

## SPEAKERS

**Michael Eisenstadt** is a Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Director of its Military and Security Studies Program. He is a specialist in Persian Gulf and Arab-Israeli security affairs. Prior to joining the Institute in 1989, Mr. Eisenstadt worked as a civilian military analyst with the U.S. Army, and he is an officer in the U.S. Army Reserve. His most recent publication is *Detering the Ayatollahs: Complications in Applying Cold War Strategy to Iran* (Washington Institute, 2007). He earned an M.A. in Arab Studies at Georgetown University.

**Frederic Wehrey** is an International Policy Analyst at RAND currently researching Gulf security, Saudi-Iranian relations and future U.S. strategy in the Middle East. Prior to joining RAND in July 2005, he served as an active-duty U.S. Air Force officer for ten years. Some of his publications include "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," with Dalia Dassa Kaye (*Survival*, Summer 2007) and "A Clash of Wills: Hizballah's Psychological Campaign Against Israel in South Lebanon," (*Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Autumn 2002). Mr. Wehrey holds a B.A. in Middle Eastern history with honors from Occidental College in Los Angeles and an M.A. in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University. ■

## IRAN: MEETING THE MILITARY CHALLENGE

Defining the Iranian military challenge to the Gulf is "exceedingly difficult given the multidimensional nature of the threat, the enigmatic nature of the state, and the fact that Iran frequently exaggerates and obfuscates its military capabilities" argued Frederic Wehrey, an international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation. Wehrey joined Michael Eisenstadt, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, to analyze the challenges of Iran's military capabilities and intentions at a CSIS Gulf Roundtable on October 11, 2007.

Wehrey argued that Iran poses a multi-dimensional threat, and described three main components of Iran's military doctrine: deterrence, strategic ambiguity, and strategic patience. The doctrine signals a shift to a model of asymmetric warfare where Iran avoids a direct confrontation with the United States, in favor of a protracted asymmetric conflict using a combination of proxies, commando strikes, and homeland defense militias. Despite this multi-dimensional threat, Wehrey emphasized that considerable gaps remain between Iran's strategic doctrine and its actual military capacity.

Deterrence is the centerpiece of the doctrine and the primary force driving Iran's pursuit of an indigenous uranium enrichment capability, he said. Through a build-up of conventional and unconventional weapons, Iran aims to convince regional governments that the possibility of Iranian retaliation outweighs any benefit incurred from a military confrontation. In particular, development of Iranian ballistic missiles is designed to discourage cooperation with the United States. These weapons, despite their modest military value, are a highly visible retaliatory option and have a significant psychological impact.

Support for terror groups is another component of Iran's deterrence. Wehrey cited a Revolutionary Guard document from 2001 that outlined the notion of "peripheral defense" using regional allies and proxies. The vast U.S. presence in the region provides Iranian proxy groups with opportunities to exploit U.S. vulnerabilities. Though the threat is real, Wehrey argued that conventional wisdom in Washington often inflates this risk.

Strategic ambiguity is another component of Iran's military doctrine. It is manifested by a lack of clarity regarding Iranian nuclear ambitions, exaggerated rhetoric, and an element of psychological warfare. The final component is the notion of strategic patience, whereby Iranian strategists believe Iran possesses superior moral and ideological fortitude and is capable of withstanding a protracted conflict. This is influenced by the Iran-Iraq War and is a critical component to fighting a better armed and larger adversary.

*(continued on page 2)*

## THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of Gulf energy, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. ■

It is difficult to measure how much progress Iran has made in developing its asymmetric doctrine. What is clear is that Iran has pursued a number of steps to prepare itself, including becoming self sufficient in arms production, strengthening joint force integration, and promoting the initiative of field officers.

Should a U.S. invasion occur, Wehrey believed that the Iranian government would apply asymmetric warfare tactics to homeland defense, using Hezbollah and the Iraqi insurgency as models for countering a better-equipped invading army. A key element of this strategy is a "Mosaic defense," whereby the basij, a volunteer-based Iranian paramilitary force, would fall behind an invading army, cut off communication links and undermine support for the invading force.

Nonetheless, Iran's progress in developing weaponry and equipping forces for asymmetric warfare is marked by shortcomings and limitations. Wehrey suggested that although regional actors fear the Iranian military—especially ballistic missile attacks and its naval capabilities—regional actors are more fearful of Iran's soft power capabilities in mobilizing domestic populations against Arab governments. Local populations are more likely to sympathize with Iran's populist challenge of Western double standards against their own governments, which they see as lackeys of Washington. In this context, Wehrey argued that "managing these diverse perceptions among the U.S. Gulf allies and the reactions of local states to this multidimensional threat actually may be a more daunting challenge than the actual military challenge from Iran itself."

Eisenstadt built on this analysis by examining U.S. strategies of deterrence versus prevention, arguing that the two are not mutually exclusive. Sanctions are the focus of both paths and remain the most viable option in the near future to prevent Iran's development of a nuclear capability, he argued. Despite the weak wording of UN resolutions 1737 and 1747, they still have a symbolic and psychological effect and should not be abandoned. Imposing stronger sanctions, such as a ban on refined oil products, might have a more important effect on Iranian behavior. Nonetheless, Eisenstadt suggested that although sanctions have prompted a debate in Iran, until they produce an Iranian suspension of enrichment and processing, the efficacy of sanctions will largely remain unknown.

A military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities also raises a series of challenges and would not guarantee an end to the Iranian threat. Instead, a strike would likely only delay Iran's nuclear program, which could be reinvigorated. The short term risks of a military strike are uncertain, but would likely include a significant expansion of the war on terror, revenge attacks against U.S. civilians and military personnel, and disruption of oil shipments

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from the Gulf. Those effects may vastly outweigh the benefits, which would be temporary. Further complicating a preventive strike, Eisenstadt raised a series of unanswered questions about the availability of the requisite detailed intelligence required to carry out those strikes effectively. Beyond the military aspect, political calculations in the United States could shape an ongoing conflict with Iran.

Rather than solely focusing on prevention through military action, Eisenstadt advocated the creation of a U.S.-led "Gulf security deterrence regime" to counter a more assertive Iran. What he termed "deterrence by denial" should be based on robust missile defense for U.S. regional allies. It would also include greater cooperation in confronting Iran's non-traditional delivery systems, maritime security, and sea denial warfare capabilities to counter Iran's sophisticated naval military capabilities. As a corollary to deterrence by denial, Eisenstadt also described a tactic of "deterrence by punishment," which could target Iran's vulnerable points such as its oil industry, leadership, and command and control structures.

Both experts agreed that factionalism in the Iranian government makes Iranian intentions unclear and deterrence even more difficult. Though some Iranians allied to Ahmadinejad might believe a limited conflict with the United States is possible, this is likely a minority view in a system where state interests continue to trump ideology. Neither Wehrey nor Eisenstadt ruled out a nuclear Iran in the future, citing the acquisition of crude nuclear weapons by North Korea. Eisenstadt concluded that should the diplomatic channel fail, Iran will remain a significant challenge for the United States, and under such circumstances sanctions will likely continue to be applied against an increasingly assertive Iran. ■

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