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June 25, 2012: Having It Both Ways on the Iranian Fatwa

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: Having It Both Ways on the Iranian Fatwa

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6/25/2012—Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the leader of Iran, was reported to have issued a fatwa against the production, stockpiling or use of nuclear weapons in 2005, according to an official Iranian statement issued in August of that year at the Vienna meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Since that time, Iran has argued that this fatwa should convince the world that it is not seeking to produce nuclear weapons. Although the US has given the fatwa favorable mention from time to time, no one on the international scene concerned with the Iranian weapons program considers it binding and sufficient. The reasons given for this include the fact that any fatwa can be rescinded and that under certain circumstances it might be acceptable under Islamic thought that a lie be told to protect the community from the hostile acts of outsiders. But there is another reason for skepticism. Many observers consider the Iranians to be motivated by self-interest and not by religious doctrines when it comes to national security. As Nader Hashemi, an Iran analyst at the University of Denver, said recently on NPR, “just like all other political leaders around the world, the supreme leader’s decisions and utterances are fundamentally political.” I know very little about these matters. I am interested in the question of why Iran’s having the bomb poses what some in Washington and Israel, including apparently the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, consider an existential threat to the existence of Israel. Why should that be, exactly? Iranian leaders know that the use of a nuclear device against Israel would mean the complete destruction of their country through Israeli nuclear retaliation. No rational person would use such weapons therefore except in a situation of final self-defense. Just as the mere existence of Soviet nuclear weapons aimed at the US was not an existential threat to America, a rational Iran would not pose such a threat to Israel. I assume that the underlying assumption is that the Iranian leadership is not rational in this way. Maybe that is the case, but if it is, it can only be because they are religious fanatics who would just as soon see their country destroyed in martyrdom against the Jewish occupier of Muslim lands. But would such fanatics play around with a religious injunction, like a fatwa? Maybe. Yet you have to wonder. And they certainly would not do so in the cynical fashion that has been portrayed. An Iranian bomb is certainly a danger in the world that the world is right to try to prevent. But the danger is war. There is no sense in going to war to prevent war. And the idea that the existence of an Iranian bomb is itself a declaration of war, in effect, is a dangerous exaggeration.