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## The Iranian Threat

Iran has made significant progress in its ability to enrich uranium—the critical component for nuclear weapons—in direct defiance of three U.N Security Council resolutions. As the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report makes clear, Iran continues to advance its enrichment efforts while denying international inspectors access to key nuclear facilities and failing to address concerns that it conducted studies on building nuclear warheads. In response to Iran's nuclear pursuit, the United States has led international efforts to sanction Tehran as a way to press the regime to change course.

### **Q: Why is Iran a threat to the United States, Israel and other U.S. allies?**

**A:** A nuclear armed-Iran would pose a direct threat to U.S. national security interests, and fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the Middle East. Iran already can deploy a sizable force of increasingly sophisticated Shihab missiles that can hit Israel, U.S. forces in the region and some of America's allies in Europe. During the next decade, Iran also may acquire intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking the United States.



**Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly called for the destruction of Israel and the United States.**

An Iran with nuclear weapons would embolden the fundamentalist regime in Tehran to carry out its radical foreign policy agenda by furthering its support for its terrorist allies. Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism; it funds, trains and arms Hizballah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other terrorist groups.

Iran's successful acquisition of nuclear weapons would likely mark the death knell of the global non-proliferation regime, and could touch off a regional nuclear-arms race among Middle Eastern countries, many of which already have expressed new interest in "peaceful" nuclear programs.

### **Q: What is the status of Iran's nuclear program?**

**A:** Iran is rapidly moving toward a nuclear weapons capability, aggressively pursuing a uranium enrichment program that could give the regime the ability to produce a nuclear weapon as early as late next year. The regime in Tehran is on the verge of mastering the entire nuclear fuel cycle, including

the mining, conversion, enrichment and stockpiling of uranium that could ultimately form the cores of a nuclear weapons arsenal. According to the latest report from the IAEA, Iran is operating nearly 3,500 uranium centrifuges, or machines that rotate at supersonic speeds to enrich the uranium needed to produce fuel for nuclear reactors or bombs. Iran is in the process of installing an additional 2,500 centrifuges that, when operational, could produce enough highly enriched uranium for one to three nuclear weapons a year. At the same time, Iran is testing advanced P-2 centrifuges, which are capable of enriching uranium at two to five times the speed of older models.

Iran is also developing and deploying an increasingly advanced arsenal of long-range ballistic missiles ideal for delivering atomic warheads. In addition, the IAEA report said that Iran is continuing construction of the heavy-water production plant at Arak in direct violation of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1737, 1747 and 1803.

**Q: Can Iran's civil nuclear program also be used as part of a nuclear weapons program?**

**A:** Yes. Most of what the Iranian authorities describe as a peaceful program aimed at providing the oil and natural gas-rich nation with yet more energy resources is in fact perfectly suited to supplying the building blocks of a military nuclear arms stockpile. The low-enriched uranium that Iran is currently churning out with increasing efficiency at its Natanz nuclear plant—and perhaps at another hidden site—is purportedly for use in power reactors. Yet such uranium can be further purified into the highly enriched uranium needed for an atomic bomb with only minor modifications to the gas centrifuge cascades that the regime is installing at the site to amass fissile material.

The IAEA in a May 2008 report accused Iran of a willful lack of cooperation in answering questions about military activities related to its illicit nuclear program. The U.N.'s nuclear watchdog expressed “serious concern” over indications that the Iranian military has played a key role in the country's nuclear program and that its research had ventured into explosives, uranium processing and a missile warhead design — activities associated with nuclear weapons.

Likewise, the Iranian heavy-water reactor being built at Arak, and even the Russian-built reactor at Bushehr, can serve as the source for bomb-grade plutonium if Iran constructs a facility to extract this alternate fissile material from used reactor fuel—something well within the country's technical capabilities. In fact, the International Atomic Energy Agency has reported evidence that Iran has experimented with plutonium separation.

By contrast, there is absolutely no visible evidence—such as power lines linking to the facility—that would indicate that Iran's reactor at Bushehr is actually intended to produce electricity for civilian use.

**Q: Does H. Con. Res. 362 increase the chances of going to war with Iran?**

**A:** No. The resolution specifically states that nothing in the resolution shall be construed to be an authorization for military action. The resolutions say that one important tool—among others—that can be used to pressure the regime is an international campaign to cut off the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran, which has to import 40 percent of its gasoline and diesel fuel. The prohibition on exports envisioned in the resolutions constitutes an international ban on the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran, potentially through such institutions as the United Nations or the EU. The resolutions do not call for a naval “blockade” or an international “embargo.”

