

# NUCLEAR DECISION-MAKING IN IRAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR US NONPROLIFERATION EFFORTS

BY ARIANE TABATABAI  
AUGUST 2020



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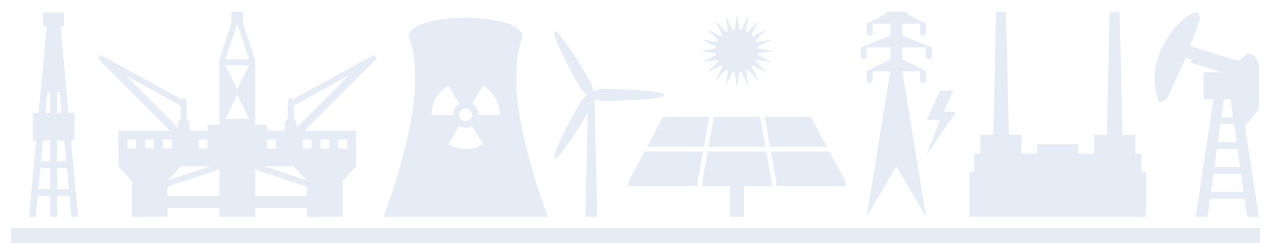
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# FOREWORD

Assessments of foreign policy tend to fall into one of two major camps: either they ascribe to a state's actions all of the characteristics of a unitary actor, in which there is a decision made and executed as designed; or they fixate on the minutiae of the internal politics and deal making that went into the decision, underscoring the complexity of decision-making but often losing the thread of what results. This is particularly pernicious when involving the actions of a state with opaque decision-making and where attribution of responsibility is often itself the subject of intense internal political debate and controversy, as is the case with Iran.

In this paper, Ariane Tabatabai seeks to pierce the veil of Iranian nuclear decision-making to both *explain* how decisions are reached and *identify* the effects of those decisions as a matter of Iranian state policy. This is, in many ways, an essential matter for those interested in understanding how Iran will decide—and *what* Iran may decide—to do in response to the continued stresses being imposed upon it by US-led international sanctions, especially when previous analysis has proven to be both overly optimistic (that Iran would meekly absorb the costs of US sanctions) and, at times, overly pessimistic (that Iran would withdraw from the nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action without delay). It is necessary to understand better how Iran reaches its decisions, particularly in the nuclear sphere, to be able to more accurately predict what it may choose to do next. This has utility in a variety of lines of work and study, but perhaps no more so than in the energy industry, which is both affected by—and has the power to affect in turn—Iranian decision-making.

For this reason, we commissioned this paper and commend it to you as an important source of knowledge on how Iran's decision-making process works, especially as relates to its nuclear weapons-relevant capabilities. Though the weapons program remains dormant, the way in which Iranian officials—and Iran as that unitary actor—think about these capabilities is an essential element of the story to come.

## **Richard Nephew**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran's nuclear program has stirred geopolitical tensions; roiled energy markets; and preoccupied policy makers, investors, NGOs, and academics for two decades. Despite assurances from Tehran that its nuclear activities have been peaceful, global concerns about Iran's ambitions to build a bomb remain. Three US administrations have tried to formulate a policy designed to keep Iran away from a nuclear weapon while academics have debated the merits of the existing scholarship in helping configure a sound response to the regime's plans. Global energy and financial systems are also implicated, as tensions around Iran's nuclear program have affected oil markets and investment decisions for over a decade.

Yet, the topic of Iran's nuclear decision-making is a relatively underdeveloped field, especially compared with a substantive body of scholarship and policy analysis pertaining to other aspects of Iran's foreign policy in general and its nuclear program in particular. As part of Columbia University's work on Iran's nuclear program, this paper explores how Tehran determines the direction of the country's nuclear program and its implications for US and international efforts to keep the Islamic Republic away from the bomb. To this end, the author, through research and firsthand interviews, seeks to answer the following questions in this paper: What drives Iran's nuclear thinking? Which key power centers draw the contours of the country's nuclear policy? Answering these questions is critical because as Iran continues to shrink the time needed to acquire enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon, the United States and the rest of the international community once again find themselves looking for effective ways to block the regime's pathways to the bomb.

Iran's nuclear decision-making process is messy and it is intricate. Key power centers within the regime and the supreme leader play a significant part in developing the framework within which decision-making occurs. However, major choices pertaining to the direction of the program—including whether to pursue a nuclear weapon capability or whether to negotiate limits to the country's nuclear program with Western and other counterparts—happen with buy-in from relevant actors across the political system. The following is a summary of other key findings related to Iran's nuclear decision-making process:

- The supreme leader's role is often to determine the framework within which various organizations can operate and the bottom lines, redlines, and acceptable outcomes in negotiations.
- A complex web of organizations—including the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches; several intelligence organizations; and the armed forces (both the Revolutionary Guards and Artesh) and streamlined through the Supreme National Security Council—engages in a bargaining process in a feedback loop with the supreme leader's office. In terms of order of importance, the supreme leader's office is followed by the executive branch (including the Foreign Ministry and the civilian side of intelligence) and the IRGC, with the legislative branch and judiciary playing relatively minor roles.



- Although parts of this process take place in the public eye (including via statements, public meetings and conferences, in the media, and on social media), much of it occurs behind closed doors and away from external observers.
- Specific organizations and power centers have some leeway to decide and execute minor actions, but for more significant decisions, system-wide consensus is required. For example, a bloc or organization cannot singlehandedly decide to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The high bar for system consensus on key and often controversial actions complicates efforts to change Iranian nuclear behavior and to affect its calculus.
- Just as when the system agrees upon and settles on a course of action it is difficult to overturn that consensus, the bargaining process and the disagreements among power centers afford the United States, and other interested parties, levers to curb certain components of Iran's nuclear program. For example, despite stated objectives of reaching one million Separative Work Units (SWUs), Iran does not have clear redlines on what is permissible within those confines—allowing the United States to seek concessions from it. The United States could also develop provisions while requiring technically significant concessions from Iran that are deemed less politically sensitive and visible in the country in exchange for high-profile offerings from the West.

Ultimately, Iran's fundamental decision about whether or not to negotiate with the United States and its partners and the regime's topline and bottom lines will be determined by the system and likely will not change regardless of whether talks resume during President Hassan Rouhani's tenure or after his successor has assumed power. Any difference will likely manifest itself in the conduct of the negotiations and rapport with the United States and other counterparts, how effectively the Iranian delegation negotiating with the US and its partners can navigate its own country's politics, and the specifics left to that team's discretion.





# INTRODUCTION

When Iranian revolutionaries toppled the US-aligned monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah (better known as the Shah), in 1979, they vowed to put an end to a number of initiatives he had undertaken with American support. In particular, they objected to the comprehensive military modernization projects and reforms the Shah's father, Reza Shah, had started and the Shah had carried on. Among these projects, the Iranian nuclear program—whose foundations the Shah had laid out with American aid provided as part of the Atoms for Peace initiative launched by US President Dwight Eisenhower—uniquely captured the imagination of the revolutionaries. As they saw it, this project was nothing but a waste of resources and, as Iran's future chief nuclear negotiator and later president, Hassan Rouhani, would characterize it, “great treason to the country.”<sup>1</sup> Revolutionary leaders contended that the Shah was deceived by the Americans—as they claimed he often was—into investing in an expensive and risky endeavor whose benefits would be seen in Washington not Tehran, much less Tabriz, Shiraz, or Esfahan.

But upon taking the reins of power, that nascent regime began to reverse a number of its formative revolutionary positions and, by doing so, committed to resuming or continuing a number of the Shah's initiatives—albeit without acknowledging that it was following the monarch's footsteps. During the 1980s, as Iran was engaged in a bloody eight-year war with neighboring Iraq—a war that Baghdad started and in which it used chemical weapons and targeted population centers—the Islamic Republic's leadership resumed the country's nuclear program.<sup>2</sup> Since then, every US administration has sought to curb Tehran's nuclear program by considering the full spectrum of American foreign policy options, ranging from negotiations to sanctions to military confrontation.

