

Iran, International Community & Nuclear Weapons The Multiple Narratives

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Iran's push towards nuclearization is dictated by several geostrategic and political factors that make it impossible for Iran to reverse course. Having a directly elected but arguably ineffectual President seems to work as a good proxy mechanism for dealing with internal disaffection.

I IRAN'S PERSPECTIVE GEOPOLITICAL IMPERATIVES

For Iran, the bomb provides a shield for its aggressive attempts at consolidating the 'Shia arc of influence' as well as being a balancer against overwhelming Sunni Arab quantitative and qualitative superiority. The nature of Iran's Sunni encirclement is multi-faceted. To the north west, Turkey represents a Hanafi tradition. To the west, Iraq represented a 'secularist heresy', with the radicalization of the Sunni, probably unavoidable due to years of oppression by the Shia and the latter's consequent need to reassert themselves culturally. The south (most states of Arabian Peninsula) was implacably Wahabi, the east and north east (Pakistan and Central-Asia) largely Sufi.

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In this last region, Wahabism has over the last thirty years or so completely gobbled up Sufism whose syncretic nature means its followers have accepted being indoctrinated into the Wahabi *weltanschauung*. The Sunni noose around Iran therefore is a fast radicalising danger that brooks no dissent or heresy. This of course was made crystal clear to Iran in the way the Shia minorities were persecuted in Afghanistan under the Taliban – with active UAE, Pakistani and Saudi connivance – and precious little international condemnation. The image therefore is that when the Shia are persecuted – either in Bahrain or Afghanistan the only defence they receive are gratuitous statements from a west, that otherwise tends to paint the entire Shia belt in terms of guilt by association with Iran.

The West, having ceded the space to Iran for the diplomatic and political protection of the Shia minorities, can hardly complain then that Iran takes that role seriously. One can argue that Sunni Arab jargon labelling all Shia protests as being 'Iranian inspired' was responsible for this situation even though the Islamic concept of the ummah is precisely about such a pan national Islamic identity. Most Arab countries readily accept Pakistan's claim that Indian statements to the effect that "we share the same culture" smack of hegemonic design and an intention to reunite the subcontinent, but they very conveniently turn a blind eye to the labelling of the old Persian empire as Iraq Arab (Arab Persia) and Iraq Ajam (Infidel Persia) implying the need to purify it. Similarly prior to the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon when the less extreme Amal was the voice of the Shias, the West chose to completely ignore calls for a one man

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one vote system, even though it had become clear that by sometime in the 1990s the Shia were in an absolute majority there. Condoleezza Rice's statement during the 2006 Israeli campaign that America supported "Lebanese democracy" as opposed to supporting 'democracy in Lebanon', endorsed the denominational voting that cynically denies the Shia their rights since all estimates indicate that they are in an absolute majority in Lebanon.

The Military Balance

As the military situation stands in West Asia, the Sunni Arab quantitative and qualitative superiority is so completely skewed that Iran may have no option but to go nuclear to protect itself. In terms of combat aircraft – perhaps the most potent symbol of military superiority as well as being the accepted war winner, Iran has no fourth or fifth generation combat planes. The old A and B model MiG-29s that defected from Iraq and the compromised 70s era F-14s are perhaps the most modern planes in their arsenal and comprise no more than 50 flyable airframes. Contrast this with just one small country – the UAE with a total of 148 late fourth generation aircraft comprising 80 AESA equipped F-16Es and 68 upgraded Mirage2000-5s. Saudi Arabia for its part already boasts a 154 strong fleet of advanced F-15 fighters with 84 additional much improved and stealthed-up F-15SE due for delivery. Added to this is a fleet of 72 Eurofighter Typhoons considered almost fifth generation. In total the GCC fleet of advanced fourth generation airframes comes to about 600 – contrasted with no more than 150 aircraft on the Iranian side – mostly obsolete and all of doubtful serviceability.

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conventional attack. That is to say in order to fulfil a role the West has thrust on it, it seeks the equipment to do the job. It is surprising therefore that American and European statements supporting aircraft sales to the GCC claim they are reinforcing the balance of power while in fact they only succeed in reinforcing Iran's nuclear imperative.

