

A Middle East free of Missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Iranian View

NASSER HADIAN

Background paper

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About the Author

Nasser Hadian is a Professor at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of University of Tehran, where he served as the Director of Graduate Studies (1996-98). He was a Visiting Professor and Research Scholar at the Middle East Institute and Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures Department, Columbia University (2001-04). His areas of scholarly and research interests include Iranian contemporary politics, Iran’s nuclear program, and political Islam.

Abbreviations

AP	Additional Protocol
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

1. Introduction

This article provides an overview of Iran's security concerns and examines challenges and opportunities associated with Iran's nuclear programme. The article will first provide a background on the evolving nature of Iran's security environment and the historical factors affecting Iranian perceptions and policies. It will then address the contexts, sources, and factors shaping Iran's decision-making process in terms of its nuclear programme and national security. Finally, the different Iranian points of view on the nuclear debate will be explored. In conclusion the feasibility of a Middle East free of missiles and WMD will be discussed.

2. The background

The 1979 Iranian Revolution transformed the geopolitics of Iran overnight, taking it from being one of the closest and most strategically important allies of the United States to being one of its most vehement opponents. At this pivotal juncture, Iran's threat perception and foreign policy priorities dramatically changed with respect to its immediate environment and the world at large. Shortly thereafter, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) deeply affected the minds of Iranians and policymakers alike. Iran felt as though it had not received support in its war with Iraq, going from being a Western client-state to fighting an Iraq that had the political support of important countries in the Arab world and the West, including the United States. In terms of military supplies, Russia, China, and France sold billions of dollars of arms, the Arabs provided money, and the United States provided satellite imagery along with other kinds of support to Iraq. The most relevant analytical factor in this discussion is the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by Saddam's troops – chemical weapons in this case – against the Iranians and Iraq's indigenous Kurdish population.

The Iranian leadership also concluded that the leaders of the world's powerful nations could easily be persuaded to ignore the crossing of a 'red line' (i.e. the use of chemical weapons) for short-sighted interests or because of simple animosity towards the regime in Tehran.

The next important event that greatly impacted Iran was the collapse of the Soviet Union. A new geopolitical environment emerged, which changed the balance of power around Iran. Iran found itself bordering three new neighbours, two of which were vying for Caspian Sea access. New opportunities to cooperate with these countries were blocked by the manoeuvrings of regional states and great powers to isolate Iran, especially in the energy sector.

Two points are worth emphasizing about Iran's decision-making process. First, no single person or particular group has the authority to make decisions on major issues alone. Second, Iran makes decisions on key issues through consensus. Iran's defence and security decision-making are articulated by and developed in a complex process. Numerous formal institutions, informal networks, personal relationships and individual initiatives play a role in the formation of Iranian policy. From the outside, it may seem very chaotic, and it is often difficult for outsiders to understand who makes what decisions and how. Nevertheless, the output of the system is based on consensus. While this consensually-driven process provides policy stability, it does make reaching decisions more difficult, less predictable, and arduous.

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Despite elites eagerly factionalizing and politicizing major national security issues, including those related to the nuclear programme, consensus ensures that sensible decisions are the final product. There is no doubt that decisions about the nuclear programme are made within a relatively smaller circle but, nonetheless, a circle that is representative of the relevant and influential political factions.

A key characteristic of Iranian perception regarding security issues is its strategic loneliness. Partly the result of the revolution's character and nature and partly self-inflicted, this loneliness was most dramatically displayed during the eight-year war against Iraq. This created an Iranian psychology that lacks trust in international institutions and alliances and which emphasizes reliance on its own resources, both mental and physical, for national protection and defence. While the cost and damage from this imposed self-sufficiency have been enormous, it has nevertheless also interjected and infused a sense of confidence, national pride, ability to manage crises, and domestic development of our country's own resources unparalleled in the region. This combination of loneliness, independence, and self-sufficiency underscores both Iran's cautious attitude towards regional conflicts, on the one hand, and its bold – even tough – style on issues of national significance on the other. Iran has a seasoned elite that, while displaying idiosyncrasies of its own in missing opportunities, is quite capable of manoeuvring during real crises, not only with regional states, but also with great powers such as the United States.

Three points are worth emphasizing in order to understand Iran's national security policies. First, one must assess Iran's intentions and policies in terms of rationality – not sympathy – taking Iran's arduous geostrategic environment into account. Second, in spite of this challenging security framework, Iran has not only managed to maintain its territorial and political integrity, but it also has developed considerable infrastructure and a stable society – all without external support. Third, Iran is the most important linkage state in the Middle East. Because of its geography, revolution, ambitions, and jealously guarded sense of independence and centrality, all issues of importance in the Middle East, either by default or design, run through Iran – from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, proliferation, terrorism, Iraq's future, stability in Afghanistan, future of relations between Islam and the West, regional political change and reform, Persian Gulf security, to secure energy access in both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin. Therefore, isolating Iran is not a productive policy.

