

Lesson

The U.S. and Iran: Confronting Policy Alternatives

Choices for the 21st Century Education Program, Brown University




News about Iran appears frequently in the press these days. In the summer of 2009, tumultuous protests over Iran’s disputed presidential election captured the attention of the world. At the same time, nuclear weapons and weapons proliferation are drawing increasing world attention, and Iran is often at the center of these discussions.

The United States and other governments around the world worry that Iran wants to build nuclear weapons. Iran’s president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has staunchly defended Iran’s right to a nuclear program, claiming that it is only developing nuclear materials for peaceful purposes, a right protected under international law. The dilemma for the international community is that it is difficult to distinguish between “good atoms” for peaceful purposes like nuclear power and “bad atoms” for military purposes.

In 2006, Iran restarted its uranium enrichment program, a move that sparked increased concern around the world. There is much debate internationally about how to respond to this issue. The United Nations Security Council has imposed sanctions and worked to resolve the conflict through multilateral talks for several years.

In December 2007, an assessment by U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that Iran froze its nuclear weapons program in 2003. The assessment also stated that the agencies “do not know whether [Iran] currently intends to develop nuclear weapons.” This finding has not quieted concern about the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran. Further, many remain unconvinced by the intelligence assessment.

As the Bush administration was coming to a close in fall 2008, the United States announced it would impose new, unilateral financial sanctions against Iran. When President Obama came into office in January 2009, he expressed hope that a policy of diplomatic engagement with Iran could help resolve these issues.



Students look at a small-scale model of the nuclear fuel cycle at an exhibition of Iran's nuclear achievements at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran, April 20, 2009.
Reuters/Caren Firouz (Iran Politics Energy Education)

U.S. policy toward Iran is a key foreign policy issue. Several major questions complicate the matter.

- Does Iran plan to build a nuclear weapon, or is it only interested in developing nuclear energy as it claims?
- If the former, how long does the international community have to respond to the threat before Iran succeeds?
- If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, what are the consequences?
- If Iran only wants nuclear power, should it be allowed to enrich its uranium itself, or should it import nuclear energy materials from elsewhere?
- How do Iranian citizens view this issue? How do they view the United States?
- Is it possible to address other issues on the U.S.-Iranian agenda simultaneously, such as human rights and terrorism?

What do you think U.S. policy should be toward Iran today?

In the United States, views on this issue differ widely. In this lesson, you will hear from several experts on the topic and consider four contrasting policy approaches (i.e., “Options” on pages 222–225) before developing your own. You are also encouraged to explore the online resources available from www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_iran.php. As you consider the issues and frame your own option, think about the following:

- What is the history of U.S. relations with Iran? With the wider Middle East?
- What U.S. interests are at stake?
- What steps should the United States take in the coming months?
- What should our longer-term goals be?
- What values are important to you?
- What are the strengths of your option? What are the arguments against it?

OPTION 1: Use the U.S. Military to Achieve Regime Change.

Iran's government threatens the United States, Israel, and vital U.S. interests in the Middle East. The United States should not underestimate Iran's aggression. It clearly seeks a greater role in the Middle East. It wants to flex its muscle by intimidating others into accepting its dominance. And it will not be dissuaded from pursuing nuclear weapons. It also has threatened to "wipe Israel off the map." In fact, its revolutionary Islamist ideology is incompatible with international peace and cooperation. As Iran develops its nuclear capabilities with the intent of one day making weapons, we must recognize that the only guarantee of blunting Iran's hostile intentions is to change its government completely, and to do so now. The population of Iran overwhelmingly is made up of young people under 30 years old, and the evidence shows that these citizens would like a better relationship with the United States. They are tired of their hard-line leaders. The huge anti-government demonstrations in June 2009 show not only that many are dissatisfied, but also that the people are willing to risk their lives to express that dissatisfaction. There are several dissident groups inside and outside Iran that we should support so they can gain more power. All people worldwide deserve democracy and the freedom to choose their leaders; Iran is no exception. A democratic Iran would be both a welcomed friend for the United States and an example to the smaller countries of the Middle East, and it would not seek nuclear weapons. A democratic Iran also would stop destabilizing Iraq and would instead help improve the situation there. The United States must take immediate steps to change the regime in Iran.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 1

- Iranians deserve the liberties inherent in a democratic system.
- With or without nuclear weapons, the current government in Iran will remain a danger to the United States and the Middle East.
- Iranians would feel positively towards the United States after we help them overthrow their hard-line regime.
- Iran's current regime is a threat to Iraq's young democracy and to the Middle East as a whole.

