

Good Atoms or Bad Atoms? Iran and the Nuclear Issue

For more than a decade, the United States and other governments have worried that Iran wants to build nuclear weapons. Iran's government has staunchly defended its right to a nuclear program on the basis that it is only developing nuclear materials for peaceful purposes. This right is protected by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which Iran has signed. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has said that producing or using nuclear weapons is immoral, but Iran has not always been open about its nuclear program. For example, in 2009, the discovery of an Iranian secret nuclear enrichment plant both worried and angered the international community. The dilemma for the international community is that it is difficult to distinguish between "good atoms" for peaceful purposes like nuclear power and "bad atoms" for military purposes.

The United States and Iran have entered a period of intense negotiations about the future of Iran's nuclear program. China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom are also participating in the negotiations. The deadline to conclude the negotiations is November 24, 2014. The United States and other governments want to prevent Iran from having the capacity to make nuclear weapons. Israel's government, in particular, sees an Iran with nuclear weapons as a dire threat.

The United Nations, United States, and European Union have placed economic sanctions on Iran in an attempt to pressure it to cooperate. (**Economic sanctions** are punishments that restrict financial transactions or trade in an effort to get a country to change its policies or behavior.) The sanctions have severely damaged Iran's economy and caused hardships for the Iranian people, but have not yet led to a resolution of the issue.

There have been other steps to stop or delay any potential nuclear weapons program. In 2010, a sophisticated computer virus, known as Stuxnet, attacked Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities. Many experts believe that Israel and the United States were behind the attack. In addition, several key Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated in Tehran. The stakes over a potential nuclear weapons program in Iran are so high that war is also seen as a possible outcome if negotiations fail.

Iran's newly-elected President Hasan Rouhani and U.S. President Obama have indicated that they would like to try to resolve these issues through negotiation and diplomacy. But the U.S. relationship with Iran has been filled with hostility and mistrust for many years, making negotiations difficult.

What Should Be Done?

You are about to explore this important issue and then role-play three options for U.S. policy with your classmates. When you have completed this you will be asked to make your own judgement about what U.S. policy should be.

It will be helpful to keep the following questions in mind as you prepare for the role play:

- What is the history behind the mistrust and disagreement between the United States and Iran?
- Should the government of the United States trust Iran's government? Should the government of Iran trust the U.S. government?
- Does Iran plan to build a nuclear weapon, or just to develop nuclear energy?
- What are the potential consequences of an Iranian nuclear weapon? What are the potential consequences of fighting a war to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon?