



*True North In Canadian Public Policy*

# Straight Talk

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## Alexander Holstein and Peter Jones on the Iranian nuclear weapons program

*In this instalment of Straight Talk, MLI speaks to Alexander Holstein, Managing Director of Geopoliticalmonitor.com, and Peter Jones, Associate Professor at the University of Ottawa, about the Iranian nuclear weapons program.*

**MLI:** Let's talk about a nuclear-armed Iran. How likely is Iran to develop working nuclear weapons and, if it does, how likely is it to press the button?

**Jones:** The American intelligence community's position is that Iran is trying to at least acquire the option to build a bomb or the capability to build one. It hasn't said that Iran is actually trying to build one. Conversely, other countries feel that Iran is trying to build a bomb. But even trying to "acquire the option" is a grey area because it could mean anything from acquiring the basic capabilities but still being a few years away from building a working weapon to being very close to having one. The answer to your question depends on whether Iran wants a working bomb or just the option to build one; and if the latter, how close it feels it needs to be. If it's content with the basic capabilities, the world would be in a more stable situation.

**Holstein:** I agree. The threat needs to be taken seriously, but not as an imminent existential threat. It could become one in the long term, particularly when you consider the inflammatory remarks of many leaders within the Iranian regime, particularly the most outspoken ones such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Of course, nobody knows whether Ahmadinejad will still be around if Iran does decide to become nuclear-armed or what the situation will be in the Middle East at that time. I don't think any major military response is required right now. Iran isn't an imminent danger to Israel or to any other country in the Middle East.

As I understand the Iranians and their objectives, they may be content to get close to having a bomb and then hold back; what some people call the "Japanese option," where everybody knows they are close but have chosen not to cross the line unless pushed. This would fulfill Iran's deterrent requirements without the unpredictable subsequent chain of events—including American and Israeli responses to an actual test, given that both countries have said that they won't allow Iran to have a bomb. It's a more subtle and complicated problem to decide how to live with an Iran that is permanently close to having a weapon, but does not actually cross the test threshold.

**Jones:** That's probably the right attitude to take towards all of this. If you look at the Iranian regime's actions since the revolution as opposed to its bombastic rhetoric, it tends to be fairly risk-averse. It doesn't provoke a power that can hit back. It may use proxies, but never if it may end up in the line of fire itself. That could change if Iran builds a substantial number of nuclear weapons. And remember that Ahmadinejad's bark may be worse than his bite. In Iran, the president is not the most powerful figure. Ahmadinejad will be gone at the end of his term in August 2013.

**Holstein:** Yes, I also think the rhetorical bark in Iran is always bigger than the bite, particularly with this type of issue. The biggest threat from Iran is its support of terror groups like Hezbollah, particularly within the region. I don't see Iran doing anything seriously suicidal like acquiring a bomb, attaching it to a missile, shooting it at Tel Aviv or any other Israeli city. Iran does consider self-preservation, in my view.

**Jones:** Absolutely. That leads to the very interesting question of whether it might "press the button" vicariously by supplying nuclear weapons to a terrorist group. Some people have said that it's a tangible danger but, again, I'm skeptical because the Iranians know that the real trigger finger stands a very good chance of being traced back to them. And even if it couldn't be traced scientifically, any number of countries would simply assume that Iran had supplied the weapons and heap devastating reprisals upon the country. Certainly Iran's sponsorship of terror groups is very serious, but I don't think it would supply nuclear weapons to a terrorist group.

**Holstein:** I think you're right. Whether Hezbollah or Iran fires an Iranian nuclear warhead, it would be traced back to Iran. Even without conclusive scientific evidence, intelligence agencies are pretty good at connecting the dots, particularly when it relates to Hezbollah.

*Iran may or may not develop nuclear weapons, but if it does, it is unlikely to fire them itself or to supply terrorist groups directly. The Iranian regime is risk-averse even though it is also an agent provocateur.*

**MLI:** Let's say that three years from now, Iran has successfully tested a warhead, Khamenei is still the supreme leader and the new president reflects Ahmadinejad in character and lack of political power. Does anything change dramatically for the worse?

**Holstein:** The biggest change is the possibility of greater proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region, like what happened with Pakistan and India. Saudi Arabia could decide it wants to be openly nuclear-armed. It may even have a secret nuclear program right now. And that's when things get a bit scary, especially if destabilization continues in the Middle East, and we—the West, that is—start wondering who's going to take over a regime with a nuclear arsenal. We don't know what the outcome will be in Syria, Egypt or Libya right now, although I don't think Libya is in as much danger as Syria of a jihadist or al-Qaeda-type regime taking over in a power vacuum.

