

FOREIGN RELATIONS | MARCH 2013

Making the Case: Stopping Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program

By Mieke Eoyang and Aki Peritz

The U.S. is currently leading a multinational effort to squeeze Iran and force them to give up its weapons program. Here's how to make the case for that approach and why it makes sense:

1. A nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable.
2. Sanctions are working—they are wrecking the Iranian economy—but they need more time to have their full impact.
3. We can blunt Iran's capabilities by strengthening our allies' missile defense systems.
4. Military strikes now could exacerbate the problem, but all options must remain on the table.

The U.S. is concerned about Iran's quest to develop a nuclear weapon. Options for American policymakers range from diplomacy to increasing the current sanctions regime—already the toughest ever—to a military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.

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A nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable.

- The U.S. cannot allow a designated state sponsor of terrorism to have a nuclear weapon, as Tehran has supported organizations like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad for decades.
- Iran threatens our allies by calling for their destruction while also targeting their diplomats abroad.
- Iran would use its nuclear status to flex its regional muscles, igniting a regional arms race. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others would begin the quest for upgraded weapons to even the score.

We will do what is necessary to prevent [Iran] from getting a nuclear weapon.

— President Barack Obama
State of the Union
February 12, 2013

- A nuclear-armed Iran would undermine the global nuclear non-proliferation under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). If Iran develops and deploys nuclear weapons, it says the decades-long international effort to halt the spread of nuclear weapons is dead. This would increase the threat of nuclear war in the future.

MAKING THE CASE

We must keep tightening the screws on Iran.

Sanctions are working—they are wrecking the Iranian economy—but they need more time to have their full impact on the regime.

- Over the past few years, Congress has passed multiple bills sanctioning the Central Bank of Iran,¹ penalizing businesses that deal with the state,² and limiting refined petroleum exports to the country.³
- Such unilateral sanctions, along with multilateral action by our allies, are seriously affecting Iran’s overall finances, causing its currency to crash and inflation to skyrocket.
- Since last year, the countries on the UN Security Council and Germany (aka the “P5+1”) have been negotiating with Iran over its nuclear program. There has been some headway, with the regime showing signs of the economic strain. But the latest round in talks recently concluded in Almaty, Kazakhstan, so far has yielded few tangible results.

We can blunt Iran’s capabilities by strengthening our allies’ missile defense systems.

- Any nuclear weapon that Iran develops would be delivered by a missile strike. By strengthening our allies’ missile and air defense systems, we can blunt Iran’s arsenal.
- While Israel’s “Iron Dome” system proved remarkably effective against short-range rockets and missiles during the 2012 conflict with Hamas, Israel will require a much more sophisticated air defense system to stop missiles fired from Iran and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah.
- Iran already has several different missile systems that can strike Israel and other nations in the region.⁴ Congress can put American ingenuity and money behind developing and deploying a multi-layered air defense system that assists them and our other vulnerable allies, including:



Shahab-3 Ballistic Missile Range

- An Iron Dome-like system that stops short-range missiles;
- A medium-range missile defense system called “David’s Sling”(developed by Raytheon and Rafael);⁵
- A long-range missile defense called “Arrow” (developed by Boeing and Israel Aerospace Industries).⁶
- Congress can also continue to assist other countries, such as Turkey, in deploying Patriot-3 (PAC-3) anti-missile systems⁷, and can provide resources to lengthen the operational life of Saudi Arabia’s 300 PAC-2 systems.⁸

Military strikes now could exacerbate the problem, but all options must remain on the table.

- According to America’s top intelligence officer, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has not yet decided whether to proceed on developing a nuclear weapon, despite having a clandestine nuclear program since the 1980s.⁹
- Unless the U.S. provides indisputable proof that Iran is indeed weaponizing its nuclear program, it could be difficult to prod even normally supportive nations into backing a military strike. Such a strike would likely collapse the international coalition—including (to varying degrees) Russia and China—that support economic and technology-transfer restrictions.
- If we strike Iran, Tehran will likely bar nuclear inspectors from the country—as Iraq did in 1998—further limiting our ability to know whether they have secretly restarted their nuclear program.
- While the Iranians have been dragging their feet on negotiations, attacking them prematurely would close off this avenue. On the other hand, entirely removing the threat of a strike would lessen the pressure on the Iranians to negotiate in good faith.

MAKING THE CASE

We should strengthen our allies’ air defense systems to blunt Iran’s missiles.

MAKING THE CASE

The White House’s approach—that all options are on the table, including military force—is the right one.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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