Goals of Option 1

- Oust the dangerous, non-democratic, conservative regime and install a democratic government in Iran.
- Continue efforts to democratize the Middle East.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Encourage and support Iranian resistance groups.
- Use information to sway the Iranian population towards supporting regime change.
- Use military force as needed, including air raids and Special Forces units on the ground in Iran.
- Encourage other nations to tighten sanctions in order to cut off funds that prop up the regime.

Arguments for Option 1

- Many people in Iran are looking for regime change.
- Installing a new government in Iran will eliminate the region's greatest threat to peace and security.
- A new regime in Iran will be a vast improvement over the current one which supports terrorism, abuses human rights, and is trying to hide its nuclear weapons program from the international community.
- Increasing the number of democratic, friendly states in the Middle East will have long-term positive effects for the United States.
- Achieving regime change quickly will halt Iran's nuclear weapons program before it develops a bomb.

Arguments against Option 1

- The problem with Iran is narrow: the possible development of nuclear weapons. Regime change is destabilizing. It is also unnecessary to resolve this problem.
- The United States is overstretched militarily and cannot undertake another action.
- Any attempt to overthrow the Iranian regime will unite the Iranian people against the United States.
- There is not a unified, significant opposition force or group in Iran to lead the change.
- "Regime change" would be difficult and costly. As we saw in Iraq, there are too many unforeseen and potentially very negative consequences to this kind of policy.
- Any effort to overthrow the Iranian regime will damage already strained relations with other countries. Military action against Iran, without full cooperation of other nations, will make the United States a pariah.

OPTION 2: Use Military Action to Destroy Iran's Nuclear Facilities.

The threat from Iran's nuclear program is real and it is immediate. It is clear that Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons. The United States must act, alone if necessary, to destroy Iran's nuclear production facilities while limiting civilian casualties and reducing Iran's ability to counter-attack. Iran has hidden its nuclear enrichment program from the international community for many years. The International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) has been working diligently to discover what exactly Iran has achieved in its nuclear program. Iran has not always cooperated, making it difficult for the IAEA to provide accurate reports. President Ahmadinejad routinely speaks out against the United States, fueling hatred against the United States and thwarting U.S. diplomatic efforts. Indeed, diplomatic efforts have not been successful with Iran because of the Iranian government's radical and belligerent stance. Iran has threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If Iran gets nuclear weapons it might use those weapons against Israel, an important U.S. ally in the Middle East. As a state sponsor of terror, Iran also may pass nuclear weapons on to groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Additionally, an Iran further emboldened by nuclear weapons will pose an additional danger to the fragile democracy in Iraq and will put millions of people in peril. An Iran with nuclear weapons is a serious threat demanding serious and immediate action. But the United States must target the action to the specific threat and be careful not to destabilize an already dangerous region. The United States should take immediate military action against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 2

- Iran's nuclear program is intended as a basis for developing nuclear weapons. This is a danger to our national security.
- An Iran with nuclear weapons would be more dangerous than other nuclear states including Pakistan, India, and China.
- The United States has the right and a responsibility to take action against those who violate the IAEA and international nuclear agreements.
- Threats from Iran towards Israel are not empty ones; they need to be taken seriously.

Goals of Option 2

- Destroy Iran's known and suspected nuclear facilities and eliminate Iran's capability to develop nuclear weapons forever.
- Protect Israel and maintain stability in the region.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Act quickly, and alone if necessary, to launch military air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.
- Sabotage Iranian nuclear facilities covertly.

Arguments for Option 2

- A crisis with Iran is coming sooner or later. Better that we deal with it now and on our own terms.
- Waiting for the international community to act or for trade initiatives to take effect would mean giving Iran plenty of time to develop nuclear weapons.

- Air strikes would limit the amount of U.S. troop involvement.
- Iran's involvement in destabilizing Iraq would be halted if we increased pressure on Iran by eliminating its nuclear sites.

