfahan, suspension is meaningless. The decision is irreversible.”⁶⁹

Indeed, even before the confrontation with the EU, Manuchehr Mottaki, who was later appointed foreign minister by Ahmadinezhad, said that as far as the talks with the EU were concerned, the key issue was the resumption of enrichment.⁷⁰

Defeat of the Bomb in the Basement Strategy?

Basically, Iran’s bomb in the basement strategy had been based on attaining a break-out capability within the framework of the NPT. Victor Gilinsky has described this strategy as “Iran’s ‘legal’ path to the bomb”.⁷¹ Its most important assumption was that Iran could exploit the disagreements between the US and the EU over Iraq to ensure the continuation of its indigenous nuclear programme. Moreover, Iran would use its nuclear programme to persuade the EU to give Iran a guarantee that the US would not invade it and gain economic concessions from the EU. However, all of that was based on the assumption that the EU would agree to an indigenous Iranian nuclear programme. Advocates of the bomb in the basement strategy believed that the prolongation of the talks and the differences among the EU-3 would lead them to agree such a formula.

The second plank of the strategy was tacit cooperation with the US on Iraq and Afghanistan and refraining from contributing to the insurgency in Iraq. Indeed, this extended to cooperation with the EU against Al-Qa’idah and the Mojahedin-e Khalq. Iranian officials expected the EU to classify the Mojahedin-e Khalq as a terrorist organization in return for Iran’s help in the campaign against Al-Qa’idah.

Rowhani's report to Khatami made clear that Iranian officials saw the programme as a deterrent. The key issue was the sharp difference of opinion over what the minimum deterrent was. Rowhani, Rafsanjani, Khatami and other advocates of the bomb in the basement strategy believed that a viable indigenous nuclear programme plus security guarantees from the EU would be sufficient. It was difficult for Rowhani to sell this policy to the Iranian political establishment given that he admitted in his letter to Khatami that he did not trust the EU.

Even if Rowhani did trust the EU, he would find it difficult to say so given the political atmosphere in the country. Opponents of the bomb in the basement strategy argued that Iran could not trust the EU or the US, that it had to resume uranium enrichment immediately and that no economic incentives were sufficient to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear programme. It would be wrong to argue that advocates of this policy could change Iranian strategy without the supreme leader's support. However, once the strategy had been changed, senior officials made it clear that the decision had been a collective one. After the decision to proceed with the operations in Esfahan, Ali Aqamohammadi, the head of the information dissemination committee of the Supreme National Security Council observed that despite Western attempts to portray Ahmadinezhad as an extremist, the entire state was responsible for the decision to resume nuclear activities, which had actually been made during Khatami's tenure.⁷² Ali Larijani, who was appointed as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council made the same point, arguing that he had not played a role in nuclear negotiations in early August.⁷³ This was despite the fact that on the same day he reportedly left for Vienna to attend an emergency session of the IAEA.⁷⁴

Shortly after the announcement of the decision to resume operations at Esfahan the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization Gholamreza Aqazadeh made clear that Iran should not link political or economic issues to the nuclear issue in its negotiations with the EU-3.⁷⁵ Aqazadeh's remarks suggested that he was keen on continuing the negotiations with the EU if only to buy time for Iran. Asked why Iran had been negotiating in the last two years, Aqazadeh's reply showed that, at best, Iranian officials had been disingenuous: "I believe that we were mainly passing time over the last two years and the negotiations were rather formulaic."⁷⁶

Aqazadeh's remarks showed that as far as far as Iran was concerned, the very premise of the EU-3's strategy was wrong. Iran had never really been interested in economic concessions or political guarantees and that, unlike the EU, Iran did not prefer to focus on political issues. Unlike Rowhani, Aqazadeh did not have much faith in security guarantees:

Parts of the proposal included trivial and insignificant matters. One of the issues on which Europe was manoeuvring was the European security guarantee to Iran, namely that if a nuclear country attacked, then two countries which are members of the UN Security Council (Britain and France) would request the Security Council to assist Iran. This is the centrepiece, indeed the entirety, of the guarantee which the Europeans gave us after two years. I believe that what they did was very short-sighted.⁷⁷

Ahmadinezhad also lambasted the EU-3 proposals. While expressing his country's readiness to continue the negotiations, he declared: "The Europeans talk as though the Iranian people were a backward people, as if they were still in the last century when they dominated our country." Ahmadinezhad's rhetoric and the appointment of Ali Larijani, as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council were widely perceived as a harbinger of a tougher Iranian posture in the nuclear

negotiations.⁷⁸ However, opponents of the new strategy, nuclear opacity, were still strong. They had one last chance and that was the implementation of the Additional Protocol to the NPT prior to its ratification by the Majlis. Some of the opponents of the talks with the EU, such as Manuchehr Mottaki, argued that Iran had already expressed its desire to implement the Additional Protocol even though it had not yet gone through the formal ratification procedure.⁷⁹ When asked about this, Aqazadeh said: “The Additional Protocol consists of a set of rules which have been drawn up on the basis of all the international ways of thinking. It has thought of all the ways in which deviations may occur in the nuclear field. Therefore, approval of the protocol means giving an objective guarantee to the world.”⁸⁰

