

## A NUCLEAR IRAN: PROMOTING STABILITY OR COURTING DISASTER?

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Scott Sagan, Kenneth Waltz and Richard K. Betts

ON 8 FEBRUARY 2007, at the Kellogg Conference Center at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), the *Journal of International Affairs* and the Middle East Institute hosted a live debate between Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz. The two political scientists revisited their classic debate on nuclear weapons, addressing recent developments in Iran and possible global responses. Richard K. Betts moderated the event. Dean Lisa Anderson delivered opening remarks.

**Lisa Anderson:** I'm delighted to welcome you here and to congratulate the *Journal of International Affairs* for having put together such a distinguished and, as it turns out, popular program. It is a tribute to the *Journal* that for sixty years it has addressed questions in ways both timely and timeless. Some of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs' most renowned faculty and distinguished students have been associated with the *Journal*.

Among these faculty is one who has agreed to serve as moderator tonight. Professor Richard Betts could make the case for either of our contestants nearly as well as they do, and, in their absence, often does. Now he will help us to pursue the question of whether Iran should go nuclear. Dick, the arena is yours.

**Richard Betts:** Thank you, Dean Anderson. We are fortunate to have Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan here tonight. Their company here is appropriate for two special reasons.

First, to help answer the general question of whether the acquisition of nuclear weapons by middle-powers like Iran is bad, good or indifferent in its implications. Many of you have read their book, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate*, which explores the question in very provocative detail. The question tonight is how the particular case of Iran fits into this debate.



Photo by Monique Mugnier

*Kenneth Waltz argues that nuclear weapons yield stability in a debate with Scott Sagan at Columbia University on 8 February 2007.*

Second, focusing on Iran brings us to the question—in the air at this very moment—of whether the United States will soon attack Iran in an attempt to set back its nuclear program.

The United States has recently dispatched the [*USS John C. Stennis*] aircraft carrier battle group to patrol the waters of Iran's vicinity. It isn't clear why, unless President Bush is at least considering the option of an air attack. If this action is simply coercive muscle-flexing, it could prove embarrassing in the event Tehran doesn't back

down and the United States does not in fact attack Iran. Exposing this gesture as a bluff would be reminiscent of [President Richard Nixon] sending the carrier *USS Enterprise* to the Bay of Bengal in 1971 to intimidate India during the invasion of East Pakistan—a gesture that was revealed as an empty tacit threat.

So, should the United States attack Iran to destroy its nuclear capabilities? If not, does that mean that prospective Iranian nuclear weapons will not be a grave danger? Can instruments other than military attack effectively impair Iranian progress toward the development of nuclear weapons?

With us tonight are two of the most thoughtful and provocative observers of international relations to answer the questions raised by Iran's nuclear program. Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan will present their basic arguments, and then I will pose a few questions to them, after which time we'll open the forum to audience participation.

**Kenneth Waltz:** Thank you very much, Dick, for that kind introduction. I'll begin with a few things about nuclear weapons, and then I'll say a few things about Iran.

First, nuclear proliferation is not a problem because nuclear weapons have not proliferated. "Proliferation" means to spread like wildfire. We have had nuclear military capability for over fifty years, and we have a total of nine militarily capable nuclear states. That's hardly proliferation; that is, indeed, glacial spread. If another country gets nuclear weapons, and if it does so for good reasons, then that isn't an object of great worry.

Every once in a while, some prominent person says something that's obviously true. Recently, Jacques Chirac [president of France] said that if Iran had one or two

nuclear weapons, it would not pose a danger. Well, he was right. Of course, he had to quickly retract it and say, "Oh no, that slipped out, I didn't know the microphone was on!"

Second, it doesn't matter *who* has nuclear weapons. Conversely, the spread of conventional weapons makes a great deal of difference. For instance, if a Hitler-type begins to establish conventional superiority, it becomes very difficult to contain and deter him.

But, with nuclear weapons, it's been proven without exception that whoever gets nuclear weapons behaves with caution and moderation. Every country—whether they are countries we trust and think of as being highly responsible, like Britain, or countries that we distrust greatly, and for very good reasons, like China during the Cultural Revolution—behaves with such caution.

It is now fashionable for political scientists to test hypotheses. Well, I have one: If a country has nuclear weapons, it will not be attacked militarily in ways that threaten its manifestly vital interests. That is 100 percent true, without exception, over a period of more than fifty years. Pretty impressive.

Why would Iran want to have nuclear weapons? There are two very simple ways to answer that question. One is by looking at a map. To the east, Iran borders Pakistan and Afghanistan—countries that do not look greatly stable, and countries that might make any neighbor feel uneasy about what is going to happen next. To the west, Iran borders Iraq. And for eight bloody years in the 1980s, Iran fought a war against Iraq and Saddam Hussein.

I wonder if Iran really feels more comfortable now that it's not Saddam Hussein but instead the United States who represents the great military force in Iraq. If I were ruling Iran, I certainly wouldn't think this region of the world is safe.

Two, if the president of the United States says three countries form an axis of evil—which George Bush said in 2002—and he then proceeds to invade one of them—Iraq—what are Iran and North Korea to think?