Arguments against Option 2

- Iran does not have a record of unprovoked aggression. It is likely only to attack others when its security is threatened.
- Identifying all Iranian nuclear sites will be very difficult, as we do not have the required intelligence.
- Achieving complete success in eliminating all of Iran's nuclear sites, some of which are underground, will be logistically very difficult, if not impossible.
- A military intervention will not stop Iran from trying to acquire nuclear weapons. In fact, the very threat of military intervention makes Iran more likely to try to acquire them.
- Iranian officials have said they will retaliate against any military action. Their likely targets would be U.S. forces in Iraq or terrorist attacks against U.S. citizens around the world. Iraqi Shiite political groups sympathetic to Iran might also launch attacks on U.S. forces and supply lines in Iraq.
- Any military strikes will fuel anti-U.S. feelings and serve as a recruiting tool for terrorist organizations. Even just entertaining the idea of strikes and publicly stating it has increased distrust.

OPTION 3: Engage in Multilateral Diplomacy to Stop Iran’s Nuclear Program.

Iran’s actions surrounding its nuclear program are a concern for the United States and the rest of the world, but we have the time to address these issues. As the United States has learned from its experience in Iraq, it is important to work diplomatically and to gain the support of the international community when dealing with difficult issues such as these. Additionally, U.S. actions in Iraq have weakened the United States. We are no longer in a position either politically or militarily to consider radical options such as regime change or massive military strikes. Either could prove militarily disastrous. Furthermore, military action of any kind might only serve to embolden Iran’s leaders and further radicalize the country. Instead, the United States should take the broad approach of multilateral diplomacy, using multiple channels to convey U.S. positions on the several issues at hand. Any progress the United States has seen with Iran in recent years has come only since European nations became involved in negotiations, offering “carrots” to Iran to complement the U.S. “sticks.” This shows that multilateral action works. Only a calm and concerted effort to work with others on the Security Council and to have real dialogue with Iranians—rather than provoking them—will lead Iran to shut down its nuclear enrichment facilities and accept outside sources of enriched uranium for nuclear power plants. Diplomacy with international support also will allow the United States to raise concerns about human rights and support of terrorism. While the use of force can’t be ruled out as part of a “carrots and sticks” approach to diplomacy, it is a last resort and must be understood and agreed to only within the context of a united international effort. Beginning real international dialogue on all these issues must be the core focus of the United States. It will require patience and persistence.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 3

- Iran has exhibited a desire to cooperate. It froze its nuclear weapons program in 2003 and voiced willingness to allow IAEA inspections of nuclear facilities.
- Iran may think it necessary to develop nuclear weapons if it feels threatened by the United States.
- Multilateral diplomacy is the most effective, least dangerous way to deal with this complicated problem.

Goals of Option 3

- Stop Iran’s uranium-enrichment program and eliminate a security threat in an already volatile region.
- Re-establish a positive relationship between the United States and the rest of the international community.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Establish negotiations among allied countries and Iran, pulling in the UN and the IAEA as necessary.
- Open U.S. diplomatic relations with Iran and cease talking about “serious consequences” or using other belligerent language that threatens Iran’s security.
- Pressure Russia, China, and others to cooperate in offering incentives for a non-nuclear Iran and disincentives (such as sanctions) for a nuclear Iran.

Arguments for Option 3

- Iran’s huge youth population has a favorable attitude towards the United States and is our biggest ally against the current regime; anything but diplomacy will alienate Iran’s youth and produce another genera-

tion in the Middle East that hates the United States.

- Iran is probably 10 years away from developing a nuclear weapon. We have the time to muster a worldwide diplomatic effort.
- The United States can reestablish its credibility as a force for stability and peace by relying on diplomacy.
- A broad diplomatic effort would enable the United States to address issues other than nuclear weapons, such as human rights and sponsorship of terrorism.

Arguments against Option 3

- The international community will never agree on an effective solution; meanwhile, Iran will develop a nuclear weapon.
- Trying to engage with a regime that supports terrorism and has a belligerent president only encourages rogue behavior.
- Iran has used diplomacy as a cover for years, misleading the international community; meanwhile, they have been developing their nuclear capabilities.
- The sanctions, UN resolutions, and other measures imposed have not worked thus far. There is no evidence that such tactics will work now.
- Iran responds to hard-line U.S. policy. Retaining the threat of U.S. military action is important for a peaceful resolution to this problem.
- Trying to negotiate with both the radical clerics as well as the hard-line president in Iran, when it is unclear where central power is really held, complicates diplomacy to the extent that it may be impossible.

OPTION 4: Normalize Relations with Iran and Begin Trade Negotiations.