To understand which options would work and how the United States can best tackle the challenge posed by the Iranian nuclear program, practitioners must first and foremost understand how the Iranians think about their nuclear program. But few have attempted to map out how the Iranian political system translates into the security realm in general and nuclear decision-making in particular. This is in part due to the complexity of the Iranian political and security ecosystems and the difficulty of fully capturing their inner workings due to the limited information available to researchers in the open source. This paper explores Iranian nuclear decision-making and its implications for US efforts to keep the Islamic Republic away from the bomb. To this end, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: What drives Iran's nuclear thinking? Which key power centers draw the contours of the country's nuclear policy?

Beyond scholars and policymakers focused on Iran and its nuclear program, such understanding is critical for the global energy and financial systems. The standoff between the West and Tehran has held sway over oil markets for over a decade, causing price moves of various magnitudes, while corporate boardrooms, banks, and financial markets have pored over developments before making investment decisions. This paper seeks to provide these energy players and wider financial stakeholders with a clearer understanding of the process at



work behind the headline decisions—although it does not elucidate processes behind energy and finance decision-making, which fall outside the scope of this report, whose sole focus is the strategic decision-making behind the Iranian nuclear program.

After discussing methodology, this report will begin by presenting an overview of the history of the Iranian nuclear program and identifying the ideas drawing the contours of Iran’s national security thinking, before offering a treatment of Iran’s decision-making process and how key power centers and figures whose input shapes the country’s nuclear policy fit into this picture. The paper will then discuss this decision-making process in the context of Iran’s nuclear program broadly. It will finally assess the efficacy of various US instruments of power in molding Iranian views on nuclear issues.



# METHODOLOGY

The groundwork for this report was laid out during the 2013–15 nuclear talks leading to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with fieldwork conducted in Iran as well as locations hosting the negotiations between Iran and China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States (known together as the P5+1 or E3+3) and the European Union. The report relies on a number of semistructured interviews conducted during that period and the two years immediately following the JCPOA (until the US withdrawal from the deal on May 8, 2018). Finally, following the revelation of the nuclear archive uncovered by Israeli intelligence, some of the material shared in briefings informed this paper.

Nearly all the resources used in this paper—and indeed, all open source material on Iran’s nuclear program—suffer from a number of shortcomings, thus restricting our ability to offer a complete account of Iran’s nuclear history and its decision-making. Hence, a degree of humility in our knowledge of Iran’s nuclear program and the decision-making process pertaining to it is in order, as is a healthy dose of skepticism and critical thinking. The archive has a number of limitations. First, it is comprised of documents retrieved and selected by Israeli intelligence and does not provide a comprehensive and completely unbiased account of the Iranian nuclear program. Second, despite shedding some light on Iranian nuclear decision-making, the documents seen by the author do not provide a complete picture of the process and the extent of involvement and role played by key entities. Nevertheless, the archive’s material is useful in that it adds color to and fills in gaps in our knowledge of Iran’s nuclear history (though it should not be assessed without exercising caution).

For example, although it would be inconceivable for the individual occupying Iran’s highest office, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, not to have been involved in the decision-making process, the material uncovered by the archive as briefed to and seen by the author do not directly implicate the supreme leader. It is not clear whether such material simply does not exist due to Iranian cautiousness in linking the highest authority in the land to nuclear weapon-related efforts or if the specific batch of documents retrieved by and/or presented by the Israelis does not contain such information. The documents disclosed by Israeli intelligence and seen by the author indicate that permission was requested from and granted by Khamenei to undertake a certain action, but they do not establish or trace direct permission by Khamenei (for instance, through notes signed by him). The archive’s material does not exonerate Khamenei but does point to the limits of relying solely on it to establish a chain of custody and map out Iranian decision-making. The archive does, nonetheless, provide interesting insights into the history of the Iranian nuclear program previously unknown in the open source.

Similarly, interviews do not come without their own limitations. In this case, although some of the interviewees spoke on record, much of the material from these interviews is not for attribution. Many interviewees will remain anonymous in this report according to the guidelines on ethical academic research, although this decision does entail a number of trade-offs. Those whose assessments of the nuclear program, the negotiations, and the JCPOA are



included in this report include Iran's foreign minister and then chief nuclear negotiator, Javad Zarif; his deputies Majid Takht-e Ravanchi and Abbas Araghchi; a former Iranian representative in Vienna and to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Aliasghar Soltanieh; and the former head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) who started Iran's nuclear program under the Shah, Akbar Etemad.

Here, too, there are limitations to what these sources can unveil about the Iranian nuclear program and decision-making. For example, Iranian officials have long insisted on and off the record that their country's nuclear program did not comprise a military dimension. This claim has long been debunked by academic, intelligence, and international reporting on the topic. In the case of the fieldwork conducted by the author, the interviewees undoubtedly provided only the side of the story they were willing to share due to their ideological inclinations or able to communicate due to sensitivities and political constraints. They may also have characterized aspects of their own role in the process and their relationship to other players in a manner inconsistent with how they would be perceived by other relevant actors due to personal biases and a lack of knowledge of other parts of the system. Hence, one must carefully examine Iranian claims during interviews to separate talking points and propaganda from facts, as well as events and the perceptions thereof.

These interviews complement the author's examination of existing secondary and primary sources. As such, this report relies on Iranian primary and secondary sources, as well as US and international assessments of the Iranian nuclear program and intentions (including unclassified or declassified US government documents and intelligence assessments and reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency or IAEA), media reporting, and a comprehensive scholarly literature and think tank reports. Iranian sources considered include publications on the Iranian nuclear program (such as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's memoir and publications on the JCPOA by negotiators) and news reports from key Iranian state-affiliated outlets.



# A HISTORY OF THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Throughout the 20th century, generations of leaders sought to propel Persia (as the country was known until the 1930s) and, later, Iran into modernity. To this end, they took steps to build and reinvigorate the country's key institutions, chiefly its military—which had been weakened as a result of a lack of capacity and capabilities, foreign interference in the country's domestic affairs, and corruption and mismanagement.<sup>3</sup> As part of these efforts—and building on the foundations laid out by his father and predecessor, Reza Shah—the Shah sought to create a strong military worthy of what he viewed as the heir to a great civilization and empire and a rightful regional power during his tenure.<sup>4</sup> To this end, he started a partnership with the United States upon ascending to the throne in 1941, which provided the Iranian military with training, advice, and military technology, as well as assistance to establish a new intelligence organization.<sup>5</sup> Thanks to this partnership, by the time the revolutionaries overthrew the Imperial State of Iran and replaced it with the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the country had become one of the top military powers in the region and was gradually asserting itself beyond its borders—chiefly, via a direct military intervention in Oman to support the sultan's struggle against Communist rebels, and indirectly by covertly supporting Shias in Lebanon and the Kurds in Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

The Islamic Revolution turned back the clock on these military reforms and modernization efforts: The revolutionaries weakened their country's armed forces when at the height of revolutionary zeal, they purged the Iranian military (known as the Artesh) and created a new paramilitary group in the form of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the early days of the revolution. They also tore down the Iranian intelligence agency or the Organization of National Intelligence and Security (known by its Persian acronym, SAVAK), which they viewed as a US puppet designed to help suppress dissent. The implications of these steps became obvious during a bloody and devastating eight-year conflict, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), which started on September 22, 1980, when Saddam Hussein's Baghdad launched an attack on the Iranian Southwestern regions. The war began just months after the revolution and amid the hostage crisis—during which Iranian revolutionaries stormed the US embassy in Tehran and took members of the American diplomatic corps hostage for 444 days in 1979–81, prompting international condemnation and severing ties with the United States, which have not been restored to this day.

Having lost its key military supplier and partner and hollowed out its military and security apparatus, Tehran found itself at a disadvantage during the war. The conflict demonstrated the new regime's lack of conventional capabilities.<sup>7</sup> This coupled with Saddam's willingness to use unconventional means, particularly chemical weapons, during the war would lead Iranian political leaders and military planners to consider a wide array of options to turn the tide in their favor. Hence, during and following the war, Iran would invest in a number of unconventional tools and build a hybrid military doctrine based on asymmetric means of war and operations in the gray zone—somewhere between war and peace, and never rising to the threshold of an overt and direct conflict with conventionally and technologically superior adversaries, particularly the United States.<sup>8</sup>



After the war, understanding that they would likely not win an all-out war with one of their chief adversaries, the United States (whose assistance was key to the development of the military capabilities of Iran's regional rivals), Iranian political leaders and military planners prioritized deterrence above all. As a result, they expanded their missile program—which the Shah had started and which the Islamic Republic had resumed during the war—and their network of proxies and nonstate partners throughout the region.<sup>9</sup> Guiding their thinking was the clarity gained from the Iran-Iraq War that the country's conventional capabilities would simply not match any well-organized and well-equipped adversary, let alone the United States and its partners. Moreover, for centuries, generations of Iranian leaders had learned that their inability to deter adversaries would ultimately lead to catastrophic consequences for the nation, including the loss of sovereignty and territorial integrity, as had been the case on numerous occasions during the 19th century.

