The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is a regime bent on survival. It is not yet a half-century old, but it has drastically changed and masked its truest intentions from the international community. Examining the overall strategy of Iran unveils the core necessity of its survival—Syria and Hezbollah. It is through these two allies that Iran’s true colors and strategic ambiguity are evident. We’ll examine the strategic, geographical, and cultural examples of strength provided to Iran by Syria and Hezbollah. Additionally, Iranian leaders pursue highly enriched uranium (HEU) under the guise of peaceful intentions. Iran’s proxy organizations spearhead its survival and the risks of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapons capability are plentiful, for they could lead to a nuclear arms race or even war.

Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria

The strategic objective of Iran is survival through proxy organizations. To survive is to thrive eventually, and doing both advances the underlying goal of an independent, pragmatic state capable of developing deep religious and nationalist beliefs across the region. It has not always been this way. The U.S. and the West had a friendly relationship with Iran from the 1950s through the late 1970s. Religious tension and unrest within Iran against the pro-western secular leader, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, led to the 1979 revolution to overthrow him.
After that Islamic Revolution, the Ayatollah Khomeini led initial Iranian movements of Shiite Islam through rousing speeches while governing with strict Islamic directives.

Two examples of Iran’s intent to expand through violence are the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and the 1983 bombing of a Marine Corps facility in Beirut, Lebanon. Each instance creates a vital point to understand when discussing Iran in the Twenty-First Century. First, that the Iran-Iraq war developed a more pragmatic Iran, “As the war [between Iraq and Iran] dragged on, popular support for it waned. The [Iranian] population was demoralized and wearied by years of inconclusive fighting, making it increasingly difficult to attract volunteers.”\(^1\)

After the end of the war and Khomeini’s death, analysts observed a cautious Iran and even today it remains reluctant to seek direct involvement in any large scale conflict. “Tehran’s cautious behavior during past crises is the best proof that post-Khomeini Iran has tried to avoid direct involvement in costly conflicts and quagmires with its enemies.”\(^2\) This pragmatic behavior in Iran is counter-intuitive to the mainstream international belief that Iran is a transparently violent and predictable regime. The way the international community views Iran versus how Iran is in reality displays a kind of chicanery in Iran’s strategic objectives. The point is that Iran is not an isolated regime like North Korea. Iran’s strength is its ambiguity doctrine.

The second important point to understanding Iran’s overall strategy is the relationship it has with Syria and Hezbollah. To comprehend the issues of today, we must again look back at Lebanon in the 1980s. Lebanon endured a brutal civil war in the 80s in which it experienced the dispatch of the Lebanese government. That vacuum of power left Iran the ability to export its

\(^1\) Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (Marine Corps University: Middle-East Studies 2011), 2.

\(^2\) Ibid.
terror arm to the central part of the Middle-East region. Iran essentially established a Shiite outpost of terror. Thus, the vacuum in Lebanon allowed Iran to prepare and employ offensive operations against named enemies, Israel, and the United States, in an indirect manner. Such strategic ambiguity is significant. Iran readily denies any involvement in violent attacks against Israel and U.S. assets while placating its aimed goal of expanding regional Shiite interests.

Iran actively pursues the development of a strong Hezbollah through providing economic and military assistance. “Both [Syria and Iran] regard Lebanon as their front line against Israel and Hezbollah as their strategic proxy.” From the late 1980s to the present day, Iran has facilitated Hezbollah’s acquisition of upgraded military ground-to-ground missiles. Iran also exports trained fighters known as the Qods Force to carry out terrorist attacks from southern Lebanon and even from Palestinian territories. Finally, estimates of Iran’s economic contributions to the development of Hezbollah are over $100 million dollars a year for training the Qods Forces and garnering intelligence against Israel. To summarize, what we see between Iran and Hezbollah is not only the exportation of weapons, money, and men. We see the exportation of ideology. The Iranian exportation of all these assets supports its strategic goal of expanding influence in the greater Middle-East. Geography is important when discussing Hezbollah and Syria. The proximity of Lebanon and Syria to Israel and the Mediterranean Sea make for strategic military outposts for Iran to train Hezbollah’s soldiers. Bases and ports in Syria provide Iran a greater ability to obtain and export military weapons to its proxy

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3 *Hezbollah as a Strategic Arm of Iran, Intelligence and Terrorism Information*, (Center at the Center for Special Studies, 2006), 6.
4 Ibid, 10.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
organizations. Iran’s placement of resources in Syria and Lebanon create an “Iranian stronghold in the heart of the Arab world.” As we’ll see, Syria and its leader provide an additional strength to Iran.

