



# Book Iran and the Bomb

## The Abdication of International Responsibility (CERI)

Therese Delpech  
Hurst Publishers, 2006

---

### Recommendation

The international landscape offers a few terrifying future scenarios, including the vision of Iran with a nuclear bomb. If this threat came to pass, it would destabilize the entire Middle East, disrupt long-standing relationships, threaten other Arab nations and endanger global oil supplies. Therese Delpech takes you on a guided tour of the international diplomatic confrontations surrounding Iran’s persistent, secretive attempts to build a nuclear weapon. This foreign policy nightmare has been building for decades. Yet Iran’s new radical fundamentalist Shia government has adopted a policy of stalling, intimidation and obfuscation to hide its nuclear program. So far, it has worked. Iran has thwarted United Nations inspectors and international diplomats who have been unwilling or unable to force it to reveal its true program and intentions. While the book is dry and academic, if you are interested in foreign policy or lead an international business, *BooksInShort* recommends this realistic professional overview.

### Take-Aways

- Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president of Iran to complete the construction of a nuclear weapon.
- Iran hid its nuclear program from 1985 to 2002, when Iranian exiles disclosed it.
- To keep its nuclear program under way and deflect international pressure, Iran may have fomented the war in Lebanon in July 2006.
- Western democracies have been unwilling to confront Iran.
- Iran bought 18 missiles from North Korea, and learned advanced ballistic technology from Russia, China and Pakistan.
- Saudi Arabia, Turkey and India, among other nations, oppose Iran’s nuclear program.
- Dating back to Shah Reza Pahlavi, Iran has planned to go nuclear for energy-generating purposes.
- Iran’s most important strategic and diplomatic relationships are with China, Russia and Pakistan, all of which have supplied it with nuclear technology.
- Israel is Iran’s public enemy, but it is not the reason Tehran wants the bomb.
- The dangerous situation with Iran shows that the international community lacks rules and enforcement.

### Summary

#### No Compromises

Western diplomats were caught off guard in 2005 when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hard-line militant, was elected president of Iran. At first, diplomats tried to negotiate with him. He rejected their approach. When he called for Israel’s eradication, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Anan called off his visit to Tehran. As these moves show, the West does not understand whom it is dealing with at all.

“Since the end of 1980s, Tehran’s relentless determination to obtain nuclear equipment and materials...has intrigued more than one European capital.”

Ahmadinejad was elected to complete Iran’s nuclear weapons development program. He was not empowered to negotiate with anyone. To keep this program under way and deflect international pressure, Iran may have fomented the 2006 war in Lebanon. Yet while Iran’s citizens are better educated and trained than citizens in any other Middle Eastern country except Israel, they are not part of the governing apparatus. Instead, a religious regime governs Iran, and Ahmadinejad voices its ideas. The country is developing its nuclear options as it simultaneously confronts its enemies and engages in lengthy discussions to forestall any retaliatory measures.

“If Iran wanted to develop a nuclear energy program, the Europeans never tried to prevent it.”

The Europeans, Americans and Russians say a nuclear Iran would threaten their interests. Yet Western democracies have repeated past mistakes and been unwilling to confront Iran, an openly aggressive nation. Western Europe seems paralyzed, U.S. policy is stagnant, the Russians feign neutrality and the Chinese hide behind the Russians. Iran’s supporters, like Pakistan and South Africa, pursue a more opaque, surreptitious policy.

“Until now, Tehran has paid no price at all for its provocative policy.”

Iran already faces major domestic economic problems and the risk of international sanctions, so why does it want to pursue a nuclear program? One possible reason is that it wants nuclear power for purely civilian purposes. If so, Iran would not need enrichment and uranium-reprocessing technology. Nuclear reactors for energy purposes can be obtained readily from third parties, which is how Finland, Sweden and South Korea got atomic power plants. Russia is already building a reactor for Iran.

“Deterrence presupposes a sound knowledge of the enemy, but also some kind of mutual recognition.”

Further, if Iran sought nuclear fuel for peaceful purposes, it did not have to hide this project from 1985 to 2002, when Iranian exiles brought it to light. In 1985, when Iran fought Iraq, no civilian reactor was even under construction. Another possible reason that Iran wants nuclear capability is to bargain with the U.S., Germany, France or Great Britain. However, if so, why did the clerics nominate Ahmadinejad, a radical who is not known as a negotiator, to be president? A third theory is that Iran wants an atomic bomb, not just nuclear energy. This would explain why it misled IAEA inspectors, used its military to conduct enrichment research and developed a ballistic missile program. At the same time, Iran pursued a clandestine program to purchase critical components worldwide. There is some question about Iran’s technical capabilities, but since this project is so secretive, no one can accurately explain its progress and development.

“From the mid-1990s, the Europeans were aware of the possibility that this civil nuclear energy program might enable Iran to obtain expertise and technology from the Russians, other than those necessary for purely peaceful purposes.”