As part of their effort to build a deterrent—and despite tensions within the system about the morality and usefulness of this effort—the country's new leaders also revived the Shah's nuclear program, largely pursuing the same strategy he had undertaken: hedging. The Shah's nuclear thinking was twofold: He hoped to build a civil nuclear program while his country was in a position to invest oil revenues to secure its future and prepare for when the country needed new energy resources. At the same time, he had instructed the man in charge of his nuclear program and the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI), the European-educated Akbar Etemad, to explore developing weapons-related capabilities.

As Etemad recalled decades later, in 2014:

At the time, there were several reasons for Iran to start a nuclear program. Iran had a lot of money coming in. The idea was that, if today Iran can sell oil, and has oil, it needs to invest that money, that some of the oil had to be left for future generations. Nuclear energy was a good way to invest because it takes 20 to 30 years to pay off. You start to invest in it, and then after that time, it starts to show results.

But ... I wasn't sure if [the Shah] wanted energy only, or weapons too. So, I spoke to him and asked him what he wanted. I said: "I'll explain everything to you, and at the end, you can tell me what you want." ... For six months, I taught him everything from the atom, to reactors, and nuclear weapons. Then, after six months, I said, "Now that you know everything, what do you want me to do?" ... Then we spoke for two hours, about politics and the military. He said: "Today, we are the great regional power; we don't need anything. But if the balance [of power] changes in the region, if other countries get nuclear weapons, we need to have the capability for it." So, I said, "Would nuclear weapons be an option then?" He said, in English, I remember it exactly: "Why not?"

I understood that I had to prepare for that. That same day, without telling anyone, because Western countries would decrease their cooperation with us, I began the preparations. I didn't even tell anyone at the [AEOI] about this. We were trying to be ready.<sup>10</sup>

It is unlikely that Etemad's version of events is complete and fully accurate. Nevertheless, the



revolutionaries followed a similar trajectory after the regime's inception and following the start of the war. There was some debate within the system about whether Iran should pursue nuclear weapons, a civil nuclear program, neither, or both. And it is not fully apparent which components of the nuclear program Iranian decision makers viewed as directly tied to their weapons-related efforts, which (if any) were deemed only relevant to the civil program. For example, Etemad claimed that the organization he was overseeing did not explore working on the fuel cycle besides some experiments with laser enrichment.<sup>11</sup> Later, the country would pursue elements of the fuel cycle with a focus on its front end, uranium enrichment, a fact Etemad (like many other observers) viewed as providing evidence that Tehran was interested in obtaining a nuclear weapon.<sup>12</sup>

But inside the Iranian system, the topic of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons remained a source of contention. From the perspective of some key security officials and military planners, nuclear weapons would provide Iran and the regime with a deterrent, serving both chief objectives of national security and regime survival.<sup>13</sup> A key individual within the regime pushing for nuclear acquisition was Aliakbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1934–2017), who would become one of the most influential leaders in postrevolutionary Iran, occupying a number of different posts, including the office of the presidency. However, there was also significant dissent among some of the clerics. Notably, the founder of the Islamic Republic and its first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989), initially objected to Iran obtaining nuclear weapons as he believed this would be against the prescriptions of Shia jurisprudence.<sup>14</sup> He appears to have changed his mind at some point during the first half of the Iran-Iraq War (around 1984) due to the dissonance between the faith's prescriptions and the exigencies of warfare.<sup>15</sup> As the internal debates about the fate of Iran's nuclear program have not been recorded in public documents, we do not have a clear understanding of when and how this shift occurred. Nevertheless, ultimately, as those familiar with the deliberations have put it, the regime settled on acquiring nuclear weapons but only as a deterrent.<sup>16</sup>

There was also some discussion about the country's international obligations under the nonproliferation regime and its cornerstone, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). As Iran's representative to the IAEA, Aliasghar Soltanieh, would later put it:

After any change of system, you have to sit down and think about all the treaties. It wasn't just a change of government. It was the entire system. So, after the revolution, the questions were: Should we have nuclear energy and should we have nuclear weapons? Nuclear technology is the flagship and combination of all other tech and science, therefore, important to all progress. ... At the time, we could have left NPT, people would have understood it, and it would have been natural given the change. Most countries were not even members of the NPT yet, but Iran decided to stay a signatory.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, Iranian decision makers chose to remain in the NPT and revive their country's dormant energy program. However, as it had long been suspected and is now clear from the IAEA's reporting and the nuclear archives discovered by Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, the Islamic Republic also began working on a covert weaponization program by the late 1980s, known as project Amad.<sup>18</sup> What is not clear is whether the decision was made to



pursue a concerted nuclear weapons program or to undertake ad hoc efforts by leveraging what was available to the country at the time. It is also difficult to assess which elements of the program were seen by decision makers as designed for the civil nuclear program and which were introduced as part of its military component (and whether the division was apparent to those deliberating at a high level).

Iran first sought to complete the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP), which had been left unfinished with the advent of the revolution when its German supplier followed other Western companies and left the country. The existing sources do not conclusively tell us whether Iranian decision makers saw Bushehr as completely distinct from the weapons-related elements of their country's nuclear program and simply designed for power generation purposes, as a mere cover for their efforts to acquire the bomb, or as a potential component of their weapons-related research and development. But Bushehr would take decades to complete before becoming the region's first nuclear power plant; it would not be viewed as a proliferation concern unlike other components of Iran's nuclear program developed later.

The primary reason behind the effort to develop nuclear capabilities was likely to add a nuclear deterrent to the panoply of Iranian tools, including its ballistic missiles and nonstate partners. Iran appeared to be pursuing the same dual-track strategy as that of the Shah. Tehran would strive to acquire a civil nuclear program in the interest of an objective long advocated by Iranian statesmen from the Shah to Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq—who had championed the nationalization of oil and the concept of “negative equilibrium,” a strategy designed to end all reliance on foreign players as opposed to the policy of balancing long prevalent in Persia—and, now, the Islamic Republic.<sup>19</sup> This goal was to render the country less reliant on other powers, as well as on oil and fossil fuels. There was also a prestige-related factor at play as Iran sought to enter an exclusive club of nations equipped with the technology. In parallel, the country would pursue covert activities, designed to prepare the groundwork for a dash to the bomb if and when needed.

The father of the Pakistani nuclear weapons program, Abdul Qadeer (A. Q.) Khan traveled to Tehran and Bushehr in 1986 to meet with one of the key players in the IRGC, Mohammad Eslami, before officially visiting the country again a year later.<sup>20</sup> During a meeting at Tehran's Amir Kabir University of Technology, he reportedly advised the Iranians to pursue weaponization through uranium enrichment, rather than via Bushehr.<sup>21</sup> Cooperation between the two countries expanded in 1988 with the end of the Iran-Iraq War, enabling Tehran to allocate more resources to revive its nuclear program. Around this time, Tehran appears to have started project Amad in earnest. This shift was facilitated by a number of other developments in Iranian domestic politics, including the death of Khomeini, who despite agreeing to resume the country's nuclear activities appeared to have nonetheless never fully endorsed the pursuit of nuclear technology on religious grounds. Of equal significance was the ascendance of the pronuclear Rafsanjani to the presidency and his ability to play a growing role in the Iranian political ecosystem for the next few decades.

