



# Iran's Nuclear Program: A Final Warning?

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# **Iran's Nuclear Program:** **A Final Warning?**

**Date:** Tuesday, December 6<sup>th</sup> 2011  
12:00 Noon – 2:00PM

**Place** The Potomac Institute for Policy Studies  
901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 200  
Arlington, VA 22203  
(Ballston Metro Station, Orange Line)

**Co-Sponsors:** Inter-University International Center for Inter-University Center  
Center for Terrorism Terrorism Studies, at the for Legal Studies, at the  
Studies Potomac Institute for International Law Institute  
Policy Studies

**Opening Remarks:** **Michael S. Swetnam**  
CEO and Chairman, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies

**Moderator:** **Prof. Yonah Alexander**  
Director, International Center for Terrorism Studies, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies

**Panelists:** **Dr. Leonard S. Spector**  
Executive Director, Washington, DC, Office, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterrey Institute of International Studies

**Dr. Christopher A. Ford**  
Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Technology and Global Security, Hudson Institute

**Michael Eisenstadt**  
Director, Military and Security Studies Program, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

**Hon. Guy Roberts**  
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for WMD Policy and Director, Nuclear Policy, Emerging Security Challenges Division, NATO

**Closing Remarks:** **Prof. Don Wallace, Jr.**  
Chairman, International Law Institute

# Seminar Summary

## Iran's Nuclear Program: A Final Warning?

December 6, 2011

The Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies (held at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Arlington, VA) presented the topic “Iran’s Nuclear Program: A Final Warning?” highlighting Iran’s nuclear weapon ambition amidst the backdrop of an uncertain political reality in the Middle East. Given the questionable nature of the “accidents” befalling those tied with Iran’s nuclear program and targeted electronic strikes such as the ‘Stuxnet virus’; the argument that a clandestine war is being waged is not an obtuse observation. Professor Yonah Alexander challenged the speakers to analyze and comment on the issue of a nuclear armed Iran and the tactics that may be used to prevent such a reality.

Dr. Leonard S. Spector, Deputy Director the Monterey Institute of International Studies' James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, was the first to provide his analysis of how to deflect Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Dr. Spector offered four main points. First, he warned that the West had only one to three years to counter Iran before it gained the ability to rapidly produce a small arsenal of nuclear warheads. Second, he stressed that although current measures to stop Iran from achieving this goal are often innovative and are being pressed aggressively by the United States and like-minded governments, they have not yet proven effective, and Iran continues to make progress toward acquiring a nuclear-weapon capability.

Third, he said, this makes it necessary to escalate U.S. and international efforts both to *pressure* Iran to halt its sensitive nuclear activities and to *prevent* its further progress. Such escalation is likely to entail tougher sanctions against the Central Bank of Iran and, in all probability, an intensification of covert operations against Iran’s nuclear program. Citing recent comments by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, he noted that overt military action, while “on the table” in theory, appears to be “off the table,” as a practical matter, at least for now. But Panetta left the door open for covert actions, Spector pointed out. Some, such as “accidental” explosions at sensitive sites, Spector argued, might be as destructive as an air strike. He also noted that sanctions originally directed at the Iranian nuclear program had become so broad that they appear to be aimed increasingly at weakening the Iranian regime.

That brought him to his fourth point, which he referred to as “Operation Arab Spring.” Noting that the regime of Bashar Assad appears to be crumbling in Syria, he stressed that when it falls, possibly within the next six months, Iran will lose its only national ally in the region. This would not only reduce the risk of Iran fomenting a wider war in the Middle East in response to interventions to curb its nuclear program, but would also force the Iranian Revolutionary Government to focus its energies on what will certainly be growing domestic challenges to its survival – challenges that will take strength from the Syrian precedent. Indeed, he concluded, if one looks at the combination of what is happening in Syria and the broader sanctions being imposed to undermine the legitimacy of the current Iranian regime, overall U.S. “grand strategy” may well be to promote the overthrow of the mullahs once the Syrian domino has fallen.

The next speaker, Dr. Christopher A. Ford, Director of the Center for Technology and Global Security and Senior Fellow of the Hudson Institute, discussed three distinct arguments against clandestine warfare and how he expected that U.S officials might respond to those arguments in pondering the prospect of such a campaign. The first argument he addressed discussed the notion that clandestine warfare is illegal. Dr. Ford set the grounds for his argument

acknowledging that both the United States and Israel have left overt military action on the table for addressing Iran's nuclear program, which implies that a military offensive would be deemed legal by both actors. (Indeed both nations have set a precedent of preemptive military strikes on rogue states' nuclear weapon facilities as demonstrated in Iraq and Syria.) Ford argued that if preemptive action against an offensive weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program is an act of self defense and is a "legally available" option, then so also must be the "lesser-included" policy of covert war. He also discussed the implications of a covert war, as compared to an overt military strike, through the prism of international humanitarian law. Traditional military strikes might be more effective than most covert means in damaging a nuclear program, but they might also produce more collateral damage and come at a higher geopolitical cost than covert strikes. Covert methods might thus be depicted as morally superior to "legal" military action, and certainly not inconsistent with law-of-war principles stressing the minimization of suffering. Finally, Ford discussed the "Caroline Case" of 1837, which provides a frequently-cited articulation of the legal precedent for preemptive warfare. The British viewpoint expressed in that episode – coupled with the parties' difficulty in arriving at a common understanding of how to operationalize the agreed legal standard, which suggests the flexibility of the concept – arguably supports the idea that it is justifiable to engage in anticipatory self-defense against an assailant in the more modern context of emerging WMD threats. Finally, he suggested that U.S. officials might find a further ground for a campaign against Iran because Tehran is passively and directly supporting terrorism, going so far as aiding and abetting al-Qa'ida and the Taliban in their war against the United States. The U.S. has demonstrated that it believes itself to have legal authority for using force against al-Qa'ida and all its supporters, grounded in self-defense and the Authorization for Use of Military Force enacted on September 18, 2001, and this might be felt now to apply against Iran.