The New Strategy and Military Options against the US

The new strategy was based on the assumption that US involvement in Iraq would either prevent the Bush administration from attacking Iran or that it would lead American decision makers to order a limited attack at best. Thus once the new strategy had been adopted, Iranian officials announced that they would defend Iranian facilities or withdraw from all nuclear agreements. In fact, even before the confrontation with the EU, those who favoured a shift of strategy had begun to declare that Iran had prepared itself for a confrontation. For example, while visiting the third naval zone of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps in Bandar-e Mahshahr, the commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, Major-General Yahya Rahim-Safavi, said that Iran was prepared “to withstand any foreign threat”.⁸¹ He declared that the Persian Gulf’s incomparable energy reserves meant that “any country that can dominate the energy resources will have the wherewithal to dominate economic, political and security affairs in the world”. He said that the US was seeking to replace “old colonial powers such as Britain and other European countries” in the region. Safavi made it clear that Iran would not permit the US to do so, noting that the Islamic revolution and the spread of “pure Muhamaddan Islam” to other countries had increased the importance of the Persian Gulf.⁸²

Moreover, Iranian officials sought to drive the point home that the shift in Iranian strategy was a state decision and not a governmental one, i.e. change of government would not change anything. Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani, who had been a strong defender of an Iranian nuclear capability, declared: “Our nuclear capability cannot be destroyed because it lies in our universities.”⁸³ Above all, he made it clear that “The day our facilities are attacked, we will put aside all our nuclear commitments”.⁸⁴ He also indicated that Iran was prepared to fight: “Should we accept humiliation, the sanctions, see ourselves be punished, or should we resist? I think that we should resist.” He then claimed that Iran had improved the accuracy of the Shahab-3 missiles “to within one metre of their target”, adding pointedly that the missiles were not targeting any country.⁸⁵ Shamkhani argued that destroying Iranian nuclear installations would not solve any of the attackers’ problems because Iran had built its own nuclear facilities and, therefore, it was quite capable of rebuilding them “in another part of the country”.⁸⁶ The commander of the ground forces of the Iranian army Purshasb made similar remarks, saying that Iran was prepared to defend itself against the US.⁸⁷

The father of Iran’s missile industry, General Ahmad Vahid, told Associated Press that Iran had increased the range of Shahab-3 missile from approximately 1,300 kilometres to 2,000 kilometres. Vahid said that Iran had been “working on the missile’s range” since it started producing it. In July Iran announced that it had tested a solid fuel motor for Shahab-3. However, it was not clear from Vahid’s comments whether the range of the missile had been increased as a result of the use of solid fuel.⁸⁸ Like Shamkhani, Vahid claimed: “Our nuclear capabilities are

not annihilable...We have mastered nuclear science by ourselves. In case of any damage, we could construct it somewhere else.”⁸⁹

However, in early August, reports on a “major US intelligence review” and a National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, which reflected a consensus of opinion among US intelligence agencies, indicated that the country was approximately 10 years from “manufacturing the key ingredient for a nuclear weapon”. The previous estimate had said that Iran was five years away from building a nuclear weapon.⁹⁰ At the same time, the estimate included “credible indicators that Iran’s military is conducting clandestine work”. It was reported that “there was no information linking” such work to the pursuit of nuclear weapons. However, what was clear was that Iran was “acquiring and mastering technologies that could be diverted to bombmaking”.⁹¹

Other sources, have speculated that Iran might already have acquired a substantial nuclear capability.⁹² Moreover, during this period, former CIA official Philip Giraldi wrote that Vice-President Cheney’s office had instructed the US military to prepare for the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Iran in the event of another 9/11 style attack. According to Giraldi’s sources in the air force: “Within Iran there are more than 450 major strategic targets, including numerous suspected nuclear-weapons-program development sites. Many of the targets are hardened or are deep underground and could not be taken out by conventional weapons, hence the nuclear option.”⁹³

No senior Iranian official reacted to the Giraldi report. In an interview with Israeli television, President Bush hinted that the US had not ruled out the military option.⁹⁴ Reacting to President Bush’s comments, Ayatollah Khamene’i said that the Iranian militia would defeat the US. At the same time, Khamene’i declared that the US was trying to bring about the metamorphosis of the Iranian state through political and cultural means – a strategy which he claimed would be defeated by the Basij Resistance Force. He said that the Iranian presidential elections had ensured America’s defeat and that Iran would ensure “regional stability”.⁹⁵

Unfortunately, hardly any media commentaries in the UK or the US said much about the dispute over strategy in the Iranian state. By late July, the conflict over strategy had become enormously complex because it was deeply intertwined with another related development: the dispute over the formation of a broad anti-Ahmadinezhad front comprising the strong pro-Khatami Islamic Iran Participation Front, the Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization and Rafsanjani's Executives of Construction.

Rafsanjani sought to establish himself as the leader of the new coalition. However, the political pressure on him over his wealth seems to have led him to reach out to dissidents in an effort to raise the issue of Khamene’i’s leadership. The composition of President Ahmadinezhad’s cabinet indicated that it was determined to crush dissent in the country. The main reason for this, apart from the low priority given to the establishment of democracy in Ahmadinezhad’s manifesto, was the new government’s fear of US support for dissidents and reformists. It is not at all surprising that the government should have been so fearful. It was embarking upon a new strategy aimed at sharply reducing US influence in the Persian Gulf and South Asia.

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- ⁴⁰ For Larijani's remarks see Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
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