We talk about dangerous rogue states that are hard to deter. But what state is in fact the biggest rogue state in the world? For countries that think the United States constitutes a threat, how should they react? In effect, there is no way to deter the United States other than by having nuclear weapons. No country can do



Photo by James Stephenson

*Scott Sagan contends that past models no longer apply to the contemporary security environment.*

that conventionally. The United States can overwhelm other countries conventionally.

If you were making decisions for Iran, would you say, “We don’t want nuclear weapons,” or, “Let’s do everything we can to get a small number of nuclear weapons and get them just as quickly as we possibly can”? It would be strange if Iran did not strive to get nuclear weapons, and I don’t think we have to worry if they do. Because deterrence has worked 100 percent of the time. We can deter small nuclear powers—after all, we have deterred big nuclear powers like the Soviet Union and China. So sleep well.

**Scott Sagan:** Thank you for this invitation. Nuclear weapons are horribly destructive. And, in theory, any statesmen in any state should be strongly influenced by the fear that his or her cities could be destroyed by an adversary. But in reality, as opposed to theory, nuclear weapons are not controlled by states. They are not controlled by statesmen. They are managed by imperfect, normal human beings inside imperfect, normal organizations.

To understand in which situations nuclear weapons are likely to produce successful deterrence and in which situations they are less likely to, we need to open the black box of decisionmaking inside states to look at who controls and manages the actual nuclear weapons or devices that are being built. We fail currently to do that in our thinking about Iran.

There is a creeping fatalism occurring in the American debate about this subject. Many policymakers and scholars are fatalists in thinking that there is nothing we can do, short of using military force, to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons. And that fatalism is often coupled with deterrence optimism, best exemplified by Kenneth Waltz’s thinking.

Proliferation fatalism and deterrence optimism interact in a particularly diabolical manner; the more we think it inevitable that Iran is going to acquire nuclear weapons, the more we are tempted—through wishful thinking—to say, “Well, maybe it won’t matter.” And the more we bolster our belief that it won’t matter, the less we are willing to take the necessary diplomatic and strategic steps that could potentially stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons.

I think diplomacy could still work in Iran and a military attack would not be a wise move today. But, for now, I’d like to focus my brief remarks on why we should really worry about nuclear weapons in the hands of the Iranian regime.

Let me start by noting that today, as in the past, Kenneth Waltz refers back to the Cold War, saying that the United States didn’t want the Soviet Union to acquire nuclear weapons, and, when it did, Moscow still didn’t use them against us. Deterrence worked. He refers to the People’s Republic of China, saying we didn’t want them to get nuclear weapons—we even thought of preventive war—but the result wasn’t so bad. Deterrence worked.

And yet, these two states, China and the Soviet Union, were monolithic governments through most of the Cold War. Indeed, the rare moments when they were not monolithic were some of the most dangerous periods in recent history. At the end of the Cold War when the Soviet Union collapsed and during China's Red Guard Cultural Revolution, there were serious threats to the safety and control over their respective nuclear weapons.

Instead of looking at the Cold War with nostalgia and projecting its legacy to assess the meaning of potential nuclear weapons in Iran, let us look instead at the more recent history of a state in Iran's neighborhood: Pakistan. Three of the dangers that can occur in theory when a new nuclear state emerges really did occur, and in spades, in Pakistan.

First is the danger of nuclear weapons promoting aggression of the state which holds them—that is, acquiring the protection of a nuclear shield which will enable the state to be more aggressive in a conventional manner.

Second, there is the problem of terrorist theft.

And third, the problem of potential loose controls and sales of nuclear weapons to terrorists.

All three of these problems occurred when Pakistan got nuclear weapons.

The first is often called the stability-instability paradox: a situation of stability between two countries who both have nuclear weapons that can lead one country to think that it can be more aggressive conventionally because it is protected from a nuclear retaliation by its nuclear shield.

In Pakistan decisionmaking is not centrally controlled, as it was in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. When Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons there were many inside its military who said, "This our chance to do something about Kashmir," so they misled then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif into approving an operation which sent Pakistani soldiers disguised as Mujahedeen guerrillas into Indian controlled Kashmir near the town of Kargil in the winter of 1998.

When the Indians threatened to retaliate, the Pakistani military reportedly began to ready its missiles for nuclear strikes. It took a brave (and one of the last) act of Pakistani civilian Prime Minister Sharif to order the disguised Pakistani forces in Indian-held Kashmir to pull back.

Nuclear weapons created that particular problem and sparked the Kargil war.