By 2006, Iran had the capability to produce uranium metal and was operating a gas centrifuge plant. These are advanced steps, but its ability to deliver ballistic missiles is still questionable. Iran bought 18 sophisticated missiles from North Korea, and learned advanced ballistic technology from Russia and Pakistan. Now Iran’s most crucial strategic, diplomatic relationships are with China, Russia and Pakistan, all of which have supplied it with nuclear technology.

“The Russians, no amateurs when it comes to intelligence, probably have an interesting dossier on Iran’s nuclear programme.”

Iran’s strategy has been to stall by engaging in diplomatic talks while it presses ahead technologically. In 2005, an important mullah said Iran would not negotiate any compromise in its ability to produce nuclear-enriched materials. Yet, he said, it fears U.N. Security Council economic sanctions. Since Iran is moving quickly, it should have enough enriched materials to build an explosive device within two years. Politically, Iran has worked to become a leader of the nonaligned (that is, unaffiliated with a major power bloc) countries, yet Saudi Arabia, Turkey and India oppose its nuclear program.

## Inaction in Europe

Dating back to Shah Reza Pahlavi, Iran had plans for nuclear energy. Europe was interested since Iran has vast natural energy resources, and was exporting them to China, India, Pakistan and South Africa. In 1983, Iraq bombed Iran’s Bushar power station during the Iran-Iraq war. After the war, Tehran asked Germany and France to rebuild it, but both refused. Finally, in 2005, Russia agreed to rebuild the plant and supply its reactors.

“An Iranian nuclear bomb could...cost a lot more than a military operation by calling into question not only America’s entire ‘Greater Middle Eastern’ policy, but also its deterrent capability in the region.”

As Iran built its nuclear infrastructure, ministers from France, Britain and Germany engaged in a decade of “constructive dialogue” to curtail Iran’s nuclear ambitions, but they did not produce significant results. The Europeans tried this initiative for three reasons:

1. To prove the beneficial results of diplomacy through “effective multilateralism” – Part of this approach was the ability to intercept vehicles carrying nuclear parts. Yet when Iran twice broke its commitments to Europe, no penalties were imposed.
2. To show a united front, which did not exist during the Iran-Iraq War – Their methods differ, but all three oppose a nuclear Iran since it would destabilize the Middle East. In July 2006, all three adopted U.N. Security Council Resolution 1696, listing consequences if Iran violated its basic provisions.
3. They felt threatened by Iran’s nuclear intentions – If the E.U. expands to include Turkey, Europe’s interests will be directly linked to this region’s developments. Worse, the missiles in Iran’s planned program would be able to hit European cities. This would create a major threat to European stability.

## U.S. and Russian Policies

Iran has posed serious problems to the U.S. since 1979, when it was surprised by the shah’s fall and the subsequent break in diplomatic relations. Iran supports Al Qaeda, Hizbullah and Hamas; it works with Syria to foment instability in Iraq and Afghanistan. It promotes Israel’s eradication. Yet despite its rhetoric, Iran could not withstand a U.S. military attack. If this threat developed, Iran would suffer a political and security upheaval. Meanwhile, the U.S. always has opposed Tehran’s atomic efforts and must maintain the credibility of its nuclear deterrence policy. Some argue that the U.S. is waiting for European diplomatic efforts to fail, yet that is already evident, and the U.S. has not yet confronted Tehran about its Security Council violations.

“Nuclear cooperation with China is one of the most significant alliances Iran has established, alongside those with Russia and Pakistan.”

Russia has a complex relationship with Iran, and has supplied it with nuclear technology and personnel. Iran purchased Soviet military equipment. A Russian official signed an agreement to build an ultracentrifuge facility, but it was cancelled in 1998 after the U.S. objected. From 2005 to 2007, Russia made other deals with Iran concerning ballistic missile technology, yet many of those have never come to light.

“Egypt fears an Iranian nuclear bomb, which would be all the more worrying since Iran has never been an ally of the Arab countries in general or of Egypt in particular.”

Since Russia hoped to benefit by providing nuclear fuel and expertise for a civilian reactor, it played along with Tehran’s waiting game. Meanwhile, Tehran was pursuing its full-blown military program. In the end, Russia has both helped and tried to rein in Tehran, but both countries could be considered in violation of nonproliferation agreements. Since Russia has been integral to Iran’s nuclear program, it has special intelligence about secret locations and technology. Western sources believe Russia knows Tehran’s true intentions, but has been vague about them. Russia’s poor relationship with the U.S. has only made it closer with Iran. Russia may be betting it can complete other large nuclear projects and become Iran’s strategic partner.

“As regards Riyadh’s position on this matter, the situation is pretty clear: Washington has created a mess in Iraq and should not pull out before fixing it.”