U.S. relations with Iran are frozen in time. Since 1979, the United States has refused to have diplomatic relations with Iran. The U.S. government has limited investment in Iran, banned many imports and exports to and from Iran, and advocated for and secured implementation of major sanctions. The Iranian people—most of whom are under the age of 30—are suffering. Iran's people want jobs, security, and housing. President Ahmadinejad has focused on improving economic conditions in Iran; indeed, developing nuclear energy to supplement the oil industry is part of this plan. For the past 30 years, the United States has carried out a provocative and ineffective campaign of intimidation and isolation. The United States should stop threatening Iran. The United States will gain more if it treats Iran with the respect and cooperation it deserves as a regional power. The United States has an opportunity to recast its relationship with Iran, develop trade between the two countries, and increase U.S. access to oil. The United States should capitalize on the positive feelings most Iranians have for the United States as well their need to improve the economy. Over time, the United States can build a cooperative relationship with Iran and address issues of mutual concern. The United States has experience making such bold moves, such as when Nixon made overtures to China in 1972. The result was a restoration of normal relations seven years later. Refusing to talk with an adversary does not achieve anything. The United States must stop threatening Iran and instead take bold new steps to engage Iranians economically and diplomatically.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 4

- Iran's suffering economy is contributing to Iranian discontent and fueling a perceived need to develop nuclear energy and potentially nuclear weapons.
- If the United States threatens military action against Iran, it will only drive Iran to develop weapons as protection against us.
- Prosperity will bring stability and a more cooperative relationship.
- The Iranian people want better relations with the United States.

Goals of Option 4

- Eliminate Iran's perceived need to develop nuclear weapons as protection against a hostile world.
- Improve the Iranian economy in order to encourage reform and cooperation.
- Develop a friendly trading partner in the volatile Middle East.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Lift the sanctions currently in place.
- Renew diplomatic relations with Iran and announce that force will not be used to resolve any current or future disputes.
- Begin trade negotiations and introduce foreign investment options.
- Assist in developing and modernizing Iranian industry, particularly the oil industry.

Arguments for Option 4

- Iran's large youth population would be very supportive of the changes and would embrace U.S. efforts.
- President Ahmadinejad has stated that his main goal is to improve his country's domestic situation. We would

have the support of the Iranian people and undermine the anti-American rhetoric of the current leadership if we took this route.

- The United States has a tradition of using trade as a successful foreign policy tool, such as with China in the 1970s. Iran is a good candidate to benefit from this kind of policy.
- A policy of increased cooperation does not involve dangerous or costly military action.
- The increase in trade between Iran and the United States could be economically beneficial to the United States, particularly in the case of the oil industry.

Arguments against Option 4

- Increasing trade and cooperation takes many years. In the meantime, Iran could build and use a nuclear weapon.
- China remains a difficult challenge for the United States. It violates human rights and occasionally threatens U.S. interests in Asia. A policy of détente is no guarantee of results.
- Iran's current unelected leaders cannot be trusted enough to restore diplomatic relations.
- The problem of Iran needs an international resolution. Many nations are involved in this conflict, and if the United States embarks on a radical change of course, we may find more foes than friends.
- Iranians do not have much reason to trust U.S. intentions. The United States installed a corrupt king in Iran in 1953, and has called Iran a member of the Axis of Evil. U.S. military forces occupy Iraq and Afghanistan, two countries that border Iran. It is unlikely Iranian leaders will trust the United States enough to open trade.
- By offering trade and other incentives to Iran, other rogue nations will also believe they can threaten world peace and get away with it.

LESSON PLAN

In this two-period lesson students will:

- Identify the primary challenges posed by Iran’s nuclear program.
- Work with a framework of four “policy options” to analyze the issues and values framing the debate over U.S. policy toward Iran.
- Deliberate with classmates on the merits and tradeoffs of each of the options presented.
- Articulate their own views on what U.S. policy should be.

DAY I—Exploring Contrasting Policy Options

Introducing the Issue: Using a KWL chart, have students record what they *know* in the left-hand column, *want to learn* in the middle column, and have *learned* in the right-hand column.

1. **Know:** Have the class brainstorm what they already know about U.S.-Iranian relations and Iran’s nuclear program. As ideas are being generated, students should fill in the left-hand column of their chart.
2. **Want to Learn:** Once students have generated a list of things they already know about the situation, have them develop a list of 5 or 6 things they would like to learn to better understand the issue.
3. **Learned:** In order to complete the right-hand column of the KWL chart, have students view the Scholars Online video clips that accompany this lesson (see the box below for information on accessing these). With each of the five clips, have students write down at least two things they learned about the issue.