The second problem is the vulnerability-invulnerability paradox: For nuclear weapons to have a deterrent effect, they must be invulnerable to a first strike from an adversary to allow for the possibility of retaliation. During times of peace, Pakistan creates this invulnerability by putting its nuclear weapons under lock and key in Pakistani military bases, so terrorists are unable to seize them. But in a crisis or a conventional war they have every incentive to take those nuclear weapons to the countryside, where they can be hidden and would be less vulnerable

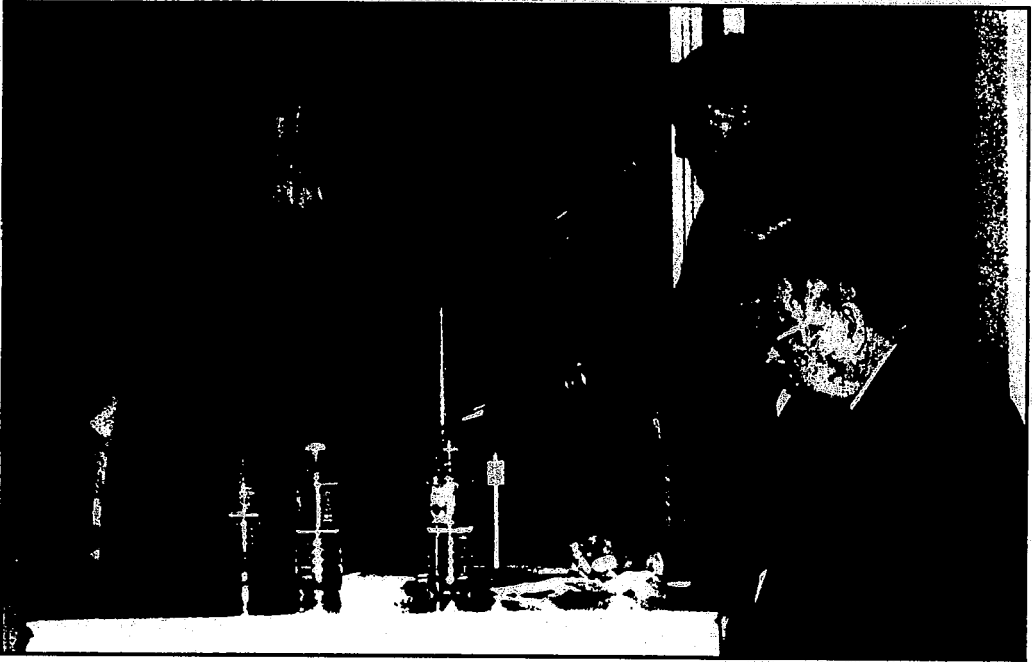


Photo by Monique Mugnier

*Lisa Anderson, dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, delivers opening remarks at the debate.*

to an attack. And yet the countryside is exactly where they are more vulnerable to terrorist seizure.

This problem can be best illustrated by an incident during the 1999 Kargil crisis. According to the *Washington Post*, officers within Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, proposed the following idea to address the vulnerability of its nuclear weapons to an Indian attack: "Let's hide them in Afghanistan—the Indians will never be able to attack them there."<sup>1</sup> Such an operation would reduce the vulnerability of an Indian attack but would certainly increase the likelihood that Al-Qaeda, the Taliban or another jihadi group could seize the weapons.

The third problem is the loss of control and the potential that someone inside a nuclear state could give nuclear weapons to another non-nuclear state.

Professor Waltz argues that we do not need to wonder whether new nuclear states will take good care of the nuclear weapons—they have every incentive to do so.

"They," an abstract entity called the state, may have the incentive to do so. But other actors inside these states may not have similar incentives.

Look at the history of the A.Q. Khan nuclear network in Pakistan. With help from others, a senior scientist, acting in his own interest and greed, began to sell bomb design and centrifuge technology. He sold the actual centrifuges and bomb design to Libya, and he offered them to Iraq in 1991, though Saddam Hussein turned down the offer, thinking it was a CIA ploy. A.Q. Khan helped initiate the

Iranian nuclear program in 1987, selling them centrifuges and other technologies. He sold similar items to North Korea.

Using the Pakistan analogy instead of the Cold War analogy, the effects of a nuclear Iran are correctly seen as very dangerous.

First, the stability-instability paradox—that is, the possibility that individual countries would be more aggressive with nuclear capability. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, will it behave more aggressively in the Middle East?

On the one hand, we have a good insight from Professor Waltz: The United States would be more reluctant to attack Iran if it had nuclear weapons, and indeed I do believe that's why Iran is so interested.

On the other hand, however, we have the possibility that various Iranians—especially those in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—may feel that it is safer for them to probe—to attack Americans in Iraq, to attack military bases in the region, to support terrorist attacks elsewhere. Therefore it is not at all clear what might be the final outcome. More probing attacks? More provocation? Indeed, this is the worry with regard to the Iran crisis today.

I don't believe the Bush administration wants to attack. But I do think there are some factions in Iran who wouldn't mind a potential attack from the United States because it would increase support for the regime. It's possible that these factions in Iran will actually increase rather than decrease attacks by Iranian agents in Iraq against American forces to force our hand.

The second problem—terrorist theft. The Iranians, in trying to reduce the likelihood of an attack against their nuclear development sites, are dispersing those sites in the countryside. But such measures will increase the likelihood that there won't be central control over their nuclear program, and increase the likelihood that, if they do develop nuclear weapons, insiders and terrorist groups could potentially seize them.