The sanctions called for in H. Con. Res. 362 and its Senate companion, S. Res. 580, are the best way to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability by avoiding military action. Meaningful economic sanctions stand a real chance of being effective. Given the alternatives of either acquiescing to an Iranian nuclear capability or striking Iran militarily—in the words of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, “Bomb Iran or Iran gets the bomb”—employing tough sanctions now makes eminent sense. It provides the best chance for avoiding the need to consider the use of force.

### **Q. Why is it important to cut off imports of refined petroleum to Iran?**

Despite sitting on some of the largest oil reserves in the world, Iran has been forced to import 40 percent of its refined petroleum—gasoline and diesel—because of a lack of investment in its oil refining infrastructure. The high cost of importing gasoline, combined with large price subsidies given to Iranian citizens, has forced Iran to ration gasoline. The regime's decision last year to ration gasoline led to protests against Ahmadinejad. These protests included Iranians taking to the streets to burn gas stations. Limiting the sale of gasoline to Iran will severely impact Iran's economy and could lead to dramatically greater domestic pressure on the regime to change course.

### **Q: Doesn't the imposition of economic sanctions on Iran harden its position?**

**A:** The United States and the international community believe that increasing the economic pressure on Iran while at the same time holding out real economic and political incentives presents the best approach to convince Iran to halt its drive for a nuclear weapons capability. While sanctions have not yet changed Iranian behavior, they have significantly increased the time Tehran needs to achieve a nuclear capability, and have raised regime costs of pursuing this program to the regime.

Were it not for sanctions, Iran would most likely already have a nuclear weapons capability. By delaying the time, sanctions keep open the possibility of achieving a change in Iran's nuclear ambitions.



**Iran is extending the reach of its ballistic missile arsenal as it continues to advance its uranium enrichment efforts.**

### **Q: Is the Iranian regime susceptible to economic pressure to stop its nuclear program?**

**A:** The Iranian regime's weakest point is its economy, which is highly dependent on its petroleum and natural gas sector. As recent protests and criticism of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad make clear, the Iranian regime is experiencing open signs of public dissatisfaction. Two thirds of Iran's population is under the age of 30, and many are either unemployed or underemployed. Inflation is rampant, while the mullahs are perceived as corrupt, enriching themselves at the expense of ordinary people. Targeting the lifeblood of Iran's economy – which underpins the mullahs – could help crystallize the choice confronting the Iranian regime between pursuing nuclear weapons and a very bleak economic future.

### **Q: What impact have sanctions had on the Iranian regime to date?**

**A:** Sanctions have not yet changed Iranian behavior, but they have significantly delayed the time Tehran needs to achieve a nuclear capability, thus raising the cost to the regime. Were it not for sanctions, Iran would most likely already have a nuclear weapons capability. By delaying the time, sanctions keep open the possibility of achieving a change in Iran's nuclear ambitions.

U.S. and U.N. sanctions have been successful in largely cutting off the Iranian financial system from the outside world, making Iranian operations costly and time consuming for international companies.

Scores of international banks, unwilling to risk heavy fines and the possible loss of access to U.S. financial markets, have ceased or limited transactions with Iran.

The threat of U.S. sanctions on firms doing business in Iran's energy sector has limited Iran's ability to attract much-needed foreign investment. The lack of investment has led to a dramatic decrease in the amount of oil Iran is able to export. Today, Iran pumps 40 percent less oil than it did 25 years ago, even though its population has doubled. Large liquefied natural gas export projects have fallen years behind schedule as foreign energy companies such as Total and Shell, as well as Malaysia's Petronas and Spain's Repsol, have delayed investments due to the cloud of sanctions hanging over Iran. Domestic Iranian companies lack the technology to develop much of Iran's petroleum industry.

**Q: Why don't we just talk to Iran to solve the dispute over its nuclear program?**

**A:** The United States and its allies have made repeated diplomatic efforts in recent years to reach out to Iran in the hope of solving a range of disputes. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in May 2006 that the United States would join multilateral talks with Iran if it met the Security Council's requirement to suspend uranium enrichment. President George W. Bush has reiterated numerous times, including as recently as last month, that the dialogue offer remains on the table and that "there is a seat at the table for them [Iran] if they would verifiably suspend their enrichment."

While Iran has proposed its own set of negotiations, it refuses to suspend its uranium enrichment program, a requirement of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions. Entering into a dialogue before Iran has complied with U.N. resolutions and suspended its uranium enrichment could undermine Security Council decisions and allow Tehran to use the dialogue as a way to continue advancing its nuclear program. Iran used previous talks with the European Union to make significant advances in its nuclear program while staving off international sanctions.