As the IAEA would later report, the Iranian nuclear program would proceed in three phases from there onward (although these are not completely distinct and clear cut). First, from the late 1980s until 2003, Iran would undertake a coordinated nuclear weapons program as part





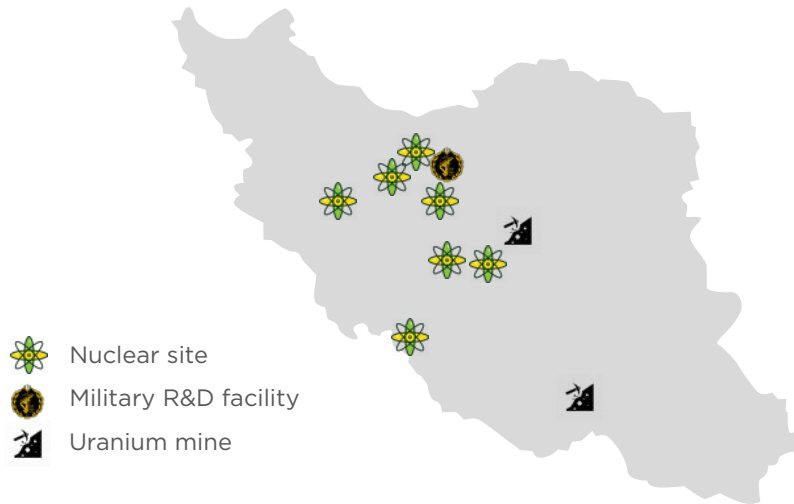
of project Amad. Second, it would conduct some feasibility studies in the 2003–09 timeframe. Finally, from 2009 onward, the US intelligence community has found that “Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities we judge necessary to produce a nuclear device.”<sup>22</sup> It remains unclear whether the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and to reimpose sanctions on Iran, as well as to kill the country’s top military commander, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, will affect the regime’s decision-making and drive it to end this third phase, ushering in a new stage of the Iranian nuclear program. Likewise, the impact on Iran’s nuclear decision-making of a series of explosions and fires occurring in military and nuclear facilities (Natanz among them); civilian sites such as factories, warehouses, and power plants; and ships off of the country’s coast in the Persian Gulf in the summer of 2020 remains unknown.

As part of the first phase and throughout the 1990s, Iran expanded its enrichment program and undertook work on a heavy water reactor, which would be able to produce plutonium. These activities were almost exclusively undeclared to the IAEA at the time. This phase of the covert Iranian nuclear program, which comprised all work under the Amad plan and which the IAEA has characterized as a “coordinated” nuclear weapon development program, ended in the early 2000s—though the facilities built in that period and some of the activities related to them, including building the heavy water reactor and enrichment, have continued. At that time, the nuclear program appeared more like a liability than a tool enhancing security and deterrence.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, by 2003, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the political wing of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MeK), then designated by the United States and Europe as a terrorist organization, had revealed Iran’s covert facilities, and the United States had invaded Iraq on the grounds that Saddam was pursuing weapons of mass destruction. The breadth and depth of the A. Q. Khan network’s activities had been exposed and was essentially being dismantled.

Now sandwiched between Afghanistan and Iraq, two countries with significant US military presence and seemingly next on the George W. Bush administration’s list of candidates for regime change, Iran moved to the second phase of its postrevolution nuclear development, which lasted until 2009. At the same time, however, the combination of the regional landscape and the revelations of Iranian covert nuclear activities also triggered diplomatic pressure, mainly from Europe, which prompted the first round of the nuclear talks (2003–05). In 2003, Fereydoun Abbasi, a nuclear scientist who was a key player in the Iranian nuclear weapons program and later served as the head of AEOI, noted that “we should make a distinction between ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ activities.”<sup>24</sup> During this phase, Iran conducted “feasibility and scientific studies” and pursued “the acquisition of certain relevant technical competences and capabilities.”<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 1:** Iranian facilities linked to its nuclear program



Sources: BBC's "Iran's key nuclear sites," July 14, 2015; United States Institute of Peace, "The Iran Primer," Oct. 6, 2010

As noted previously, since the end of that period, the US intelligence community has repeatedly assessed that "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities we judge necessary to produce a nuclear device."<sup>26</sup> However, it has also evaluated that "Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons, in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons."<sup>27</sup> The 2019 US Department of State Compliance Report noted that "Iran's efforts to retain records from its past nuclear weapons program, the preservation of which is now public knowledge thanks to Israel's seizure and disclosure of much of this information—as well as Iran's steps to keep former weapons program scientists employed on weaponization-relevant dual-use technical activities, and under the continued leadership of the former head of that program, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh—suggest that Iran preserved information from its historical efforts to aid in any future decision to pursue nuclear weapons, if a decision were made to do so."<sup>28</sup> This again highlights the fact that these phases may not be as distinct from one another.

Nevertheless, this period also saw two rounds of intensive diplomatic efforts to curb Iran's nuclear program. First, in 2003–2005, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (known together as the EU3 or E3) led an unsuccessful process aiming to curb Iran's nuclear activities and, later, in 2012–15, joined by the rest of the P5+1 and led by the United States, they negotiated the JCPOA. This second round came on the heels of US-led international sanctions and events that almost brought the United States (and Israel) to the brink of kinetic strikes against the Iranian nuclear infrastructure. The combination of these measures undertaken under US leadership by the international community, chiefly the P5+1, were critical to building leverage to curb Iran's nuclear program.



# CORE CONCEPTS OF IRANIAN STRATEGIC THINKING

## Deterrence

The US intelligence community's assessments of Iran's nuclear thinking today highlight the continuity in the pre- and postrevolution periods. Iran's historical experiences have largely framed the country's security narrative, threat perceptions, and policy responses to specific crises and challenges. Iranian officials often refer to such events as the Iran-Iraq War in international fora to explain their behavior. The war highlighted Iran's vulnerability and the extent and significance of its conventional shortcomings.<sup>29</sup> The conduct of that war made clear to Iranian decision makers and military planners that force-on-force conflict with the United States would likely not end well for their country.<sup>30</sup>

In a rare interview with a news outlet in fall 2019 (and one of his last exchanges with the press), then IRGC-Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimani, also noted the importance of the 1991 Gulf War and the post-9/11 US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as key in shaping Iranian threat perceptions and views of US power:

Following Saddam's attack against Kuwait in 1991 and subsequently, America's invasion and Saddam's defeat, a military deposit formed in our region, which led to the deployment of U.S. forces. But since 9/11, due to the two heavy invasions that America led (of Afghanistan and Iraq), nearly 40 percent of the armed forces at America's disposal directly entered our region and, later, during this time and due to the replacements and changes that have occurred, even led to the presence of the reserves and the National Guards, meaning that more than 60 percent of America's military ... entered our region.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, Tehran designed a doctrine based on deterrence, which sought to raise the costs of targeting the nation through mostly unconventional means and force multipliers such as its missile capability.<sup>32</sup> In the event that deterrence would fail and the US initiated a military effort aimed at regime change, Iran would opt for a war of attrition: "The country's military doctrine defies simple categorization into offensive, defensive, or deterrent models. It is designed to deter adversaries and retaliate if deterrence fails."<sup>33</sup> As the Iranians see it, if their country is to repel potential future aggression, it can only do so using its *own* unconventional capabilities. As the wars of the past centuries (going back to the 18th century) have shown, the country cannot rely on treaties and agreements, international laws and institutions, or great powers' assurances to secure itself.

## Self-Reliance

For Iran, fundamental assumptions about military power include the idea that the country must remain a force to be reckoned with in its region and the importance of deterrence, as well as the notions of self-reliance, the nation's ability to stand on its own two feet to safeguard its security and interests, and a severe distrust of the international order and the



great powers.<sup>34</sup> As Iranian officials often remind their US, European, and Arab counterparts—and as we will see later—the Iranians believe that their country’s security cannot and is not provided by or “purchased” from others.<sup>35</sup> In other words, unlike some of its neighbors, which outsource their security, Tehran tries to provide for its own security and defense needs and has placed an emphasis on building capacity indigenously.

Iranians have learned the hard way that their military is no match for great powers. Reza Shah and the Shah both tried to build conventional capabilities but ultimately failed to render their country less vulnerable. By the late 1970s, Iran had a large military, supported by one of the world’s two superpowers and equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and technology. But it remained largely vulnerable to foreign powers. Hence, the revolutionaries decided to adopt an entirely different approach. In the words of Foreign Minister Javad Zarif:

If you look at our region, there are different countries that get their legitimacy, authority, power and, for some, even their internal legitimacy from their engagement with the outside [world]. They’re either under a military umbrella or in need of protection and that is how they present themselves [on the international stage]; from the protection of weapon purchases to other kinds of protection. The only country that has been able to stand on its own two feet and make progress despite foreign pressure is the Islamic Republic.<sup>36</sup>

Although they cannot be taken at face value, the Iranian arguments about the need to develop an indigenous nuclear program in general and enrichment capabilities in particular have largely rested on the premise of self-reliance. And although these themes do not gain traction with Western audiences, they do resonate within the Iranian populace and even with some other countries. According to Iranian officials, Iranians relearned the lesson that their country must stand on its own two feet following the revolution, when Iran was denied access to external suppliers. One episode is particularly relevant in this context and brought up in nearly every interview conducted by the author (not just by current officials but even critics of the regime). In the 1970s, several European nations formed EURODIF, a conglomerate designed to provide European nonnuclear weapon states under the NPT with enriched uranium for civil use while minimizing the risk and prospect of nuclear weapon proliferation. The endeavor was based in France, a nuclear weapon state under the NPT with an advanced nuclear infrastructure, which helped provide the partner countries (all nonnuclear weapon states) with the fuel needed for their civil nuclear program while minimizing the proliferation concerns of developing a fuel cycle infrastructure indigenously. These nations would buy into the joint venture, and France would enrich uranium and sell it to them.