Finally, the question of ambiguous control. Here we must ask: Who controls the weapons and materials?

They don't yet have weapons in Iran, but they are working to get them. And it is not the professional Iranian military but the Revolutionary Guard Corps guarding the development sites whose own financial units have often been those used to purchase different parts of the program. These are the same individuals running the arms supply operations to terrorist organizations that Iran supports. To have your nuclear guardians and your terrorist supporter organizations be one and the same is a recipe for disaster.

It is very useful to have this debate, because Kenneth Waltz says loudly and often what Jacques Chirac was only willing to say briefly and in what he claimed afterward was an off-the-record moment of rare French candor.

We should be worried about President Chirac.

As reported by the *New York Times*, Chirac said, "I would say what is dangerous about this situation is not the fact of having a nuclear bomb. One, maybe a second one a little later, well, that's not very dangerous. But what is very dangerous is the effects on proliferation."<sup>2</sup>

Well, proliferation is a problem, but saying that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is dangerous because it produces a problem of proliferation elsewhere is like telling your kid, "Don't take heroin, because it could lead to stronger drugs."

Iran getting nuclear weapons will be dangerous enough. The government may become emboldened, and organizations that purport to manage nuclear weapons in Iran will be weak, and the weapons will be in danger of being stolen or sold to others. In short, we will face a very different kind of nuclear dynamic and danger than we ever faced during the Cold War.

**Richard Betts:** All perfectly clear! Ken, since Scott emphasized the lessons that can be drawn from the case of Pakistan, how do you see those parallels or lessons differently? What happened in Kargil was a game of chicken, a slippery slope upon which it isn't clear which side has the incentive to be the first to stop. How can you be sure we weren't simply lucky in that case and that in another Kargil instance that slippery slope would go to the lengths you're confident won't happen?

**Kenneth Waltz:** In a world in which countries had only conventional weapons, that slippery slope would indeed lead to a conventional war.

A number of Indians and Pakistanis think that what prevented the Kargil conflict from becoming the fourth war between the two countries was that each had nuclear weapons and knew the other had them as well. They each knew there was a limit to how far they could go. As one Indian military officer said, "We found, as we expected, that the trigger for war does not lie on the Kashmir frontier." It lies where there are vital interests at stake.

Of course skirmishes take place, and of course conflicts can and will occur. But they will be contained as they always were.

Nuclear optimists, like me, deal with the world as it has been for more than fifty years. Pessimists deal with hypothetical disasters that have never occurred. It seems to me that the optimists are the realists and the pessimists are the ones who are off in some ill-defined hypothesized world.

**Richard Betts:** Yes, but Ken, all disasters are things that have never occurred until the first time they occur. Your precedent from the Cold War—the stability of the U.S.-Soviet competition—involved fairly stable, secular regimes, oriented toward their material interests. Is it really a flight of fancy to worry about those regimes that possess nuclear weapons and are not governed by material interests and



physical survival, but instead by religious zealots for whom physical survival is not the prime goal?

**Kenneth Waltz:** I think that is a rather revisionist view of history.

We never thought of the Soviet Union and Soviet leaders as being fine fellows—stable, predictable and moderate in their responses to what’s going on in the world. And we certainly never thought of the Chinese that way. But looking back at their behavior, when it came to avoiding direct conflict that might lead to the use of nuclear weapons, they became very responsible indeed. So that’s why I say it’s not a question of who has these weapons; anybody who has them behaves like anyone else who’s ever had them.

I don’t notice that many religiously-oriented people act in ways that will result in the massacre of thousands of people. I think people are people. I don’t think heavenly rewards motivate very many people. So I don’t worry about those who have nuclear weapons. I don’t want too many countries to have them, but there has been no headlong rush to acquire nuclear weapons.

And why not? Most countries don’t need them. And if a country doesn’t need them, it doesn’t want them, because they are a pain in the neck. Scott is right—they are hard to take care of, and it is very important to take care of them very, very carefully. We should be careful not to give other countries reason to believe that their security requires their having nuclear weapons.

**Richard Betts:** Scott, I have to hope Ken is right, because I can’t figure out what to do about it if you are right. Can you tell us what to do in the case of Iran?

You emphasized the importance of looking inside the black box to understand the organizations that would be custodians of these weapons and to heighten our ability to assess potential disaster through these organizations. Does that suggest, for example, that we should take military action to control the nature of this regime?

Or does it mean we should use the “clean needles” approach? That is, if Iran is bound to try to acquire nuclear weapons, we might as well provide technologies for blocking unauthorized detonation for example, so they safeguard the weaponry responsibly, similar to the way the Americans and the Soviets did?

**Scott Sagan:** If a state already has crossed the Rubicon and has already developed nuclear weapons, I’m a firm believer in the “clean needles” approach.

Indeed, I have been very active in working with Indians and Pakistanis to identify how Americans and Russians secured their nuclear weapons, including organizational personnel reliability programs, nuclear emergency search teams and other organizational fixes to try to reduce the risks, although I don’t think they can be eliminated entirely.

