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# Deterring Iranian NBC Use

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## Conclusions

- Iran is aggressively pursuing nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons, ballistic missiles and other means of delivery and its use of NBC will be particularly difficult to deter. The possibility of deterrence failing is significant.
- Predictions that Iran shares the Western perspectives on NBC use or that it would employ NBC weapons strictly as weapons of last resort may be dangerously misleading. There are few apparent moral or religious impediments should Iranian leaders choose to employ NBC weapons.
- Iran considers the United States to be the primary threat to Iranian interests, and U.S. forces in the region could well be perceived by Iran as lucrative targets for NBC weapons-which Iran will be able to deliver through both traditional and novel means, presenting challenges to U.S. defenses. NBC use may be Iran's only means of offsetting U.S. technically and numerically superior forces.
- Threats of conventional force or even nuclear retaliation may pay only minimal returns toward deterrence.
- The United States needs to employ a combination of denial and jeopardy to achieve deterrence. Denial will require robust active and passive defenses and counterforce. Jeopardy requires developing the capability to credibly put at risk the two Iranian centers of gravity: the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iran's oil revenues.

## What Makes Iran Hard to Deter?

Iran more closely resembles the early Bolshevik state than the tired Soviet Union the United States deterred and defeated in the Cold War. Iran is a prime example of Eric Hoffer's "intensely frustrated" that make up the world's "true believers" with their high tolerance for risk. Iran thus presents a particular challenge to deterrence.

Like the early Bolshevik state, Iran has a self-appointed vanguard, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

Corps (IRGC). It has a centralized revolutionary purpose, including export of the Iranian Islamic revolution. The IRGC has the lead in Iran for the production and employment of NBC weapons and is well organized, coherent, and virulent in their hatred of the United States. IRGC leaders often believe that they are more religiously correct than some religious leaders or "mullahs" and there are instances in which the IRGC has taken radical action beyond that of the state's political leadership.

As the United States seeks to deter Iranian aggression in general, and its use of NBC weapons in particular, it is prudent to try to understand the legal and moral traditions that provide a context for Iranian decisions about war. Shiite tradition differs from Western "just war" tradition. While Iranian Shiite interpretations of Islam forbid declaration of offensive religious war, there is a standing authority and indeed an obligation to use force to defend Islam. Such use of force is not considered to be offensive since the persecution of believers is the same as an attack. A *jihad* (holy war) could thus be readily justified as "defensive." This might mistakenly lead some to believe that Iran would only fight 'defensively' in the sense that it would not strike first and would see NBC weapons strictly as weapons of last resort. However, as a practical matter, virtually any act contrary to Iran's interests taken by the West (such as the U.S. embargo) could be defined by the mullahs as "persecution." Further, while Western just war tradition obliges restraint in the prosecution of war, particularly the requirement that combatants limit, to the greatest degree possible, the impact on non-combatants, once a defensive *jihad* is declared against disbelievers, there need be little restraint in its prosecution. Employment of NBC weapons, even against civilians-let alone the military-could be justified. Thus there are few apparent moral or religious impediments should Iran choose to employ NBC weapons against the United States. Assessments which fail to recognize that the Iranian justification for war has a significantly lower threshold than that established by Western just war doctrine could be dangerously misleading.

This legal and religious interpretation of Islam has been further emboldened by Iran's leadership, which has sought to foster a national cult of martyrdom to strengthen its ability to conduct war. While it appears that there is a growing gap between the population and the leadership, and while the leadership's emphasis on martyrdom may not succeed, it and the IRGC in particular has an approach to the risks of war that is sharply at variance with Western perspectives and they may be prepared to take risks and to accept casualties at levels other modern states would deem unacceptable. The Iranian leadership acknowledges that it takes a different approach and has boasted that this will give them advantages in confrontations with the United States. This point was crystallized by the Iranian Army Chief of Staff in September 1995 when he stated that a military confrontation between U.S. and Iranian forces in the Gulf would be counter to U.S. interests and "ultimately to their disadvantage" because "only Muslims believe that 'Whether we kill or are killed, we are the victors.' Others do not think this way."

### **Won't Iran Be Deterred by U.S. Nuclear or Conventional Superiority?**

In Western discussions of deterring Iranian NBC use, one frequently encounters a confident assurance that Iran will be deterred by one of two U.S. threats: vastly superior U.S. conventional forces or nuclear retaliation. While it might be hoped that Iran is now and will remain deterred by the threat implicit in these capabilities, there are factors that work against continued reliance on them.