When Sweden sold its share to Iran, the country became the only non-European partner in the arrangement at the time. The Shah invested \$1 billion in 1974 to help with the construction of the plant, which would grant it access to 10 percent of the enriched uranium.<sup>37</sup> After the Shah was deposed and the revolutionaries took the reins of power in Iran, the country withdrew from the venture, and with the war starting, its nascent nuclear infrastructure crumbled.<sup>38</sup> In court, Iran argued that EURODIF should issue a repayment to the country as no uranium was transferred to Iran.<sup>39</sup> According to the Iranians, the contract was not between the Shah and the French government but Iran and France. For its part, concerned about supplying the new



revolutionary regime with nuclear technology and fissile material (especially given Iranian support for terrorist groups throughout the decade), Paris contested the claims: the Iranians, the French argued, should pay damages to compensate French companies hurt by the sudden abrogation of the contract.<sup>40</sup>

Later, when the revolutionaries decided to resume the nuclear program, Iran sought to revive its cooperation with EURODIF. It was, however, unable to return into the arrangement, and not only did Tehran never receive any enriched uranium and had to wait over a decade to settle the matter in court, but France repaid part of the debt, and Iran paid damages to French companies.<sup>41</sup> As the Iranians tell the story, it was an important driver behind their country's decision to develop an indigenous enrichment program. Although the lessons learned from the episode may have factored into the decision-making, it is clear that this was far from the only reason why Iran pursued enrichment starting in the 1980s, as military considerations also came into play. Etemad explained it thusly: "In the first few years [of the Islamic Republic], the [AEOI] was destroyed. The theory, at that point, like many other things at that time, was that the United States had imposed nuclear energy on us. ... They [the Islamic Republic] went and bought centrifuges from Pakistan, and tried to enrich Uranium. ... From the beginning, they wanted to have all the options. ... I'll tell you why I say this. The reason is that they only went after enrichment. Nothing else, just enrichment."<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, the EURODIF experience shaped the contours of some of Iran's decisions regarding its nuclear activities and, perhaps more pertinently, the nuclear talks. In both rounds of nuclear negotiations, the Iranians rejected "zero enrichment," arguing that they would need to preserve what they claim is their "inalienable right" to enrich under the NPT—though this is a contested interpretation of the treaty. During the second round of nuclear talks, the Iranian side would develop the concept of "practical needs" or how much enriched fissile material it would require to fuel its reactors should international suppliers once again fail to deliver their end of the bargain as they did during the EURODIF episode.<sup>43</sup>

## Asymmetric Warfare

The core pillars of Iran's defense thinking lie in its belief that it must deter adversaries from attacking Iranian national and regime interests while ensuring that if deterrence fails, the country is equipped with a means of denying the adversary a win. In the context of deterrence, Iran had sought to develop a nuclear capability while building up its missile and proxy forces. But unable to obtain a nuclear capability and given its security needs stemming from its adversarial relationship with the United States and regional rivalries, the country has adopted a predominantly asymmetric approach to warfare. This allows Iran to compete with nuclear-armed and conventionally superior adversaries, such as the United States and Israel.<sup>44</sup>

As Zarif explained, "[Our] view of foreign policy must be a comprehensive one. What has created power for the Islamic Republic is the asymmetric factor. Although other factors of power exist elsewhere. The Islamic Republic has made considerable progress in the material elements of power, but it is still lacking superiority vis-à-vis other regional players in an equation, especially international actors. But where the Islamic Republic has a special advantage is in the Islamic Revolution's discourse, one based on self-reliance



and independence.”<sup>45</sup>

Iran’s security needs and concerns have also led an often isolated and conventionally inferior Iran to seek to avoid direct conflict with these adversaries, instead leveraging nonstate actors for deterrence and to assert influence.<sup>46</sup> This view also entails efforts to build various key defense programs, including nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction programs, as well as missile, space, drone, and cyber programs.<sup>47</sup> These programs are all designed to increase the cost of targeting Iran for its adversaries, while lowering the costs associated with deterrence and defense for the country.



# IRANIAN NUCLEAR DECISION-MAKING

## The Islamic Republic's Decision-Making Process

Tehran's security policies are the result of intricate bargaining games and the sum of the outputs of a complex web of institutions within the political and security establishments.<sup>48</sup> This web is comprised of the supreme leader's office; the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches; several intelligence organizations; and the armed forces—both the IRGC and Artesh—and streamlined through the Supreme National Security Council. In terms of order of importance, the supreme leader's office is followed by the executive branch (including the Foreign Ministry and the civilian side of intelligence) and the IRGC, with the legislative branch and judiciary playing relatively minor roles. Ultimately, these processes lead to system-wide decisions on the trajectory of the country's nuclear program and the nature and scope of it. This is not to say that consensus is necessary for more minor decisions, particularly those taken in the technical and operational realms and which are less significant in their strategic implications. Some decisions appear to be made when buy-in from smaller, immediately relevant entities is secured. However, major steps taken on the contours of Iran's nuclear program are the result of system-wide decisions.

In other words, decisions made to accelerate certain nuclear activities and the degree of compliance with international obligations are not the result of hard-liners' attempts to undermine or humiliate moderates as some observers claim during key junctures but are rather system-wide outputs. This does not imply that Iranian decision-making is monolithic or even purely rational. Infighting and debates can be robust despite the limits imposed by the system. For example, Iran's very adherence to the NPT has been a subject of debate within the system, as have questions pertaining to the country's cooperation with the IAEA, the need for domestic enrichment and even nuclear power, and the timing and scope of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program. But should Iran choose to withdraw from the NPT, kick out international inspectors and dial down its cooperation with the IAEA, or accept to extend the sunsets on its enrichment program in future negotiations with the United States, it would do so after building consensus and as a unitary state. This decision-making is not always purely rational or driven by national interests. In fact, many of Iran's decisions are driven by its perceptions of its historical experiences and feelings associated with them.<sup>49</sup>

That Iran's security output is defined by the internal push and pull between different organizations and power centers is critical. Each of these institutions has its own subculture, defined as "a subsection of the broader strategic community with reasonably distinct beliefs and attitudes on strategic issues, with distinct and historically traceable analytical traditions."<sup>50</sup> In Iran, some of these organizations predate the Islamic Republic and go back decades or even centuries; others were created during or after the revolution. As a result of the redundancies in Iran's power structure, different organizations with similar or overlapping mandates can experience tensions and compete for resources and influence. This colors their deliberations internally and engagement with other organizations. Moreover, the history and culture of each organization come into play in these bargaining games and feed into the contours of the country's policies. For example, while the Artesh holds its roots in Imperial



Iran, the IRGC was a bottom-up creation by the revolutionaries. The Artesh was seen as beholden to the nation and not the nascent regime, as it demonstrated during the revolution that it “loath[ed] confront[ing] the Iranian people,” even after its leadership handed the Artesh to the revolutionaries.<sup>51</sup>

As a result, these two arms of Iran’s forces have distinct subcultures, which, in turn, shape their beliefs and attitudes on security issues. And while most of Iran’s security apparatuses were created after the revolution, many were established on the ashes of the security organizations of the prerevolution era. For instance, Iran created the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) in 1983. But the ministry succeeded the SAVAK. The revolutionaries dismantled the SAVAK upon seizing power. But before long, they realized that governing a country and tackling a foreign adversary on the battlefield and domestic threats on the streets of various cities required a capable intelligence agency. As a result, they first created ad hoc committees (known as *komīteh*, in Persian) tasked with intelligence and counterintelligence, before establishing MOIS (while developing parallel and redundant organizations tasked with intelligence and counterintelligence, including the IRGC-intelligence unit and the law enforcement or NAJA’s intelligence) and building capacity by granting SAVAK operatives immunity to help ensure a smooth transition.<sup>52</sup>

This complex web of organizations engages in a messy bargaining process, some of which takes place in the public sphere but much of which remains hidden from external observers. The Islamic Republic’s national security decisions result from this process. Each of these organizations is, in turn, divided into a number of different entities. As a result, far from a top-down exercise by a single individual, Iran’s decision-making process is, in fact, the outcome of intense feedback loops within and between different power centers. That said, the supreme leader no doubt plays a critical role in framing the national security discourse and forming the framework within which policies are devised and implemented. Hence, the supreme leader’s veto power grants him the ability to remove any item he does not wish to see executed from the deliberations agenda—although Khamenei has revealed himself to be reluctant to use his veto power unless he seemingly viewed the matter at hand as absolutely critical, an approach that his successor may or may not adopt.