Bashar al-Assad has been the President of Syria for over a decade. He is a member of a minority Alawi sect of Islam yet has maintained his grip on power. He has endured similar economic hardships that other dictators in the region could not overcome before being toppled by revolution. Assad’s rule and overall situation compare with Saddam Hussein’s firm rule as a religious minority leader in Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s. Assad’s age and more importantly his, “Staunch anti-western stance gives him a layer of protection that other leaders do not enjoy.” These points of strength for Assad display the strategic importance for Iran to align itself with the Syrian regime. Furthermore, we see a cultural similarity of interests between Syria and Iran in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. “Many Syrians perceive [Assad’s] opposition to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and his anti-Israel policies as desirable and in the national interest.” Assad’s strength and anti-western sentiment offer another link in the partnership of Syria and Iran. There is a cultural view that is anti-western permeating from both regimes that are supplemented and strengthened by a common idea to fight Sunni states as well. The latter point is crucial to understanding the region. Iran is not only fighting Israel and the U.S.; there is an enduring battle in the Middle East between Sunni kingdoms or military dictators antagonized by Iranian interests and Shiite rebels. The hatred of Saudi Arabia by

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8 Ibid, 2.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid, 203.
Iranian leaders and citizens alike is so strong that it recently aligned Israel and Saudi Arabia in an effort to stop Iran from producing a nuclear weapon.

Assad and Iran learned from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. As the U.S. entered Baghdad, thousands of young people celebrated. “The very first moments of that regime change were a genome of the revolution that could happen not just in Iraq, but also in Syria and beyond.”\(^{14}\) That image of jubilation from young people likely brought visions of impending chaos in Syria. As a result, Syrian leaders went on the offensive and exercised brutal tactics against political dissenters while also releasing terrorists across the eastern border to slow the advance of U.S. security forces and stability operations.\(^{15}\) This effort from Syria displays a precise calculation of Assad that promotes Iran’s interest as well. Geography again comes into play here, as U.S. forces in Iraq were geographically sandwiched between two regimes owning hatred for the west and coercing to disrupt democratic progress.

The Civil War in Syria has led to many indicators of chaos and the battle for dominance in the region. The U.S. pursuit to guide regional stability is given pause in the current state of chaos. “Those wanting more American involvement in Syria argue that an al-Assad victory would increase Iran’s influence, embolden Hizb Allah, and risk the United States’ reputation as a superpower and its credibility among allies (and enemies) in the region.”\(^{16}\) Oddly enough, Iraq today is a battleground in which the interests of Iran are somewhere in the same boat as the interests of the U.S. government. The inexplicably violent Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) wreaks havoc across the lands of north and central Iraq. Shiite rebel forces have moved from

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\(^{15}\) Ibid, 217.

western Iran and into Iraq to fight the advance of the Islamic State fighters. This is another example of regimes and organizations fighting for dominance in the region; the vacuum of power in Iraq today will be filled much like that of Lebanon thirty years ago. The Iran-ISIS conflict shows remaining dissent between Sunnis and Shias. It is a more potent display of just how complicated and dynamic the geopolitical situation in the Middle East is.

**Iran and Nuclear Weapons**

There are many risks to the Iranian nuclear weapons program. All of the risks boil down to a theme of instability and fear created by the unknown. Iran has been utilizing technological advances to produce HEU for several years. An additional example of Iran’s caution in the post-Khomeini era is its halting of HEU production after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.\(^\text{17}\) The U.S. attack indeed gave Iran some pause. Iran has continued production in the recent years. The continuation is an example of pragmatism and strategy. As the U.S. effort in Iraq slowly dragged on many in the U.S. became war weary. Thus, from an Iranian standpoint, the odds of the U.S. invading its sovereignty became unlikely. The continuation of HEU production after these realities shows that Iran is paying attention to the geopolitical scene. Some assessments conclude that Iran has accelerated the HEU program. An Iranian nuclear weapon is a risk because of the rhetoric that Iran has spewed over the years against Israel and the U.S. assets in the region. Furthermore, Iran would be able to export the weapon quickly and efficiently through its tried and true smuggling practices used to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon. Therefore, it is

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\(^{17}\) Eisenstadt, *Strategic Culture*, 2.
plausible to consider the proliferation of an Iranian nuclear weapon as another dangerous element to the significant partnership with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.