II

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

It is important to first note that there is not one monolithic 'perspective' on Iran's alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons, apart of course from the overarching opposition to its weaponization. The difference is in degree, not in kind, and hence the emphasis on an array of 'perspectives'.

Perception of threat

The first of these is the fear that Iran's desire to assume the role of hegemon in the region may erode the survival of its neighbouring regimes, and this would be much easier to do if it possessed nuclear weapons capability. This course was clearly defined in the US foreign policy towards Iran under the Shah; throwing not very subtle hints that weaponization would not be frowned upon. Post the 1979 revolution and the attempts to 'export' the new Iranian ideology beyond its borders, the desirability of a nuclear Iran changed completely. Such tendencies find voice in Iran's proactive role lending support to Shia populations in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states, such as in Bahrain and Iraq, and methods such as using the *haji* to demonstrate Saudi Arabia's self-endowed supremacy in the Gulf affairs. It is also feared that a nuclear Iran would up the ante in its favour in territorial issues like the Abu Musa island.

Second, it is also feared that the Arab Spring may have negative repercussions on these regimes. The assumption is that Iran may use its example to 'rabble rouse' domestic constituents into ridding themselves of pro-US regimes.

Third, there is a major US military presence in the GCC states which come under the purview of US' extended deterrence. In the event of military hostilities between the US and Iran, such as a US hit on Iranian nuclear possessions, it is feared that likelihood of these states may be targetted by Iran as US 'proxies'. The possibility also exists that these regimes can become collateral damage in a stand-off between Iran and the US simply because of their geographical proximity to the battlefield.

Calibration of perception

The leaders of GCC states do not often publicly acknowledge the threat they feel from Iran's hegemonic pursuits, and their public statements are carefully measured. Their messages convey enough about Iran's belligerence to invite the West to take on a more proactive role, but stop short of an outright condemnation for a whole series of complex ethno-religious reasons compounded by geopolitics.

Within this exist different levels of antagonism towards Iran from individual states, and a significant portion of it has to do with the internal politicking in the GCC. The most active in countering Iran's moves is Saudi Arabia, which has tried to inhibit Iran's role in arousing Shia sentiments in Iraq by backing Sunni groups there. Saudi Arabia is also considered to be the most likely to reactively follow Iran's path of nuclearization should it determine that such capability has been achieved by Iran. These have led to fears of a highly destabilizing nuclear arms race in the region in an attempt to hedge against developments in Iran. Saudi Arabia has a nuclear energy programme, in addition to a number of other states - Bahrain, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) - and while their aspirations to develop nuclear weapons or the chances of success in the short-term are questionable, it is entirely possible that Iranian nuclearization might lead to regional proliferation, with external assistance (such as from Pakistan), in the long-term. This would be especially important for Saudi Arabia to secure its position as the leader both in the region and in the Muslim world.

The UAE has a large population of Iranians in Dubai, as does Kuwait, which aggravates the notion that these groupings may be used to consolidate anti-regime feelings in the respective states. However, there are also states within the GCC, such as Oman, which have been passive in their opposition of Iran, or more accommodating than the other member states. This can be attributed to an unwillingness to acknowledge Saudi Arabia's stewardship in GCC matters.

The point being highlighted is that national interests are paramount. These individual agendas will further come to light at the proposed conference on a Middle Eastern WMD-Free Zone in 2012 in Helsinki, not least because most emphasis will be laid on Israel's nuclear capabilities (Israel itself views Iran as an ideologically-driven existential threat determined to wipe out the Jewish state), taking some

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attention away from Iran. Its materialization would be significant because it stands to be the first direct discussion between Israel, Iran and the Arab states on disarmament measures.

III INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The emergence of yet another nuclear weapons state does not find popular international support; and a nuclear Iran is believed to add to the growing complexities of nuclear deterrence. Avoiding a nuclear domino effect in West Asia sparking off a crisis in the region is at the helm of everyone's agenda. Iran's aggressive realpoliticking in tandem with an opaque nuclear programme is driven by its perception of an anti-Iran and anti-Islam policy practiced by the West (in particular the US) and Israel. Since 2002, when an Iranian dissident group first disclosed information about a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz, the US and its European allies have been resolute to make Iran close its nuclear programme. The suspicion on the basis of which Iran has been held guilty has generated a reaction such that Iran has aggravated the West and Israel even further, in a now decade-long game of cat-and-mouse.