But before a state gets nuclear weapons, we should not give up on diplomatic options. I'm enough of a realist (in Ken Waltz's terms) to believe our threats against Iran effectually have created more interest in nuclear weapons for the Iranian regime.

Official U.S. policy of regime change, potentially by force, is incompatible with our nuclear non-proliferation policy. This policy encourages the Iranians to believe that nuclear weaponry is the one thing they're going to need in the medium term. We need to reduce Iranian fear of the United States by taking regime change by force off the table: The U.S. should also promise, in an international context, not to use nuclear weapons against states that have not developed nuclear weapons.

We have an opportunity today to recognize that there are different forces in Iran who have different views on its nuclear program. Some want to move quickly, others want to have options in the future, and still others are willing to take economic benefits and potential military security guarantees in exchange for constraining their uranium enrichment program. And yet the United States doesn't know who's who, because we won't talk to them. We should start these negotiations as quickly as possible.

**Richard Betts:** In the logic you've just described, isn't there an incentive for other countries to pursue nuclear programs as a way of coercing the U.S. into various concessions that we would never dream of giving them otherwise?

**Scott Sagan:** There is that risk, but it seems to me that recent American policy has created a far greater risk of giving states incentives by threatening them so often.

There are always incentives that might push another country to say, "You gave them light water reactors and promised not to attack them, so I should threaten to develop weapons unless the U.S. helps me with security and energy too." But perhaps that's not a worst set of incentives to give countries. This is a small problem compared to the current dangers in encouraging countries to develop nuclear weapons in response to our threats. So if other countries attempt to pursue nuclear proliferation unless we give them light water reactors, that's a small price to pay.

**Richard Betts:** Ken, would Iranian nuclear weapons have any potential function other than as a pure deterrent? Could they function for coercive purposes in the region, especially given that other countries in the region do not yet have nuclear weapons? Do you think that the solution is to spread nuclear weapons to other regimes in the region, or to involve the United States in extended deterrence to deal with that prospect? And, if so, is that in the interests of the United States?

**Kenneth Waltz:** No one has discovered how to use nuclear weapons other than for deterrence. Let me amend that. There is a form of blackmail that might work,

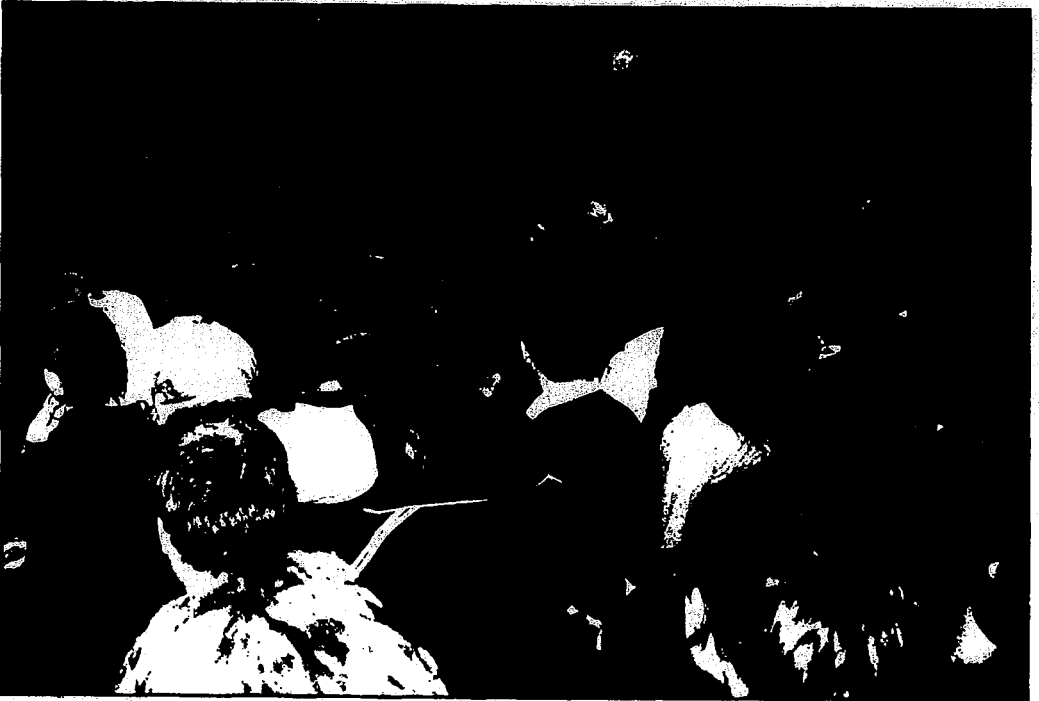


Photo by Monique Mugnier

*Richard Betts moderates the debate before a standing-room only crowd at the Kellogg Center at the School of International and Public Affairs.*

and that is blackmail for money. North Korea might have had that in mind. But when most people say “nuclear blackmail,” they think of one country saying, “We have nuclear weapons, and unless you do this—whatever this is—we’ll drop one on you.”

That’s simply not plausible. Nobody has tried it, and, if anyone does, it won’t work. There are many countries with nuclear weapons, the United States among them, and we haven’t figured out how to do anything with these things, except to use them for deterrence.