If the Middle East gets into a nuclear-arms race, we don't know how Israel will react. Israel has the smartest leaders in the world right now, with broad experience and a deep understanding of the region and of running their country. They also understand American thinking—including the limits of what the US will tolerate—because they went to school there and created long-term relationships at the highest levels within the American government. But if Israel launches a military strike against Iran or one of its proxies, especially without American backing, it's very hard to assess how other players in the region will react.

**MLI: Peter, how do you feel about that?**

**Jones:** I certainly agree with Alex that one of the biggest problems would be the impact on the regional proliferation of weapons or at least the capability to build them. If some countries decide to acquire nuclear capabilities to deter Iran, it'll take time. You can't just snap your fingers and have a bomb. It has taken Iran more than 20 years. It took Pakistan and others who were really determined several years. So the danger of regional proliferation will play out over decades, and there will be opportunities to try and change that course. On the other hand, most countries confronted with a nuclear-armed neighbour don't build nuclear weapons themselves. They find other ways to ensure their security; they develop a relationship with an established nuclear power. So one great unintended consequence for Iran could be to drive a lot of Arab countries much closer to the US. The Iranian regime says it wants to break the Arab world away from the US when, in fact, it is driving the Saudis towards the US in terms of security.

*Proliferation is the biggest concern, but politics can change dramatically in the time it takes to build a nuclear program, so there are opportunities to derail the program. Alternatively, countries can seek protection from an established nuclear power, which alters the regional balance of power. Israel may react with or without American support.*

**Holstein:** Peter brought up an interesting point about the Iranian nuclear program going on for about 20 years. In fact, I believe the initial phase started under the Shah, and I think some documents from the Ford administration supported it.

**Jones:** That's absolutely true. When the Shah started his "civilian" program, it was quite clearly a cover for a nuclear weapons program—at least to investigate the *option* of a nuclear weapon. And the US was supportive. I'm talking 30-35 years ago here. When the current Iranian regime came to power after the revolution, it shut the Shah's nuclear program down completely, and only resurrected it during the war with Iraq when Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons and no-one helped Iran as they were supposed to under existing treaties. It's a great example of what I mean about time changing the course of a nuclear program.

**MLI: We've touched on the possibility of direct military action if, for example, Iran gave Hezbollah a nuclear weapon or clearly had a working bomb. What effective response can the West make if Iran became extremely aggressive in its posture or its actions?**

**Jones:** The best response is the one you make before Iran actually gets a weapon. After that (in which I include the capability to deliver it reliably), it becomes much more difficult to respond forcibly. The American and Israeli governments have made it very clear that they will not permit Iran to develop a workable weapon. So they are obviously making careful assessments of where they think the Iranian nuclear program is. My suspicion is that if they see Iran making a sprint toward nuclear weapons capability, they will work to stop it before it happens.

**MLI: By doing what? A conventional strike on nuclear facilities? An attack on Iran's infrastructure? Nuclear weapons? What are the options?**

**Jones:** I wouldn't expect the Americans and Israelis to use nuclear weapons unless Iran also had them. But I wouldn't rule out a conventional attack, perhaps even a substantial one. I think also—and only bits and pieces of this have surfaced publicly—that a very significant clandestine war has been waged against Iran for many years involving internet viruses, targeted assassinations and explosions at Iranian nuclear facilities. I think that's

going to step up a great deal if Iran gets closer to obtaining a weapon, especially if the US and Israel decide that the Iranians are sprinting to the finish line.

**MLI: You anticipated my next question. When you refer to stepping up this clandestine war, are the Americans and Israelis already doing everything they can? Do the Secretary of Defense and the Pentagon have a sheaf of further “shovel-ready” options?**

**Jones:** The thing about clandestine activities is that we don't know. The publicly available tidbits indicate a pretty significant set of operations. I assume that the US, Israel and others can play a different deck of cards if they want to take more risk—it's all about risk. How much are you willing to take to achieve an objective? If Washington and Tel Aviv feel Iran is getting close to having a weapon, they may be more willing to take risks and perhaps combine clandestine operations with an overt attack. It's very difficult to be precise if you are an external, independent analyst.

**MLI: Alex, what do you think of that?**

**Holstein:** Yes, I agree. This clandestine war is one of the major options for aggressive action. So far, it has indeed been pretty aggressive but its strategic goal needs to be expanded farther. Our—again, specifically the West's—long-term strategy should be to undermine the nuclear program *and* the regime as a whole. Mind you, I'm not sure we can pull it off; I'm surprised we've been this successful with the targeted killings of scientists, the Stuxnet virus and whatever else. I credit much of the success to Israeli implementation because, frankly—from my contacts in the intelligence community and the public record—I'm unconvinced of American capability to conduct a sophisticated, large-scale, clandestine operation in Iran that would undermine the regime and sow the seeds of dissent among the people. I find the Central Intelligence Agency completely incompetent lately, particularly in the region and especially in taking on Hezbollah. Among the many examples I can give you: in November 2012, the agency lost 13 agents in Hezbollah through pure ineptitude and operational carelessness. Nevertheless, we should aim to develop our clandestine capability.