Deterrence by Dissuasion and Punishment

Major initiatives to dissuade Iran from proceeding with its nuclear programme have come from four main players - the IAEA, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the European Union (EU) and Turkey and Brazil. The IAEA which has been inspecting some of Iran's nuclear facilities has not been able to confirm any case of an actual nuclear weapon being developed by the country.

Iran maintains that acquiring full knowledge of the nuclear fuel cycle is its inalienable right under the NPT; it also realises that welcoming the IAEA inspections works in its own favour, since the agency is the only legitimate authority that can give its 'peaceful' nuclear programme a clean-chit. However, Iran's refusal to allow inspections at facilities like the one at Parchin (where a high explosives containment vessel was identified) has re-aroused suspicion and broken down the negotiation process.

Since the failure of the Tehran Declaration and Paris agreement – the EU Troika's (United Kingdom, France and Germany) efforts to diplomatically pressurise Iran into halting its uranium enrichment programme - the baton has been taken over by the UNSC and the P5 + 1 (US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany). Over the past six years, the UNSC has passed seven resolutions on Iran, the latest being UNSCR 1984 of June 2011 extending the mandate of the earlier UNSCR 1929 by 12 months. But the UNSC's economic sanctions have not been able to provide decisive results. In what was believed could have been a successful diplomatic engagement, Brazil and Turkey announced the Tehran Nuclear Declaration on 17 May 2010 with Iran; by this arrangement Iran was to swap its low-enriched uranium for enriched fuel for its research reactor from Turkey. The US suspected that the swap agreement was Iran's strategy to derail the UNSC sanctions and the Turkey-Brazil initiative remained a 'missed' opportunity.

Divided opinion

President Obama's policy on Iran initially flip-flopped between hard talk and tough diplomatic action but has now increasingly turned aggressive and impatient. Given domestic pressures from its powerful Jewish lobby and Israel's constant threat of using military force against its belligerent adversary, the US is finding it increasingly difficult to simply 'talk' to Iran. Since 2010 the United States has been economically alienating Iran by targeting its financial and commercial systems. The US and the EU have urged the international community to ban Iranian oil imports with effect from July 2012 and sever all economic ties with the country. In fact, those who fail to do so have been threatened with secondary and tertiary sanctions. China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Nigeria, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Turkey are twelve countries

who have refused to reduce Iranian oil imports. Saudi Arabia is expected to be the top gainer from the Iran oil embargo.

That sanctions will ultimately choke Iran into compliance is not a popular opinion in the international community, especially opposed by Russia and China who have much to gain, politically, from Iran's miffed relations with the West. For others like India, Turkey or Malaysia, bilateral economic and political relations with Iran are vital, but they have to be kept at a level that will merely mildly rankle the US.

IV

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN THE FRONTLINERS

Just as the Israel lobby imposes certain limitations on US policy actions, any visible reduction in the US bellicosity is met by Israeli statements indicating an imminent and unilateral strike by the latter. In many ways this acts as a further pressure on the US to maintain the state of tension simply as a means of placating Israel and avoiding precipitate action which the US may not be prepared for.

Several domestic impulses are mirrored in Iran as well. Given the deep split between the moderates and hardliners and the emerging schisms even within the hardliners, conciliatory voices are hard to find in Iran. The Iranian system of *t'aarof*, a cultural curiosity, requires a certain level of praise for ones adversaries, the harshness of rhetoric coming out of the west seems like crude bullying from the Iranian cultural perspective. Thus while America sees its rhetoric as a substitute for action and as a device to rein in Israel, the Iranians see this as an obstacle to any meaningful dialogue as it would represent a grave loss of face. Given the schism it is impossible for any Iranian moderate or hardliner to take a conciliatory approach as this would mean humiliating Iran publically. Culturally this comes in the backdrop of a pride both in Iran's history but also the fusion of that history with an ethno-linguistic-religious myth. Iran was in a far worse state of isolation towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, (with all the P5 powers ranged against it and a nonexistent weapons supply and trade) than it is now and therefore the resolution of the current impasse seems to lack a sense of urgency. In a sense each country is caught in dilemma through domestic dynamics that essentially given time will inevitably force a conflict of some sort.