How is a relatively backward, dinky nuclear country going to manage to use its nuclear weapons for purposes other than deterrence? I don’t see any possibility of that. It may be, as Scott says, that possessing nuclear weapons gives a country a little more freedom of action. But it certainly does not gain much ability to act in a conventional way *because* it has nuclear weapons. Again, nuclear weapons have one purpose and only one purpose, and that’s deterrence.

**Richard Betts:** Will any Iranian regime permanently lose interest in nuclear weapons, even if we do things right? Or is this a case in which there is permanent incentive to consider this option, and whatever outside powers might do to moderate it will need continual renewal in order to keep Iran out of the nuclear club? That is, is this just a holding action?

**Scott Sagan:** I believe that the best way of viewing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—that has led to a world in which we only have nine countries with nuclear weapons—is to note that there are many states that have a long-term interest in hedging their bets: Develop nuclear power; agree not to develop nuclear weapons; but move just a little closer to getting the bomb. Iran will be one of those countries. I have no doubt that it will develop nuclear reactors—they're doing so at Bushehr. The trick is how to constrain that activity, so it becomes only a latent program Iran can't easily turn into a weapons program. The key is to permit the development of civilian nuclear reactors, but stop the spread of uranium enrichment and reprocessing technologies.

Any regime that will want to gain civilian nuclear power can do so. Not all regimes will want to acquire nuclear weapons out of their latent power capability. Our longstanding—and, I fear, everlasting—policy dilemma will be how to keep latent nuclear states in the closet. We're going to have more and more of them in the future. Frankly I would like to see a world in which all nuclear states become latent states—states without arsenals but with the capability to build them if necessary—rather than the world of nuclear porcupines that Ken Waltz envisions. We should be moving backwards towards a nuclear-power-without-nuclear-weapons world.

**Kenneth Waltz:** So Scott's imagining we are in a world with virtual nuclear weapons—that is, not weapons in being, but the capability of building those weapons.

That strikes me as being the most dangerous kind of world. First, countries that have leaders that are at all intelligent are going to hide some of their nuclear weapons. So everyone will believe that every other nuclear power still has some—they don't know how many, they don't know where they are. If any country is foolish enough to get rid of them, and then someone discovers that these other countries have them, there will be a rush to rebuild them.

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**Nuclear weapons have one purpose and only one purpose: deterrence.**

You create a very unstable situation by going back to zero in a world in which many countries still know how to make nuclear weapons. Then every country is poised to hide them and then to make them as quickly as possible if there comes the moment of need. That is a very bad world.

**Richard Betts:** Now we'll open the forum to audience questions.

**Question:** Two names that weren't mentioned with regard to Iran developing nuclear weapons were Israel and Saudi Arabia. Could you both comment on possible reactions of those two actors?

**Scott Sagan:** Well, both the Israelis and the Saudis have spoken about the danger of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, but they have also spoken by their actions.

The Israelis have commented both in saying that they will not accept a nuclear Iran and in starting to build submarine forces that could house nuclear weapons at sea, so they are able to retaliate even if Israel itself was destroyed first. That is, they are working to reduce the vulnerability of their nuclear arsenal.

These actions suggest that the Israelis themselves have not yet decided whether they are going to use military force to reduce the threat, or accept Ken Waltz's arguments and live with a nuclear Iran. Either option is hard for them.

The case of the Saudis is fascinating. The Saudis have just announced that they are going to start a cooperative, peaceful nuclear research program with other states in the Gulf region. They say the program will study desalination and other forms of useful nuclear power. I don't know if they're serious about that, but clearly the Saudis are trying to weigh their reactions to Iran.

Another Saudi reaction is their potential pursuit of a joint deterrent with the Pakistanis, their Sunni brethren, with whom they have strong ties. Indeed, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia visited A.Q. Khan's laboratory, reportedly only to pursue conventional weapons deals with him, but nonetheless a worrisome possibility.

The idea is that instead of building a nuclear program, which would take a long time, they could purchase a nuclear program, or do what NATO did with the U.S., which is to get Pakistan to station military forces in Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's own nuclear weapons in Saudi Arabia could provide deterrence against Iran. That, of course, leads to increased dangers of loss of control and terrorist theft.

**Kenneth Waltz:** I have no doubt that Israel would find it hard to accept an Iran with nuclear weapons. But what can a country do other than accept that?

The Bush administration said that North Korean nuclear weapons would be simply unacceptable. Then they tested nuclear weapons, and what do we do? We accept it.

**Question:** Under Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, all countries are permitted to pursue nuclear energy for peaceful means. Over the course of the last few years, that is all Iran has purported to do. Also the Iranian ayatollah has issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons. Could all this be a moot point? Do we take for granted that Iran will most certainly pursue nuclear weapons and not just nuclear energy?