Understanding this decision-making process is important for several reasons. Practical considerations make it critical to understand how Iran’s policy outputs are shaped in order to identify pressure points in future efforts to curb the Iranian nuclear program in the context of the country dialing down its JCPOA implementation or perhaps even leaving the agreement or the NPT. Moreover, pinpointing the players involved in establishing security policies is key to comprehending what concepts and considerations shape decision makers’ calculations. Scholars, policy circles, and media outlets have attempted to shed light on the Iranian political system for decades.<sup>53</sup> And during each major Iranian political event, including presidential and parliamentary elections, charts of the country’s political system emerge again.

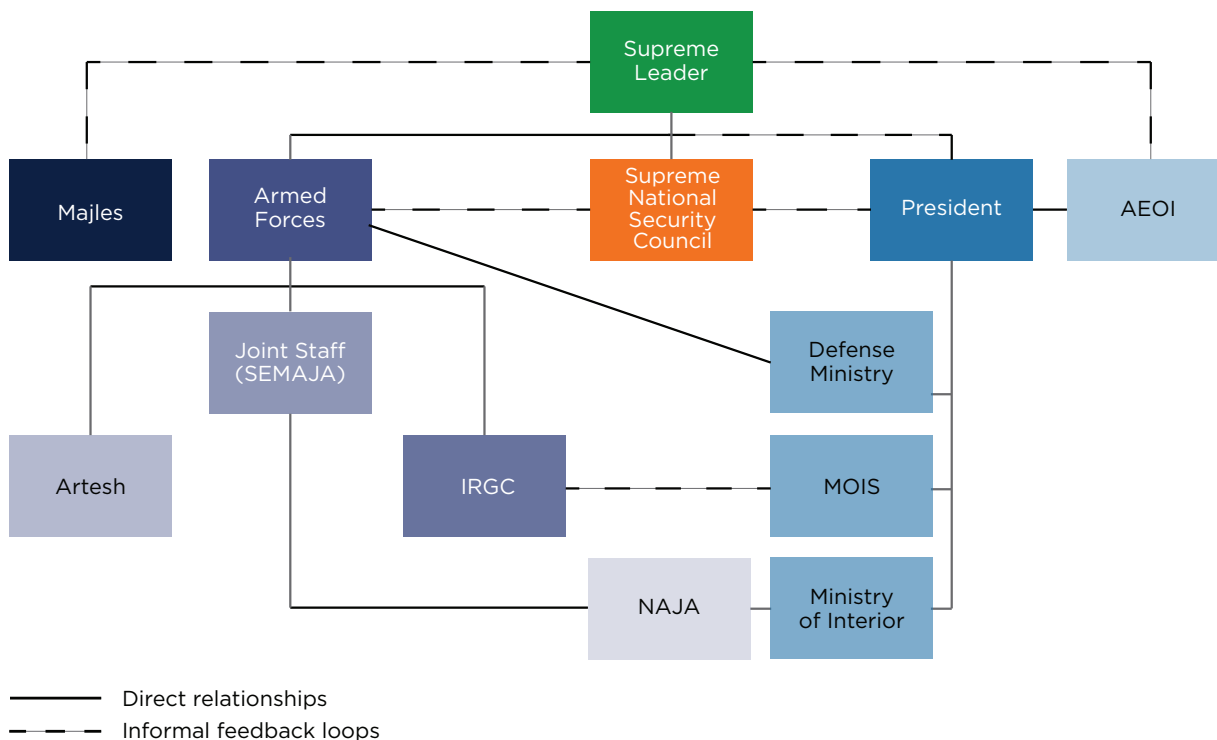
In the context of security decision-making, the supreme leader’s role is often to determine the framework within which these organizations can operate and the bottom lines, redlines, and acceptable outcomes. This is not a one-sided process, and in establishing these redlines and bottom lines, the supreme leader also consults other power centers.<sup>54</sup> The supreme leader provides the green light to pursue a course of action and establishes a framework within





which policymaking takes place. The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)—composed of representatives from all key power centers within the regime and tasked with formulating Iran’s strategic interests to protect national security—turns this framework into an “actionable” policy plan.

**Figure 2:** Iran nuclear decision-making process and power centers



**IRGC** (Hossein Salami, commander in chief)

- Provides some facilities and assists procurement efforts
- In charge of missile program (used in potential nuclear weapon development)

**AEOI** (Aliakbar Salehi)

- Responsible for overseeing nuclear program
- Provides technical advice on nuclear capabilities needed and implements those steps

**Supreme Leader** (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei)

- Defines framework within which decision-making takes place
- Veto power over all programs and initiatives undertaken in defense and security
- Lay out redlines for negotiations

**SNSC** (Ali Shamkhani)

- Feedback loop to build coherent process involving different power centers to streamline decision-making and formalize decisions

**Majles** (Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf\*)

- Legislative process provides checks on executive branch decisions
- Turns into law key redlines

**President and Cabinet** (Hassan Rouhani)

- Appoints cabinet, including defense and foreign ministers
- Since Rouhani’s election in 2013, MFA has taken the lead on nuclear negotiations
- Ministry of Defense involved in nuclear weapons-related components of nuclear program
- MOIS involved in weapons development efforts

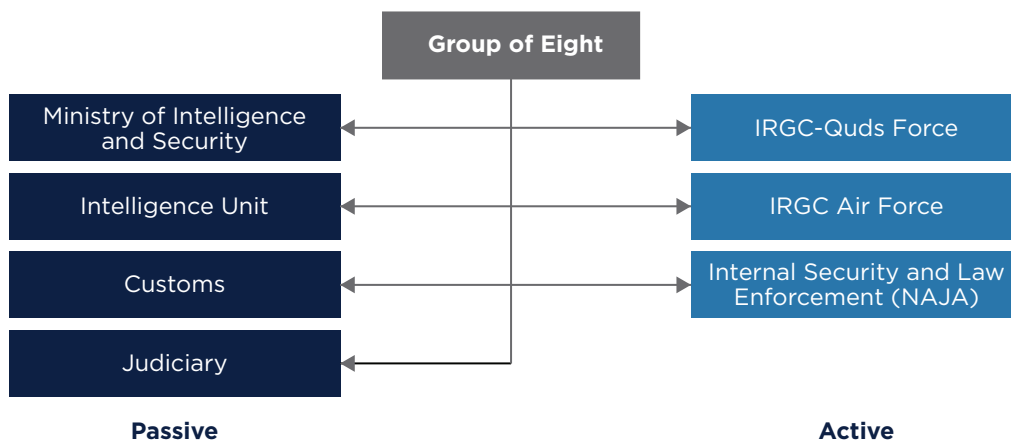
\*Note: Qalibaf succeeded Ali Larijani as Majles speaker following the 2020 parliamentary elections.  
 Source: Author’s compilation



This policy is then implemented by the executive branch, the president and his cabinet. The IRGC often follows the supreme leader, and in certain specific areas, along with the executive branch, it turns this policy into strategy and extricates operational and tactical level actionables from it. The legislative branch or the Majles, whose powers are fairly limited, is meant to check the executive branch. Parliamentarians seek to hold the executive branch accountable. The parliament is also responsible for turning specific policies into laws, whose legality and compatibility with the constitution must be assessed by the Guardian Council.<sup>55</sup> The council is charged with assessing the policies presented by the executive branch and laws drafted by the legislator against the regime’s fundamental beliefs and redlines.