As for air strikes, the Iranians are very clever and have learned from Saddam Hussein in Iraq—putting all your eggs in one basket is an invitation to having that basket blown up in a single strike. All their assets are dispersed and hidden. Because of this adaptation to US/Israeli superiority, it would be very difficult for air strikes to have any impact despite the impressive visual effects. And a major aerial assault on Iran right now would obstruct potential diplomatic success.

Instead, we need to refine the sanctions to provide a safe way for Iran to stop its nuclear program. Right now, the Iranian regime has a diplomatic advantage because it is united. Various countries involved in the negotiations are also united (Russia and China support UN resolutions, for example), but that can only last so long. The Iranians feel they can play these countries off against one another to buy the time they need to build functional nuclear weapons. Iran has nothing to gain and much to lose from a humiliating public retreat. The negotiating countries must reassure Iran that they are not trying to undermine the regime—but do exactly that on the clandestine level—so that time stops being Iran's friend. Even extending the possibility of normalizing relations between the US and Iran

*It is easier to act successfully before Iran gets a nuclear weapon than after. Preventative primary action may include (potentially ineffective) conventional air strikes and a ramp-up of clandestine activities, for which the West does not have the capacity. Far better to stall Iran's nuclear progress and ultimately change the regime through diplomacy supported by secondary clandestine activities.*

(coming from me, this is totally out of left field!) could really throw this regime off, especially since it needs the West as the enemy for its own legitimacy, so it could create an interesting dynamic. I say we do this, keeping in mind that we are also pursuing a clandestine program to take it out. So there are carrots and sticks.

**Jones:** I'm in no position to comment on what is happening in clandestine operations right now, but I definitely agree that regime change should be the ultimate objective. I've been in Iran many times over the last 20 years and, certainly, life for the common person is very difficult. The average Iranian has no great love for the regime, and a great number of people would like to have a different type of government. You saw this after the 2009 presidential election. On the other hand, and this is important... if we work *actively* toward regime change, it will complicate our efforts to keep Iran away from nuclear weapons. A major reason Iran is pursuing the nuclear option is because it believes that nuclear capability will help guarantee the survival of the regime. An effort to change the regime could push it to think it needs a nuclear option as quickly as possible, and must not trade it away in negotiations.

**MLI:** I don't know whether the Arab Spring improved or worsened Iran's geopolitical position, but our conversation raises the possibility that this regime is not as strong as it looks. Can we simply wait for it to crumble through its own domestic weaknesses? Or is that just a head-in-the-sand approach?

**Jones:** I believe that the Iranian regime will fall the way communist regime did in the Soviet Union. It's illegitimate, doesn't respond to or coincide with the wishes of the people of Iran, and it won't survive.

Even if incoming governments in countries like Egypt don't make us entirely comfortable, the Iranians dislike them even more. Iran has been promising change in the Muslim world under the premise that its revolution was the model to follow. In fact, the Iranian revolution bears no resemblance to the Arab Spring, which was entirely indigenous in the countries where it happened. Those incoming governments have no great love for the Iranians. Then there's the Shia-Sunni issue, the Arab-Persian issue, and Iran has a particular problem in Syria as well. If the Assad regime—Iran's only real ally in the Arab world—falls, and it looks as though it will, we don't know what will replace it. The situation could be chaotic. So the Arab Spring has weakened Iran's position in the region.

*Iran has lost status as a result of the Arab Spring, due partly to its difficult relationships with incoming governments in the region, and partly to the imminent fall of the Syrian regime, its only ally. The Iranian regime is likely to implode eventually.*

**Holstein:** Yes, I agree. Syria is the biggest ace in Iran's deck of cards, and it's about to disappear. The Iranians are very concerned about that. President Morsi in Egypt has made a few overtures... but baby steps. There are so many major differences and issues of contention between the two countries that preclude any sudden alliance. Mind you, I do believe that Sunnis and Shi'ites can work together against their perceived common enemies, and that includes Iran. As you know, in the mid-1990s, Ali Mohamed testified in US federal court<sup>1</sup> that he ran security for a meeting between Osama bin Laden (al-Qaeda is Sunni-based) and Imad Mugnyiah, the top terrorist with the Shia-supported Hezbollah, where a deal was made to cooperate on operational matters. That said, I don't believe these differences completely prevent Iran and

<sup>1</sup> Mohamed, a former US army sergeant who became a top al-Qaeda trainer, operative and bodyguard, pleaded guilty to multiple counts of conspiracy to murder US nationals overseas and to destroy property of the United States government under Title 18 of the *United States Code* in connection with the 1998 embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya. As part of that plea, he went on record about his role in arranging security for the Khartoum meeting between Imad Mugnyiah and Usama bin Laden. See *USA v. Ali Mohamed* (US District Court, Southern District of NY, Oct. 20, 2000).

al-Qaeda from cooperating. For example, we know that Saif al-Adel, who is probably al-Qaeda's Number Two, has been in Iran, and that he travels back and forth across the mountains into Afghanistan and Pakistan with the help of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and its intelligence unit. However, I agree on a strategic regional level that the Arab Spring is not a good thing for Iran and probably isolates it more in the region.