**Kenneth Waltz:** The Iranians have allowed inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to look at their nuclear program, but not to do any inspection. Of course that is cause for great suspicion. If they aren't moving toward a nuclear military capability, why keep the inspectors out? Also remember that Iran

sees the United States as a threat and therefore wants nuclear weapons. That said, no one knows whether the Iranians will develop an actual nuclear military capability, but they seem to be moving surely and rather smartly in that direction. If they do acquire nuclear weapons, however, they are imminently deterrable.

**Scott Sagan:** Under Article IV of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, all states in good standing with the treaty have the inalienable right to acquire peaceful nuclear energy. The Iranians, in often citing that, forget the article's initial clause: states in "good standing" with the treaty. And because the Iranians were caught cheating—

**Most strategists believe attacking major Iranian nuclear sites might retard the program but could not stop it.**

that is, not reporting on what they had purchased from A.Q. Khan and not letting inspectors into all their facilities—they are not in good standing and they have sacrificed that right. Some day, if this or a different regime in Tehran agrees to full inspections and acknowledges what they have done in the past, then perhaps they could go forward with all aspects of nuclear

energy. The UN Security Council has said that until Tehran comes clean on the past violations and permits full inspections, they have sacrificed that right.

With regard to the fatwa, remember that Iran's nuclear program did not begin with the Islamic Republic. The program began with the shah. Ayatollah Khomeini originally shut down the program believing it was unnecessary, immoral, western technology.

In December 2006, the Iranian newspaper that's tied to [former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi] Rafsanjani published a previously classified letter from the Ayatollah Khomeini written at the end of the [1980-1988] war with Iraq. In this letter, Khomeini attempted to justify signing a deal with the devil, Saddam Hussein, at the end of the war with Iraq. The letter stated that sometimes, in positions of weakness, difficult decisions must be made for the national interest. The publication of the letter sent a clear sign to [current Iranian president] Ahmadinejad and the hawks that Iran should cut a deal with the international community.

But the other point made in Ayatollah Khomeini's letter was with regard to nuclear weapons. It stated that Iran needed nuclear weapons and should restart its program, because the Iran-Iraq war illustrated that if an adversary uses chemical weapons on the Iranian people, they could not trust the international community to support them. That was the primary rekindling of their nuclear weapons interests.

**Question:** How determined is Israel to stop Iran from attaining nuclear weapons? Do you think the Israelis will attack Iran if they think the Iranians are going to build an atomic bomb?

**Scott Sagan:** Whether the Israelis strike Iranian facilities or they live with a nuclear Iran, either option is incredibly dangerous. Most strategists looking at Israel's military options believe attacking major Iranian nuclear sites might retard the program but could not stop it. They are already dispersing the program to numerous sites because they don't have inspectors investigating it now. Moreover, Iran has deliberately built their nuclear facilities near civilian facilities, increasing the probability that if anyone attacks their program there will be lots of civilians killed. This all suggests that, if an attack occurs against Iran, it may delay the program, but it won't end the threat of proliferation there.

**Question:** Dr. Sagan, you agreed with Dr. Waltz that the presence of American forces in Afghanistan and Iraq provides a strong incentive for Iran to develop nuclear weapons. Don't you think that a nuclear-armed Israel provides a stronger incentive for Iran to develop nuclear weapons? And, if so, do you think disarming Israel of nuclear weapons would take away that incentive from Iran?

**Scott Sagan:** I think the Israeli nuclear program does create somewhat of an incentive, but it is not the major reason for Iran's nuclear program. I would love for Israel to disarm, but I can't imagine that they would do so anytime in the near future. And I don't think the U.S. will put pressure on them to do so. An ultimate solution, however, would clearly have to be a nuclear-free Middle East, including Israel.

**Richard Betts:** One difference, too, is that Iran doesn't have to deter an Israeli invasion since it isn't feasible for Israel to take effective conventional military action against Iran, which it is for the United States.

**Question:** Today there is a dialogue in Iran that the acquisition of nuclear weapons is a national right. Could you comment on that?

**Scott Sagan:** There are many Iranians who think it is their right to have nuclear weapons, and there are many Iranians who don't. Public opinion polls suggest that some Iranians think that it's their right and others believe the regime's argument that Iran just needs nuclear power and nothing else. That debate is muted and can't be held publicly today because of the way that Iranians are managing their cover story.

All states don't have a right to get nuclear weapons. They do, however, have a responsibility to keep to the treaties that they have signed. Iran has signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapons state. Therefore, today it does not have that right unless it withdraws from the treaty. If it does, it should return all the materials it received as a member of good standing in the treaty.


**Question:** Professor Waltz, given the current facts on the ground, if you had the American president's ear right now, what would you suggest he do with regards to Iran?

**Kenneth Waltz:** What would I tell George Bush? I certainly would tell him to talk to the Iranians and the Syrians. I would tell him to play down the threats he's been making. We have a drumbeat going on now, about Iran and the danger that Iran poses. We should talk more quietly and more reasonably, and we should talk to the people who we believe are causing present or potential problems, such as Syria and Iran.

**Question:** Professor Sagan, you suggested that Iran might be quite public about its nuclear program. Another plausible scenario might be an Iranian pursuit of a strategy of ambiguity about their nuclear weapons, which might suffice as a deterrent. Is that a realistic scenario?