To help students get the most out of the video clips, it is advisable to debrief after each clip. Possible debriefing questions include:

- Why is it so hard to determine whether or not Iran is attempting to build a nuclear bomb?

- In light of the dilemma that exists between the right of countries to produce nuclear energy and the challenge of distinguishing between peaceful nuclear energy programs and nuclear weapons programs, what does Mr. Cirincione, one of the speakers in the video clips, see as the best solution for the Iran nuclear challenge?
- How does Ms. Hart, one of the speakers in the video clips, characterize the relationship between the U.S. and Iran, and what impact does this relationship have on our ability to resolve the nuclear issue?
- What appear to be the risks involved if Iran obtains a nuclear weapon?

4. **Summarize:** With their KWL charts completed, challenge students to succinctly summarize the issue in 40–50 words.

Preparing and Presenting the Options

Break your class up into five groups. Assign four of the groups a Policy Option (one for each group). Assign the remaining group the role of the president and his advisors or of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

- **Options Presenters:** Their task will be to review their assigned Option, consider the values that underlie it as well as the tradeoffs involved, and then develop a short presentation to give to the class. This presentation should make the best possible case for this Option.
- **Senate Foreign Relations Committee:** Their task will be to review each of the Options presented in the material and prepare clarifying questions to ask of the “advocates” of each Option after their presentation. The intent is to make sure that the Options, as they are written, are fully understood prior to deliberation on their merits, risks, and tradeoffs.
- **Foreign Representatives:** If your class is large, you may want to assign some students the role of representatives of other nations. They can be asked to present their views on the Options after all of them have been presented.

These videos are available online
www.choices.edu/resources/scholars_iran_lessons.php#twtn.

1. The Iranian government says that it is producing nuclear fuel for energy, not weapons. What is the difference between producing nuclear energy and producing nuclear weapons? [Joseph Cirincione - 3:53]
2. Why would countries like North Korea and Iran want nuclear weapons? [Joseph Cirincione - 1:56]

3. What are the U.S. and Iranian perspectives on Iran’s nuclear program? [Jo-Anne Hart - 2:28]
4. Why might Iran want nuclear weapons? [Jo-Anne Hart - 1:49]
5. What would happen in the Middle East if Iran had a nuclear weapon? [Joseph Cirincione - 0:51]

Note: Scholars Online brings university scholars into high school classrooms. Each video features a scholar answering a specific question in his or her field of expertise. These videos are designed to supplement Choices printed curricula and online lessons. Additional Scholars Online resources specific to this topic are also available.

LESSON PLAN

DAY II—Shared Deliberation and Individual Judgment

Deliberating on the Options

Begin your deliberation by asking students to identify the things they like and the things that concern them about each of the options presented. Encourage students to listen carefully to each other rather than to try to “win” the argument. The intent of deliberative discourse is to see that all perspectives are heard and considered and that all participants have a place at the table. The outcome should involve a more sophisticated understanding on the part of all participating. See www.choices.edu/resources/prosandcons.php for resources.

Articulating Their Own Views


What should we do? Give all of the students an opportunity to come to terms with their own views on this issue. Have them frame their “Option 5” using the format of the Options presented. Students may find the questions provided in the introduction a useful organizing tool.

Beyond the Classroom

Encourage your students to express their views beyond the classroom. Students could write letters to elected officials. They can find contact information for the White House at www.whitehouse.gov/contact and their U.S. senators and representatives at thomas.loc.gov. Students could write letters to the editor of a local paper or write an article for the school or community newspaper.

Students could also play a leadership role bringing this topic to other groups. Possibilities include engaging other classes in school in this topic, holding a forum in the school, or sponsoring a discussion with community members in a public community setting. [Students who pursue such projects are encouraged to contact the Choices Program at choices@brown.edu and tell us about it. We are looking for stories to share with others.]

Additional Online News and Analysis Resources

Links to additional online resources on Iran, including the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), Public Broadcasting Stations (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR), International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Council on Foreign Relations, and the U.S. State Department are available from the Choices Program at www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_iran.php. 

The U.S. and Iran: Confronting Policy Alternatives is a **Teaching with the News** lesson published by the Choices Program at Brown University. It is available online at www.choices.edu/twtn.

Iran Through the Looking Glass: History Reform, and Revolution, a one-week unit published by the Choices Program, provides a foundation for understanding Iranian history as preparation for this lesson on U.S. - Iranian relations today. See www.choices.edu/iran for details.