The next argument against covert action Ford addressed is the idea that covert warfare would provoke a bloodbath and that Iran is on a much more level playing field in this type of warfare. Dr. Ford agreed that Iran is adept at covert war, but noted that Iran already considers itself to be in such a conflict, and has been actively engaged in a covert war against the U.S. for the past three decades. Iran has supported and directed terror operations against the U.S. ranging from the Beirut bombing to the recent plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. From Iran's perspective, no covert war taboo remains to be broken; the main question is what the U.S. will do on *its* side of the campaign.

The last idea that Ford discusses is that counter-proliferation is unlikely to stop Iran's program. Dr. Ford acknowledges that this notion does indeed have some legitimacy, suggesting that disruptive tactics will not end the program but merely delay it. Though these tactics by themselves may prove to be unsuccessful, however, if coupled with other strategies to address the Iranian problem they might provide enough time to stop the program by other means (*e.g.*, regime change). Finally Dr. Ford stressed the importance of making Iran policy with an eye not merely to counter-proliferation in Iran but also to the international nuclear nonproliferation regime as whole. Even if Iran ultimately succeeds in developing nuclear weapons, U.S. officials might find it very important to make the cost of such a program to be as high as possible in order to serve as an example to other would-be nuclear proliferator states. This systemic rationale might provide a reason to justify a covert campaign against Iran for years to come.

Michael Eisenstadt, senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program, discussed the larger consequences of Iranian nuclear proliferation, comparing it to Pakistan, China, Russia, and North Korea and their practice of sharing weapon

technology. In response to the threat posed by Iran, regional powers have significantly increased their conventional military forces as well as expressed interest in pursuing their own “civilian” nuclear programs. This regional militarization is inherently dangerous for stability and could have massive international implications. Iran wants to create the perception that their development of nuclear power is inevitable with the creation of covert facilities, the use of mixed messages and double entendres, and symbolic demonstrations, such as showing their missiles instead of nuclear weapons. Thus the Iranians are already using their program as a deterrent against the United States and other regional opponents. Eisenstadt suggests that Iran’s other option is to create all of the necessary infrastructure for an atomic weapon without making the bomb itself. He suggests that at the moment Iran might not have the capability to create a weapon, but if they stockpile enriched uranium and delivery systems then years down the road they can make one rapidly if need be. Ultimately Iran would not have invested this much energy and capital as well as such faced harsh sanctions if they were not bent on creating nuclear weapons at some point. Eisenstadt believes that U.S. policy towards Iran needs to be reset in order for the U.S. to rebuild its credibility and force Iran to believe our threats. The recent attempt to engage in terrorism on American soil is an indication that Iran no longer fears U.S. military retribution.

The Honorable Guy Roberts, former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for WMD Policy and Director, Nuclear Policy, Emerging Security Challenges Division, NATO, explained that the U.S. is already at war with Iran, from Iran’s involvement with Hezbollah to the Quds Force activities in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, covert war should continue but overt war is also a perfectly viable option. Iran is moving deeper into South America, specifically Venezuela, Bolivia. Thus the U.S. needs to be more assertive to stop Iran’s global spread. The United States needs to address every facet of any potential Iranian offense and show Iran the true cost of their nuclear program. If the United States and NATO become more assertive and aggressive then Iran would be forced to see the west’s threats as credible and possibly end their program. The EU and NATO also need to present Iran with incentives to stop their nuclear weapons program. The carrot and stick approach must be fully utilized to ensure the security of NATO members, especially Turkey which is vulnerable to Iranian hostility. Roberts suggests that the United States and NATO may have to demonstrate the “teeth to our bite” if Iran continues to develop its weapons program. He believes the region needs a strong military commitment to ensure stability and act as a deterrent to other nations who may attempt to proliferate. Ultimately this commitment could lead to a potential WMD free zone in the Middle East, which Roberts believes to be the best scenario for future stability and security.

Professor Don Wallace, Jr., Chairman of the International Law Institute, closed the individual presentation portion of the seminar. He agreed with many of the speakers that, apart from the specific challenge of Iran, the viability of the NPT must be ensured. He believes the Iranians to be an extremely proud and ambitious people, so even if there were regime change, a new regime may not stop their attempts to build a nuclear weapon. In his view, co-existing with a nuclear-armed Iran is a scenario that is completely unacceptable.

*The summary of the seminar was prepared by Patrick Cheetham, Research Coordinator; Evan Lundh, Research Assistant; Amy Glazier, Research Assistant; and Jesse Sedler, Research Assistant at the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies. For further information, please contact: [icts@potomac institute.org](mailto:icts@potomac institute.org).*