While Iraq remains a possible threat, Iran acknowledges that its primary threat is the United States and its forces in the Gulf. NBC weapons offer Iran a counterbalance to the United States' overwhelming conventional superiority. U.S. naval forces in the Gulf offer a lucrative target for Iran's NBC capabilities. For the IRGC in particular, there could be no better symbol of U.S. force projection capability and thus no better target to demonstrate their disdain for the United States. If Iran believes that its NBC forces offer the possibility of inflicting unacceptable damage on U.S. forces, the deterrence value of U.S. conventional superiority will decline and the incentive for Iranian use of its NBC forces will increase.

By confronting the United States, Iran could hope to gain the advantages of "image exaltation" or "exporting the revolution." The fight against the United States and the "defeat of world arrogance" justifies the existence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, ties her leaders to their religious heritage, and endows them with a sense of righteousness and purpose. Having defined themselves as the rightful leaders of Islam, Iranian leaders see their confrontation with the United States as a key source of respect and support from other Islamic states and Muslim (especially Shiite) opposition groups in other states.

Iran might also strike out against the United States to deflect internal pressures. Iran is plagued by socio-economic problems that have led, in recent years, to strikes and riots. While their socioeconomic problems mostly stem from the internal policies of Iranian leaders, they are often attributed to the "hostile actions" of the United States, including the economic embargo. High inflation, slower than promised economic development, the growing demands of a young population are major sources of growing internal pressures. The flight of the poor and the young to large cities raises the risks of easily ignited frustration. This, coupled with accusations of governmental corruption at the highest levels, place the regime at a risk of collapse. Under these conditions, Iran, and especially the IRGC, could try to obscure their own culpability in the problems besetting Iran, or to strengthen themselves in the face of internal divisions and weaknesses, by striking at external "enemies."

The Iranian and IRGC leadership would certainly prefer to attain their objectives without having to accept large-scale Iranian casualties. However, U.S. retaliation might be an acceptable risk because these leaders espouse a belief that Iranians killed in a holy war would be martyrs and would thus have an automatic ticket to paradise. These leaders might rationalize that the Iranian Islamic revolution could even be facilitated by a U.S. nuclear retaliatory strike against Tehran. This is not to say that the entire Iranian population embraces martyrdom; rather, it highlights that the religious/political leadership and the IRGC might risk large scale casualties to achieve what they may see as a worthy goal. The IRGC is perhaps more likely than the political/religious leadership in Tehran to make such a calculation. The IRGC might be capable of taking military action even without political or religious direction. Self-preservation would likely not be an issue for them since the IRGC leadership would not likely remain in Tehran after such a decision were implemented.

Moreover, Iran may believe there is a relatively low probability that the United States would weigh *any* regional interests worth the censure a nuclear retaliatory strike would invoke. A strike against any city would cause massive civilian casualties, would raise the threshold of violence, and almost certainly lead

to still greater follow-on use of NBC weapons by Iran. Iranian leaders might question whether the United States would retaliate with a nuclear strike in response to its own NBC related military casualties let alone civilian casualties in another state.

While the United States may have persuaded Iraq that use of chemical and biological weapons in DESERT STORM would have raised the prospect of U.S. nuclear retaliation, subsequent revelations by senior Bush Administration officials indicate these threats may have been more bluff than real. Similar threats are thus unlikely to communicate a credible threat to Tehran. Therefore, while Iranian use of NBC may risk conventional attack or nuclear retaliation, it is hardly self-evident that the risk would be considered too high or that these U.S. responses would inflict damage Iranian leaders regard as unacceptable.

### **What are Iran's Likely Uses for NBC?**

The United States believes that Iran has some weaponized biological weapons and a large chemical weapons stockpile, some of which are deployed on Abu Musa Island in the Gulf near the Strait of Hormuz. Iran may also possess radiological weapons. Iran has deployed ballistic and cruise missiles and appears to have placed a high priority on expanding these capabilities. It appears to have developed novel delivery options, such as small motorized launches and remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs)-which it is mass producing-that might overwhelm U.S. defenses and which could serve well as delivery systems for NBC.

The United States is certainly a target of the Iranian NBC and missile threat. One point of evidence is the Iranian effort to increase the reach of its weapons of mass destruction through acquisition of the longer range ballistic missiles that would enable Iran to threaten U.S. bases in Turkey which would be essential for any U.S. military operations against Iran.

Moreover, Iran, and the Iranian Navy in particular, has exercised its BW and CW capabilities in tactical maneuvers that explicitly train the IRGC's "Shin-mim-re" or "chemical, biological, and radiological" units. Most of these exercises involve offensive assaults on fixed enemy positions. Thus, they are not strictly defensive. The Shin-mim-re and naval forces in particular have exercised numerous times against "large naval forces" which certainly represent those of the United States. The frequent exercise of the Shin-mim-re units are not likely meant to protect Iranian forces against a U.S. NBC attack: the United States has not possessed biological or radiological weapons for decades and is eliminating its entire chemical weapons stockpile-none of which remains in the operational forces. Thus no U.S. chemical, biological or radiological weapons are deployed in the Gulf or elsewhere. The more credible explanation is that Iranian forces are training to operate in an NBC environment of their own creation.