Several key power centers play an important role in the Iranian nuclear decision-making process. Israeli intelligence assessments indicate a degree of streamlining in Iran’s decision-making process, which included the establishment of the Supreme Council for Advanced Technologies in 1998.<sup>56</sup> The council included then President Mohammad Khatami, then SNSC secretary Rouhani, then Minister of Defense Ali Shamkhani, and then AEOI head Reza Aghazadeh.<sup>57</sup> According to documents released by Israeli intelligence, Aghazadeh signed an agreement with Shamkhani, which provided for coordination and information sharing between the AEOI and the Ministry of Defense (and the president’s office), as well as the stipulation of specific actions to be undertaken in enrichment.<sup>58</sup> This included a provision granting the Ministry of Defense the authority to enrich uranium from 3 percent to above 90 percent.<sup>59</sup> Beyond these two organizations, a number of other organizations are outlined in the Iranian documents retrieved by the Israelis. “The Group of Eight,” as Iranian documents refer to them, consists of active and passive members. The former comprises the IRGC-Quds Force, IRGC Air Force, and Iranian law enforcement or *Niro-ye Entezami-e Jomhoori-e Eslami-e Iran* (NAJA). The passive members include the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the intelligence unit, the judiciary, and customs.<sup>60</sup>

**Figure 3:** Makeup of “Group of Eight”



Source: Nuclear archive



## The Decision-Making Process and Nuclear Policy

### Nuclear Talks and the JCPOA

Given their importance and sensitive nature, the 2012–15 nuclear negotiations leading to the JCPOA illustrate this map perfectly. The “Iran talks,” as they were known, were shaped by internal bargaining at home as much as they were by the negotiations taking place around the table with the P5+1. Khamenei provided the green light for the nuclear talks to commence and set the framework within which various organizations could operate. This framework was composed of a number of loose “redlines,” which determined Iran’s bottom lines, while granting the negotiators some room to maneuver and sell the deal domestically, including to the hardliners.<sup>61</sup> There were broadly two sets of redlines guiding the nuclear negotiations. First, Iran returned to the negotiating table with a set of assumptions about the future of its nuclear program, sanctions relief, and other items its counterparts could introduce in the talks, including the country’s missile activities. Second, a number of redlines were later added to these in an ad hoc manner to tackle new issues emerging in the negotiations.

Both sets of redlines appear to have been formulated through a feedback loop created between key power centers involved in the nuclear program—including in consultation with the AEOI, Ministry of Defense, MOIS, key IRGC affiliates, and the SNSC. There is limited visibility over how these redlines were formed. The first set of redlines existed prior to the beginning of the nuclear negotiations. This set of redlines was created to meet both Iran’s “practical needs” in its overt nuclear energy program and what the Group of Eight likely identified as the needs for the covert weapons-related activities should they be continued. They included

- a narrow mandate focused exclusively on the nuclear issue (not missile or regional activities);
- preserving the Iranian nuclear program, including research and development (R&D) and the enrichment program;
- keeping key facilities, particularly Fordow, open and functioning.

All in all, Khamenei issued 11 redlines for the nuclear talks at the outset. However, some were clearly symbolic and were disregarded within weeks of the negotiations resuming. Others were actual bottom lines that Iranian negotiators could not compromise. For example, although Khamenei had ordered broadly that the Iranian delegation “should not accept any impositions from the other side,” Tehran did make a number of concessions by accepting limits on its enrichment program and R&D, as well as enhanced verification and monitoring. Iranian negotiators were able to sell the deal at home as meeting these requirements, by noting that the country had not accepted any limitations that would be considered impositions and that the deal was entirely reciprocal and voluntary.

Other redlines were overcome thanks to creative solutions that would allow the United States and its partners to have confidence that the proliferation risks posed by Iranian activities were limited while allowing Tehran to sell them using the framework established by Khamenei. For



instance, Fordow remained open, meeting Khamenei's bottom line, but it was repurposed to become an R&D site, meeting the United States and its partners' proliferation concerns. In some cases, the Iranian side did not have a clear and coherent idea of its wishes and redlines. That was notably the case in the context of sanctions relief, which by some Iranian officials' own admission in interviews was an area in which the delegation was not proficient.

In the case of the second set of redlines, some instances appeared to be discussed in public and created as the negotiations progressed—that was the case when Iranian negotiators and their American counterparts were reportedly debating the possibility of the emerging agreement granting IAEA inspectors access to military facilities and facilitating interviews with Iranian nuclear scientists. Khamenei appeared in public rejecting both notions, arguing that this would be a breach of national sovereignty, jeopardize national defense secrets, and put at risk Iranian scientists (some of whom had been assassinated in years prior).<sup>62</sup> These redlines seemed to be formulated as exigencies emerged during the negotiations.

The SNSC turned this framework into an “actionable” policy plan, which was executed by the president and his Foreign Ministry, as well as the AEOL. The IRGC followed Khamenei's lead and cautiously endorsed the nuclear talks.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, in consultation with the Foreign Ministry, the IRGC executed policies to facilitate the nuclear talks and, later, implement the JCPOA—for example, by ensuring the quick release of the US sailors whose ships had crossed into Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf close to an IRGC base on Farsi Island in January 2016.<sup>64</sup>

However, while it was helping the talks on some level, the IRGC also played a counterproductive role on other fronts. For example, the Guards put pressure on the government by arresting dual nationals, particularly US citizens, to make sure the talks did not lead to a broader and more fundamental normalization with America. The Majles, for its part, became a platform where the legislative and executive branches debated the policies despite playing a fairly minor role, forcing the president and the Foreign Ministry to be accountable by presenting quarterly reports on the JCPOA's implementation. The Iran talks were driven and shaped by several key tenets of Iranian strategic culture.

First, from Iran's perspective, returning to the negotiating table was not just an economic matter; it was also a national security priority. As Rouhani and others would often argue during the talks and, later, to defend their legacy even after Trump's withdrawal from it and in light of the maximum pressure campaign, Iran had to choose between negotiating and war. In that sense, Tehran agreed to return to the table to “deter” the adversary—the United States and Israel, which were contemplating military action to curtail Iran's nuclear program shortly before the talks started in 2012.<sup>65</sup> Second, Iran also initiated the diplomatic process due to the belief that political and economic isolation had limited the country's ability to hold what Iranians viewed as its rightful place in the world.<sup>66</sup> Third, the country's belief that it must be a force to be reckoned with, combined with its conviction that it should be able to stand on its own two feet and be self-reliant in key areas, drew the contours of the nuclear talks.<sup>67</sup> Lastly, the notion that Iran could not trust foreign powers was a powerful force during the process.<sup>68</sup>

As noted above, Khamenei captured these tenets of Iranian thinking and turned them into redlines for the negotiators, providing the framework for the talks.<sup>69</sup> The SNSC oversaw the process and ensured that the negotiators were operating within the framework set by



Khamenei. The IRGC worked in tandem with the supreme leader’s office to ensure the formal negotiations remained contained and did not overreach and spill into other areas—even though, on the sidelines, the negotiators did frequently cover regional developments and the fate of the hostages held in Iran.<sup>70</sup> The Majles, too, sought to check the president and his cabinet and put pressure on the executive.<sup>71</sup> It is critical to note that while this description may indicate a “whole of government approach,” as witnessed in the United States, the reality of Iranian decision-making can be messier.

As then Deputy Foreign Minister and negotiator Majid Ravanchi put it during the final stretch of the nuclear talks, “The agreement has to be submitted to the Majles by the Foreign Ministry ... we have to work within the framework set up by the Majles. The Majles is very active on this. As the government, we have to listen to the Majles, and they give us the framework to operate within.”<sup>72</sup> Although Ravanchi was likely exaggerating the extent of the Majles’ authority to shape the course of events for domestic and external consumption, the Majles did play a role in checking the executive—albeit often more symbolically so. Taking all these checks into consideration, the Foreign Ministry, assisted by the AEOI, negotiated and crafted the nuclear deal with the P5+1, before taking each component of the emerging deal back to Tehran and each of these centers of power and negotiating them there.<sup>73</sup> The negotiators would then return to New York, Lausanne, Geneva, or Vienna, and present the output to their counterparts and repeat the process.

