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Century Foundation Releases New Report in Iran White Paper Series

A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult, But Not Impossible Policy Problem

New York City, December 13, 2006—Coercive strategies to block a determined Iran from developing a nuclear-weapons capability are unlikely to work, argues Barry Posen, but treating Iran’s nuclearization as the most dangerous of possible outcomes could lead to dangerous miscalculations.

Posen, a leading security and defense policy expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argues in, *A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult, But Not Impossible Policy Problem*, his provocative new report for The Century Foundation, that even if Iran acquired nuclear arms, negative impacts on peace and security in the region can be minimized.

While a nuclear Iran would be a setback to the nonproliferation regime, argues Posen, a strategy of containment and deterrence—which proved effective against vastly more formidable adversaries, including the Soviet Union—would effectively dampen the negative repercussions of a nuclear Iran. “Containment and deterrence is much resisted as a viable alternative” in the Washington political debate, writes Posen, but “such criticisms are not useful for policy analysis unless the viability of alternative strategies” is considered.

None of the options to prevent Iran’s nuclearization are promising. After assessing the options for economic coercion and military strikes, Posen concludes that sanctions powerful enough to force Iran’s hand are unlikely to win U.N. adoption, and that military options are both risky and counterproductive. A military strike could set back but not halt Iran’s nuclear program—and at the cost of strengthening the regime and providing “a potent political/ideological rationale for violence against the U.S. and its friends for many years to come.” Compared to these strategies, Posen argues that containment and deterrence is “likely to achieve U.S. strategic goals, and do so at lower risks and costs.”

In the report, Posen also dissects the various criticism of a containment strategy. Would a nuclear Iran be more likely to engage in reckless provocations, as some have argued? Posen shows that if the past is any indication, it is difficult to use nuclear weapons for strategic advantage and that either the United States or Israel could deter a nuclear Iran from using its arsenal. Moreover, argues Posen, the notion that Iran would pass nuclear weapons on to a terrorist group is far-fetched, since such action serves no strategic purpose, invites retaliation, and cannot be controlled. “It is,” he argues, “perhaps the most self-destructive thing that any nation state can do.”

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While an Iranian bomb would heighten proliferation risks by other nations, these challenges are manageable as well. Posen argues that the U.S. and its allies can take steps that would reduce these risks, including:

- Making it clear Iran's use of nuclear weapons, for blackmail or war, would be met with nuclear retaliation;
- Reinvigorating efforts to stabilize the Persian Gulf and the Middle East.
- Forgoing efforts to overthrow Iran's clerical regime.

Posen's analysis is a must read for anyone who wants to better understand America's interests and options vis a vis the Islamic Republic.

Barry R. Posen is director of the Security Studies and the Ford International Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he is affiliated with the Security Studies Program. He serves on the Executive Committee of Seminar XXI, an educational program for senior military officers and government officials in the national security policy community. He has written two books, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War* and *Nuclear Risks and The Sources of Military Doctrine*, which won two awards: The American Political Science Association's Woodrow Wilson Foundation Book Award and Ohio State University's Edward J. Furniss Jr. Book Award. His most recent article is "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of US Hegemony," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003).

A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult, But Not Impossible Policy Problem is part of a series of reports commissioned by The Century Foundation to inform the policy debate about Iran-related issues. Other reports in the series include:

Dealing with Tehran : Assessing U.S. Diplomatic Options toward Iran, by Flynt Leverett, senior fellow and director of the Geopolitics of Energy Initiative in the American Strategy Program, New America Foundation.

The End of the "Summer of Diplomacy": Assessing U.S. Military Options on Iran, by Sam Gardiner, Colonel, USAF (ret.)

Sanctions Against Iran: Key Issues, by Bruce Jentleson, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy Studies, Duke University (forthcoming)

Fundamentalists, Pragmatists. and the Rights of the Nation: Iranian Politics and Nuclear Confrontation, by Gareth Smyth, Tehran Bureau Chief, *Financial Times* (forthcoming)

The authors are available for interviews. Contact Christy Hicks hicks@tcf.org or (212) 452-7723.

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