### **What are Iran's NBC Options?**

Iran, and the IRGC in particular, appears to have pursued a number of options for employing NBC weapons to attain or further its interests. These include a terrorist attack in which both the means of death

and the source of the attack are ambiguous. Such a strike directed or encouraged from Tehran could include use of chemical, biological, or radiological weapons and, in the future, could possibly include a nuclear weapon. The targets could vary, as could the means of delivery. Should the United States respond, Iran may be prepared to counter the U.S. conventional forces with its NBC weapons.

Iran also appears to have put great emphasis, in policy statements and exercises, on enabling Iranian forces to attack U.S. forces in the Gulf. Such a confrontation could include either impeding shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and holding its NBC options in reserve to deter a U.S. response, or a preemptive attack with negotiations to follow. Seeking to close the Straits while threatening NBC use could fulfill the threat stated by the head of the IRGC, General Rezai, to take "at least 20,000 American forces" captive. Or, Iran could attack U.S. forces outright-with or without NBC weapons (preemptively or in response to some "persecution")-and seek negotiations later. Actual Iranian NBC weapons employment, if the United States were to take any response, could complete the scenario. Under either scenario, the purpose, according to Rezai, would be to force the United States to "sit down at the negotiating table," at which Iran might demand a U.S. force drawdown in the Gulf.

Thus, Iran's chemical, biological and probable radiological forces in the Gulf enable several plausible scenarios in which Iran could use these weapons against U.S. forces. The effect of such a dramatic act, in an era of instant international television reporting would serve Iranian strategic purposes, even if casualties were limited. Iran believes that U.S. public opinion is a center of gravity in the deployment and use of the U.S. military. Recalling its losses in Vietnam in the 1970s, and Beirut in the 1980s, the United States withdrew its forces from Somalia when gruesome footage of *one* dead American body was portrayed on global TV screens. How much endurance could Iran expect of the United States in response to the use or threat of use of NBC weapons?

### **What Must Be Done to Deter Iran?**

The United States has available a number of policy and programmatic options that are likely to enhance our ability to deter Iran. The United States needs to employ a deterrence strategy that combines the tools of **denial and jeopardy**. *To deny Iran*, and similar states, the ability to attack lucrative targets and achieve its military objectives, the United States must acquire a robust capability for active and passive defenses and counterforce. The United States must also be able to *credibly jeopardize* the two Iranian centers of gravity: the IRGC and Iran's oil revenues.

Defenses must be a high priority. Because ballistic missiles are Iran's delivery means of choice for NBC weapons, an active defense capability would have a deterrent multiplier effect, particularly when combined with passive defense and counterforce capabilities. Early investment by the United States in a robust regional ballistic missile defense would undermine not only the value of ballistic missiles, but also the benefits of further missile acquisition. Counterforce alone may be neither credible nor deep enough to face a determined aggressor's tactics: Iran could negate its effectiveness through novel NBC delivery modes such as RPVs and small naval platforms, which it has deployed. In combination with more traditional NBC delivery modes and mobility, concealment, and hardened structures, such novel delivery

systems, widely dispersed, radically diminish the contribution of counterforce alone to the deterrence of Iranian NBC weapons employment.

Even with robust active and passive defenses and counterforce capabilities a significant risk will remain that Iran will not be deterred from using NBC weapons. Therefore, the United States must also acquire the capability to credibly jeopardize the Iranian centers of gravity to make their use of NBC weapons "too costly" and to facilitate Iran's defeat should it initiate war.

The United States must be able to hold the IRGC itself unmistakably at risk. A credible threat of destruction-or even major damage-to the IRGC and its military capability could have a significant deterrent effect. Such a loss would leave Iran vulnerable to attack, especially from Iraq, and would, from the perspective of the IRGC, cripple Iran's chances of exporting the revolution. This would threaten both their ability to achieve their war aims and their ability to survive and reconstitute in the post-war period. Further, destruction of the IRGC dramatically decreases the probability of NBC weapons use. IRGC destruction, however, will be a difficult task in light of its decentralized command structure and its ability to physically disperse.

A second national center of gravity is access to oil revenues. Iran's economy would be gravely affected if its access to oil revenues were denied. Iran's leadership recognizes that it is vitally dependent on oil production, both for internal use and export. Should Iran's ability to produce oil, or to access its oil revenues be interrupted, its economy would be crippled and the government could lose its already waning public support.

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