### Post-JCPOA Withdrawal

Following President Trump’s announcement that he was withdrawing the United States from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, many speculated that Tehran, too, would leave the deal. However, the day after the US decision became public, Khamenei indicated otherwise: Iran would be preparing itself for the collapse of the agreement, but it would not withdraw from it.<sup>74</sup> Instead, Tehran would work with the Europeans (as well as China and Russia) to find a way forward on sustaining the JCPOA without the United States.<sup>75</sup> Having laid out the framework within which the country would execute its post-US JCPOA withdrawal nuclear policy, Khamenei instructed the AEOI to determine what steps to take to prepare for a potential collapse of the deal. The AEOI would implement these steps. In consultation with the SNSC, the AEOI identified these steps and began to lay out the groundwork for their execution.

On May 8, 2019—which marked the anniversary of the US withdrawal from the deal, and responding to the administration’s maximum pressure campaign, whose most recent target was the IRGC with its designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)—Rouhani made some public remarks, explaining Iran’s next steps with regard to the JCPOA.<sup>76</sup> He noted that the era of “strategic patience,” in which Iran implemented the JCPOA and pursued negotiations with Europe, was over. The remarks introduced a series of incremental and largely reversible steps, designed to force the United States into dialing down pressure on Iran and to compel Europe to step up its efforts to shield Iran from US sanctions.<sup>77</sup> This decision was made in the SNSC and as part of the broader Iranian strategy to counter and undermine the US maximum pressure campaign—which included military efforts in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, as well as the threat of action by proxies in Iraq.<sup>78</sup> And Iran’s measures were proposed by the AEOI, approved by the SNSC, and implemented by the AEOI.<sup>79</sup> Now, with



Iran once again under yet more pressure, whether or not the country further dials down its implementation of the JCPOA will be determined in a similar fashion.

**Figure 4:** Key players in Iran’s nuclear program

**Ayatollah Ali Khamenei**

President (1981-89)

Supreme Leader (1989-present)

- Oversaw genesis of post 1979 nuclear program as president

**Aliakbar Salehi**

AEOI head (2013-present)

Foreign Minister (2011-13)

- Played key role in JCPOA talks
- Advised and implemented post-US withdrawal JCPOA violations

**Ayatollah Aliakbar Rafsanjani**

President (1989-97)

Chairman of Expediency Council and Assembly of Experts (1989-2017 and 2007-11)

- Played key role in decision to resume nuclear activities after the revolution, and likely in pushing Iran toward nuclear weapons research and development until 2003

**Ali Shamkhani**

Rear Admiral in IRGC Navy

Minister of Defense (1997-2005)

SNSC Secretary (2013-present)

- One of key players in nuclear weapons program

**Mohammad Javad Zarif**

UN Ambassador (2002-07)

Foreign Minister (2013-present)

Chief nuclear negotiator (2013-15)

- Assisted Rouhani in 2003-05 talks
- Chief nuclear negotiator (2013-15)
- JCPOA champion

**Ali Larijani**

Majles Speaker (2008-20)

SNSC Secretary (2005-07)

- Played key role in facilitating JCPOA success
- Was succeeded by Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf as Majles speaker following the 2020 parliamentary elections

**Hassan Rouhani**

President (2013-21)

• Oversaw 2012-15 talks

• Chief nuclear negotiator (2003-05)

• Likely played key role in nuclear decision-making prior to 2003

Source: Author’s compilation



## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Bargaining within Iran's key power centers shapes its nuclear decision-making, which results from its consensus-building effort. The process remains fairly opaque and so do key components of it. This makes it difficult to adequately understand Iran's nuclear intentions fully and to separate stated objectives and policies from the leadership's actual intent. Similarly, the complexity and opacity of the Iranian nuclear decision-making process makes it more difficult to anticipate Iranian actions and reactions to US decisions. This entails some implications for US policy toward Iran going forward.

First, unlike what is sometimes assumed, key nuclear decisions are not typically made by a single organization within the system. Instead, a green light from the relevant organs within the system is needed to move forward with a particular course of action (though minor technical actions may not need a full consensus-based decision involving all bodies). Hence, hardliners, for example, are not able to play spoiler by taking steps outside the JCPOA generally frowned upon by the rest of the system. This has positive and negative implications for the United States. The high bar for system consensus on key and often controversial actions complicates efforts to change Iranian nuclear behavior and to affect its calculus. For example, should the system come to the conclusion that it must acquire a nuclear weapon, US sticks and carrots would have a limited impact on Iran's calculus.

At the same time, it would appear that once a decision has been made to engage the United States on the fate of the nuclear program and/or curb it, one entity would unlikely be successful in prompting a reversal singlehandedly, including the traditional spoilers. As a result, the United States need not worry about Iran's presidential elections, who holds the majority in the parliament, or who succeeds whom in the IRGC affecting Iran's decision to negotiate with America. But some of these personnel changes, chiefly in the executive branch, which is currently responsible for such negotiations, will undoubtedly impact the conduct of the negotiations. And as American negotiators found out quickly, Rouhani's election vastly improved the working relationship between the two sides as his team was more serious and its mindset less driven by a zero-sum approach. However, the technical details of any deal and the specific steps Iran takes on its nuclear program become the subject of internal bargaining within the system.

This was on full display during the nuclear negotiations, where key provisions within the deal were the subject of intense debates in the lead-up to and after the JCPOA's signing. Although some hardliners objected to the very premise of nuclear talks and a nuclear agreement with the United States and the rest of the P5+1, it was broadly recognized that the specific provisions within the deal, not the agreement itself, would be the subject of intense scrutiny and criticism (at least until Iran became disenchanted with the sanctions relief it was receiving throughout the course of 2016, leading Khamenei to slowly but surely distance himself from the agreement).<sup>80</sup> Hence, the domestic bargaining surrounding the emerging deal's provisions helped shape the JCPOA, including the precise limits on enrichment activity. For example, Iranian negotiators were willing to give up more capabilities in some instances to



preserve more visible but less technically significant elements of the program. The number of centrifuges kept in place was deemed more politically significant than their actual output.<sup>81</sup>

Second, and relatedly, the bargaining process provides an opening for the United States to seek concessions from Iran. Just as when the system agrees upon and settles on a course of action it is difficult to overturn that consensus, the bargaining process and the disagreements among power centers afford the United States levers it can utilize to curb certain components of Iran's nuclear program. The system has broadly settled on the need for a nuclear program, domestic enrichment, and a certain level of R&D. Hence, it is unlikely that the country will make concessions on these core tenets of its nuclear program. However, despite stated objectives of reaching one million Separative Work Units (SWUs), Iran still does not have clear redlines on what is permissible within those confines—allowing the United States to seek concessions from it.<sup>82</sup>

The United States can develop provisions while requiring technically significant concessions from Iran that are deemed less politically sensitive and visible in the country in exchange for high-profile offerings from the West. For example, as the JCPOA's negotiators well understood, the acquisition of new aircraft and parts for civilian use is a priority for Iran, whose aging fleet has led to a number of incidents and deaths over the past decades. Allowing Iran to purchase new aircraft from the US company Boeing or the European Airbus would provide a significant boost to any US-Iran engagement. The United States can impose restrictions on the use of the aircraft and parts to purely civilian uses.

The United States can also require Iran to extend JCPOA sunsets significantly, as this is an important area of concern for Washington yet, depending on how it is formulated and what Tehran gets in return, potentially not as politically toxic in Tehran. Similarly, restrictions in R&D are typically easier to impose than those on enrichment, which has become a high-profile issue in Iran (in large part due to government propaganda). Finally, leveraging Iranian political statements to codify them and impose more limits on the proliferation-sensitive aspects of the Iranian nuclear program can increase their political viability in the country. This can include the addition of limits on Iran's missile activities, which can leverage existing statements about self-imposed limits of 2,000 km on the range of the country's missiles.

The future of the JCPOA and Iran's nuclear program are yet to be determined, with domestic factors, US decisions in the remaining months of the Trump presidency, and international events affecting their trajectory. But for the foreseeable future, Iran's nuclear program will remain a national security challenge for the United States. Understanding how Iran makes decisions on the future of its nuclear program will be key to tailoring US policy toward Iran's nuclear activities and American nonproliferation interests. In this context, the bargaining process shaping the contours of Iran's nuclear policy and approach to negotiations may be more indicative than the position of any single entity within the system. Perhaps due to this, Iran has been and remains reluctant to fully and indefinitely deny itself any single option, including those it may not be pursuing at the present moment.





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