The broader risk of an Iranian nuclear weapon is—increased Iranian deterrence capabilities. If Iran becomes a nuclear state, it makes for a tough road for any democratic movements in the region. “Iran’s nuclear program was undoubtedly to send a message of deterrence to the United States and its allies that any support to the democracy forces inside Iran would result in a military escalation, with the nuclear component at center stage.”\(^{18}\) This risk of stalling the democratic process fragments into another danger of an arms race in the already violent region. It is highly likely that Saudi Arabia and Egypt would pursue nuclear weapons if Iran were able to complete production. The risk is that tension similar to what has befallen India and Pakistan would ensue. As nuclear weapons greatly enhances any country’s bargaining power on the world stage, it is clear that an Iranian nuclear weapon would make Iran stronger and better suited to advance its strategic goals.

An additional fear is that the democracy movements emanating in the wake of the Arab Spring will be overshadowed by those states becoming fearful of a strengthened Iranian regime. Again, the rhetoric of Iranian leaders is what is frightening for U.S. regional interests. There is an attitude among Iranian officials that no military can stop its forces, and no nation will be able to disrupt or destroy its nuclear ambitions.\(^{19}\) If nothing is to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, then it raises the possibility of a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran.

Therefore, a war is a risk of the Iranian nuclear program. How will Iran respond to U.S. airstrikes on nuclear facilities? What would a U.S.-Iran war resemble? How will it affect stability in the

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 241.
region and international oil markets? These unknowns are supplemental risks to the Iranian nuclear weapons program.

The greatest risk of the Iranian nuclear weapons program is that it brings that possibility mentioned above—war. The pomposity from Iran presents Israel with the notion that an Iranian nuclear weapon is unacceptable and will, therefore, have to be prevented through preemptive military strikes. Furthermore, there is a variety of potential responses Iran can implement in the wake of an Israeli or U.S. provocation. First, we must make it clear that if the U.S. or Israel attacks Iran’s nuclear facilities, Iran will mount some military response. Iran will not exercise total restraint. This is the assessment because, “Iran is aware that the West knows about its nuclear program, and an attack [from western powers] would not be a strategic surprise.” It is likely that Iran has already prepared a response to air strikes on its nuclear facilities. The Iranian regime and its pragmatism alone provide merit to the assessment that a military response will ensure. Iran would not be able to sustain a firm grip on its nationalist pride domestically without mounting some response; if for nothing else, Iran will respond for the sheer point of symbolism protecting the mystic of the regime.

A missile attack from Iran into Israel or against U.S. Naval ships in the Gulf is a possibility and would pose the most dangerous threat. The missile threat stems from sheer numbers. Iran has hundreds of missiles capable of hitting targets in Israel and the Persian Gulf. Additionally, the missiles are not precise. Volume and unpredictability expose vulnerabilities in more advanced Air Defense Systems operated by the U.S. and Israel. However, Iran likely

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20 Amos Yadlin et al, *If attacked how would Iran respond?* (Strategic Assessment Vol 16, No 3, 2013).
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
realizes that too large of a response could provoke the U.S. into obliterating more than just nuclear facilities. Iranian pragmatism and the goal of regime survival make the probability of a large-scale Iranian response subtle. The hope is that the response from Iran would be more limited and emblematic. Iran could use suicide plane attacks or a partial mining of the Strait of Hormuz. Fully mining the straight could generate a greater response from U.S. and Western forces aiming to destroy the regime to restore the stability of regional commerce.

**Conclusion**

Iran focuses on regime survival. Its experiences in the 1980s developed its policy of pragmatism through proxy organizations to advance regional goals. Its strategic ambiguities make it a successful pest of a nation for others in the region and any seeking democratic progress. Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah are core elements feeding instability across the lands of the Middle-East with hopes to rid the region of western influence. Iran pursues nuclear weapons under the guise of peaceful intent. The idea of a nuclear-armed Iran poses a significant security risk to the region. Nuclear weapons would strengthen Iran