Iran’s other attractive potential partner is China, which has a huge need for energy complemented by its ability to sell Iran military equipment. Both countries oppose the West and want to control Middle East oil-shipping lanes. International inspectors have witnessed Chinese scientists and technicians exiting nuclear sites when they arrive and disappearing until they left. China also signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with Iran in 1990 and 1992, which was not disclosed to the IAEA. Iran also may be following the Chinese political model of encouraging economic liberalism while carrying out hard-line political repression. In turn, China is using the same stalling tactics it employed when the U.N. challenged North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. China has supplied the Iranians with Silkworm missiles, guidance systems, radar and an automated air defense system, some of it using American technology that was passed on to the Chinese.

“The nuclear links between Iran and South Africa are complex and mystifying.”

Pakistan is another ambiguous ally. The Taliban are friendly with Pakistan, but have strategic and ideological differences with Iran. In the mid-1990s, Pakistan’s Abdul Qadeer Khan secretly gave Iran blueprints (which he had stolen from a facility in the Netherlands) for industrial centrifuges that were needed to process uranium. Pakistan and Iran were at odds in the late 1990s, but this did not interfere with the transfer of nuclear equipment. Pakistan is unwilling to disclose its real relations with Iran, since that would also mean disclosing its nuclear ties with Iran and China.

“Israel, it must be stressed, is not the reason why Tehran wants to acquire the nuclear bomb.”

India’s connection with Iran is hundreds of years old. The two nations have the world’s largest Shia Muslim populations and an ambiguous relationship with each other. Iran needs India to counterbalance its strong relationship with Pakistan, while India needs Iran’s energy resources. To wean India away from Iran, the U.S. has been moving to supply India with a civilian nuclear reactor. India is pivotal to the balance between the U.S. and China. When the U.S. and India advanced their bilateral relations, China countered by signing an agreement with Pakistan.

“An Israeli intervention against Iran, especially if successful, would probably make a lot of people happy, for nobody really has any idea how to resolve the problem.”

Israel is a primary enemy of Iran, but it is not the reason Tehran wants the bomb. Israel gives Iran an excuse for helping its Arab neighbors, which masks Iran’s regional ambitions, especially against other Arab Gulf states. Israel has a nuclear deterrent capability and superior conventional military forces. Given Iran’s stated goal of eliminating Israel, it fears that if Iran gets the bomb other Arab nations will develop nuclear programs. Israel’s current response is diplomatic. It exchanges information with all concerned parties. Yet many in the West and in Arab capitals would be glad if Israel settled the Iranian nuclear problem militarily, but few would admit it. Israel may be forced to act alone if Iran makes significant progress toward developing a bomb, if diplomacy breaks down, or if the U.S. lacks the desire to become involved. If a confrontation seemed probable, Iran likely would attack Israel first using terrorist attacks or its Shehab 3 missiles. This would force the confrontation. A precursor to an Israeli attack on Iran may already have taken place when Israel bombed Hizbullah forces in Lebanon in 2006.

“Iran presents the international community with one of its greatest long-term challenges.”

Egypt’s position on Iran is even more confusing, since they have never been allies. However, Egypt has often remained silent when the U.N. could have sanctioned or penalized Iran, especially in May 2005. Egyptian diplomats have adopted a defensive stance when asked about the country’s position toward Iran, for several reasons. First, Egypt is opposed to democracy in the Middle East and does not want to publicly be considered a friend of the U.S. Egypt also wants a larger international role, so it may wish to look evenhanded in the U.N.’s multilateral debates. Egypt also may be undertaking its own experiments in nuclear development, and does not want to call attention to them. Yet Egypt and Iran still are not close and view each other suspiciously.

Iran’s other main rival is Saudi Arabia. The two nations have increasingly been at odds since the 1980s, when Riyadh sided with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. However, the two nations have worked together on oil issues since the 1990s. In 2005, Riyadh publicly criticized Iran’s nuclear ambitions and it has stated that it has no any atomic facilities on its soil. However, the Saudis have funded Pakistan’s nuclear program and their intelligence services work together.

South Africa, which is nonaligned, also has been Iran’s partner, though the nature and motives of their relationship are unclear. Tehran purchased uranium from South Africa in the 1980s. South Africa also has experience hiding its nuclear weapons from international inspectors: In 1991, South Africa admitted that it produced six nuclear missiles without being detected. Some fear that it gave Iran this knowledge.

While Iran’s nuclear plans continue, the implications of a nuclear Iran are dangerous and far-reaching. For instance, Iran could easily forge new alliances and alter the strategic order of the Middle East. In any case, Iran’s ongoing nuclear program demonstrates that the international community has almost no rules or enforcement in place to deal with a renegade nation.

## About the Author

**Therese Delpech** has directed strategic studies at the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) since 1997. She is a researcher at the Center for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) and a commissioner of the U.N. Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission.