**MLI: Suppose the US Secretary of Defense or the Israeli defence minister, having listened in, asks you both to list the key options in point form and identify the one you most recommend. What is your answer?**

**Jones:** My preferred ranking of the options is a combination of diplomacy and clandestine action: clandestine action with the clear intent of preventing Iran from crossing the nuclear red line combined with diplomacy to establish a clear understanding that we could live with an Iran that is fairly close to a nuclear weapon provided we're sure it's not so close that it could cross the line without our knowledge—and it accepts that it cannot cross the line. In return, we reduce sanctions and perhaps even establish diplomatic relations.

I would say to use military strikes only in the case of extreme danger. I don't think it would help at this point and, as we said a moment ago, their effect is likely to be limited. By itself, Israel's ability to take out all the targets and attack them again within several months as the Iranians rebuild is quite limited. That would be difficult even for the US, although it stands a better chance. I wouldn't take the military option entirely off of the table, but things would have to get a lot worse than they are now before using it.

**MLI: Okay. Alex?**

**Holstein:** I agree with that, except we should also pursue regime change very carefully. I'd probably use a code name like "Operation Blue Sky" because, again, Peter is right. On the one hand, we have to be very careful not to signal to the Iranians that regime change is the objective. We're too clumsy to conduct ingenious intelligence operations like the Brits did during World War II—although I wish we could. "Operation Blue Sky" doesn't necessarily mean CIA boots on the ground encouraging protests in the street. But, for example, instead of going after WikiLeaks, why not use it to reveal information that discredits the Iranian regime? That's how the Russians would play it. I'd "accidentally" let an official-looking paper slip out that says we're going to blow Iran out of the desert if it becomes nuclear-armed. Let Iran know the score in that way. But at the same time, put out a huge carrot out that offers an exit route and makes Iran feel the regime is safe, from us at least, and that it's possible to normalize relations.

On the clandestine side, I recommend putting together a special, international intelligence ops task force, certainly between Israel and the US, solely assigned to conduct *smart* clandestine warfare against Hezbollah and really try to bury it as much as possible. We don't do nearly enough to harass Iran's most valuable terrorist proxy, yet Hezbollah is Iran's ace-in-the-hole if it needs to retaliate against the US or Israel. I'd start in the US because Hezbollah has plenty of cells there that can be taken out through judicial rather than military action, and then target its cells in Latin America.

*Diplomacy with supporting targeted discreet or clandestine action is preferred, all with the ultimate goal of changing the regime and destroying Hezbollah.*

**MLI: Thank you, gentlemen, for this very thought-provoking discussion.**

## Recommendations

- 1) Aim for regime change, but not explicitly.
- 2) Use a blend of discreet and/or clandestine action and diplomacy to achieve this.
- 3) Resort to military strikes only if facing extreme danger.

## About the Authors



**Alexander Holstein** is the Managing Director of *Geopoliticalmonitor.com*, a Canadian intelligence publication and consultancy based in Toronto. He holds a BA in Theatre (*cum laude*) from the University of Southern California and an MSc in Russian and Post-Soviet Studies from the London School of Economics, where he wrote his thesis on the KGB. Through years of extensive research and worldwide experience, Alex has developed a strong grasp of foreign affairs, maintaining a particular interest in espionage, terrorism, special operations, border security, and international relations. In his former capacity as Executive Director of the Republican Party of San Diego County, he debated and spoke on these subjects at numerous events throughout Southern California, many of which featured his lecture series, *Threat Matrix: Deciphering Allies and Enemies in the Global War on Terror*. He is currently a contributing expert for international security, intelligence issues and American politics at the SUN News Network in Canada.



**Peter Jones** is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa. Before joining the academy in 2007, he spent 14 years in the Canadian civil service: seven years as a Senior Policy Advisor in the Privy Council Office, where he worked on national security affairs for the National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister, and seven years in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, where he worked on arms control and security affairs. He has also spent four years as Project Leader at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), where he led the project on Middle East regional security. At the University of Ottawa, he specializes in conflict resolution and “Track Two Diplomacy,” and is leading various dialogues in South Asia and the Middle East. He is widely published in journals, holds a PhD in War Studies from King’s College, and an MA in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada.



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