**Scott Sagan:** The Iranians are unlikely to follow a policy of ambiguity, for more technical than political reasons. They will have difficulty knowing that they actually have a nuclear deterrent without testing. Their arsenal would be primitive. In this sense Iran is like North Korea. The international community thought they might have material for one or two bombs. Then when the U.S. threatened them, confronting them rhetorically in the "axis of evil" speech and over evidence that A.Q. Khan had given them centrifuges, they said, "You're right, and there's nothing you can do about it because you're getting bogged down in Iraq."

Why did the North Koreans not stop there? They weren't sure they had convinced the United States they actually had that deterrent. So they moved forward with a test.

The same could happen in the future with Iran. 

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## NOTES

1 Molly Moore and Kamran Khan, "Pakistan Moves Nuclear Weapons," *Washington Post*, 11 November 2001.

2 Elaine Sciolino and Katrin Bennhold, "Chirac Unfazed by Nuclear Iran, then Backtracks," *New York Times*, 1 February 2007.

*Editor's Note:* Kenneth Waltz is the author of "Realist Thought and Nonrealist Theory," which appeared in the 1990 Spring/Summer issue of the *Journal of International Affairs* (volume 44, no. 2).



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Jahangir Amuzegar** ("The Ahmadinejad Era: Preparing for the Apocalypse") is an international economic consultant based in Washington, DC, and was formerly the government of Iran's minister of commerce (1962 to 1963), minister of finance (1963) and ambassador-at-large (1963 to 1979). He is the author of seven books on Iran, oil and economic development, including *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution* (1991), *Iran's Economy under the Islamic Republic* (1997) and *Managing the Oil Wealth: OPEC's Windfalls and Pitfalls* (1999). He has also written more than fifty articles in journals such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Middle East Journal*, *Middle East Policy*, *Oil & Gas Journal* and *Washington Quarterly*.

**Richard K. Betts** ("A Nuclear Iran: Promoting Stability or Courting Disaster?") is the Arnold Saltzman Professor of War and Peace Studies, the director of the Institute of War and Peace Studies and the director of the international security policy program at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. He is the author of three books published by the Brookings Institution: *Surprise Attack* (1982), *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (1987) and *Military Readiness* (1995). He is the coauthor and editor of three other Brookings books: *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (1979), *Nonproliferation and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1980) and *Cruise Missiles: Technology, Strategy, Politics* (1981). He is the editor of *Conflict after the Cold War: Arguments on Causes of War and Peace*, 2nd edition (Longman 2001). His writings have earned five prizes, including the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award of the American Political Science Association for the best book in political science in 1980. He was a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution until 1990. A former staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the National Security Council and the Mondale presidential campaign, Betts has been an occasional consultant to the National Intelligence Council and Central Intelligence Agency. Professor Betts received his B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. in government from Harvard University.

**Karim Sadjadpour** (“The Nuclear Players”) is an associate with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a former analyst with the International Crisis Group. Formerly based in Tehran and currently in Washington, DC, Sadjadpour has conducted dozens of interviews with senior Iranian, American and European officials, as well as hundreds of interviews with Iranian intellectuals, clerics, dissidents, paramilitaries, businessmen, students, activists and youth, among others over the past three years. He is a regular contributor to BBC World TV and radio, CNN, National Public Radio and PBS NewsHour, and has also written for the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune* and *New Republic*. Sadjadpour has testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, given lectures at Harvard, Princeton and Stanford Universities, and spoken before the Council on Foreign Relations and the Asia Society in New York. He holds degrees from the University of Michigan and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He was a visiting fellow at the American University of Beirut and has been the recipient of numerous academic awards, including a Fulbright scholarship. He has lived in Latin America, Europe and the Middle East and speaks Persian, Spanish and Italian and is conversant in Arabic.

**Scott Sagan** (“A Nuclear Iran: Promoting Stability or Courting Disaster?”) is a professor of political science and co-director of Stanford’s Center for International Security and Cooperation. Before joining the Stanford faculty, Sagan was a lecturer in the Department of Government at Harvard University and served as a special assistant to the director of the Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon. He has also served as a consultant to the office of the secretary of defense and at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Sagan is the author of *Moving Targets: Nuclear Strategy and National Security* (1989), *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (1993), and with co-author Kenneth Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (2002). His recent articles include “How to Keep the Bomb from Iran,” in *Foreign Affairs* (September-October 2006); “The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969,” co-written by Jeremi Suri and published in *International Security* in spring 2003; and “The Problem of Redundancy Problem: Will More Nuclear Security Forces Produce More Nuclear Security?” published in *Risk Analysis* in 2004. Sagan received his B.A. from Oberlin College and his Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University.

**Eliz Sanasarian** (“Domestic Tribulations and International Repercussions: The State and the Transformation of Non-Muslims”) is a professor of political science at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *Religious Minorities in Iran* (2000) and *The Women’s Rights Movement in Iran* (1982). Her articles on a variety of topics, including genocide and the environment, have been published in