3. Policy Sources

Decisions about Iran's nuclear programme are made and influenced at the ideological intersection of Islam and nationalism. Iran's threat perceptions, past experiences, organizational imperatives of involved agencies, national pride, as well as economic and geopolitical considerations all play significant roles in informing and framing Iran's nuclear policy. Seven important factors are influential in the specific formulation of Iran's nuclear programme:

3.1 Ideological Sources

Three important ideological outlooks and orientations have played an influential role in informing and shaping national security and defence policies in Iran - Revolutionary Islam, Reformist Islam, and Traditional Iranian Nationalism. Depending on the particular issue and the constellation of political forces involved, and also considering the relevance, interaction

and impact of external players, any or a combination of these three outlooks/orientations comes to bear on policy-making. As is often the case, failure to arrive at a reasonable degree of consensus among the three competing camps inevitably leads to serious problems in implementation.

3.2 Threat Perceptions

Threat perception can be categorized into threats to Revolutionary ideology/values and threats to our national interests. The dominant ideological approach is that ‘global arrogance’ (US imperialism) and international Zionism are out to destroy Islam. From this perspective, Iran is seen as the centre of the Islamic world, which provides leadership to the Islamic Ummah (nation) that the United States is trying to destroy. ‘Global arrogance’ and Israeli aggression are the most significant and immediate threats. This outlook also maintains that US puppets in the region pose dangers as well, though less imminent.

Iran’s national interest becomes more important when there is incompatibility with ideological priorities. Geopolitical issues, territorial integrity, and enhancing Iran’s international standing by demonstrating the primacy of Iran’s national interests are more influential in shaping Iran’s security and defence policies. Threats emerging from Iran’s immediate environment are considered more dangerous than those from countries further away, provided that ideological considerations are not the driving forces behind the foreign policies of other countries.

3.3 Organizational Imperatives

The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), a number of universities and research institutions, and defence establishments are involved in the production and exchange of knowledge and technology in the field of nuclear energy. Certainly, like other bureaucracies in the world, they have their own concerns and interests in finding new projects and tasks to ensure their preservation and expansion. They are very concerned that Iran, in dealing with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), would accept a concession that prevents these organizations from achieving their goals of survival and ‘logical’ expansion.

3.4 National Pride

Iranians, as historical inheritors of an old, millennial civilization with a deeply-felt grandiose perception of themselves, their role and power, especially in the wake of a successful popular social revolution in 1979 – which has added rejuvenated ideological fervour [revolutionary Shi’ite ideology] to traditional Iranian nationalistic pride – appear to have found it quite difficult to accept that their young, newly established neighbours have more wealth and opportunities, more advanced technology, and a higher standard of living. Given the stark differences at the material level, the ruling elite have instead tried to argue that advancement in science and technology (particularly in the nuclear, stem cell and software areas) could empower Iran and help raise the country to its deserved place in the world. This outlook could well explain the dogged pursuit of the nuclear programme – even if at tremendous costs – especially if placed in the larger context of a region consisting of three

nuclear neighbours (Israel, India and Pakistan), which has led some Iranians to feel that achieving a comparable power status necessitates acquiring nuclear capability.

3.5 Past Experiences

As stated before, the long, bloody and destructive war with Iraq, including Iraq's extensive and repeated use of chemical weapons against Iranians and also the war of cities, deeply affected the psyche of the Iranian population at large – reviving the old memories of a nation that since ancient times has been subjected to frequent foreign invasion and occupation. The Iran-Iraq War experience, especially the UN Security Council's unbelievable refusal to condemn the act of aggression and call for the immediate withdrawal of forces, and the later failure to react strongly to Iraq's numerous war crimes, including resorting to chemical weapons, led Iran to conclude that it simply could not rely on the United Nations to safeguard its national security and defence. The bitter conclusion that the international community could not be trusted proved extremely costly during the war and came to cast its long shadow on the foreign and defence policies of the Islamic Republic afterwards. As seen by Iran's longest-serving foreign minister, 'Historical precedent is in fact an important input into Iran's foreign policy.' (Velayati, 1998).

3.6 Economic Imperatives

Especially considering the quite high level of education, Iran's almost 75 million people have expectations of a higher standard of living and a better life. Taking national resources and capabilities, including abundant oil revenues, into account, it is now a fact that more than three decades after the 1979 Revolution Iranians expect a higher level of governance and much better national economic performance. As is widely known, the Iranian government – in fact, the Islamic Republic - is under serious pressure to perform. It is safe to predict that, on the whole, economic issues will exercise increasing influence on Iran's future security and defence policies. At the same time, low rates of economic growth and capital formation will, in the final analysis, also negatively impact the country's expenditures in the military-defence sector.

3.7 Geopolitical Considerations

Iran is located in an area rife with upheaval and is surrounded by quite a number of ongoing conflict situations – instability in Afghanistan and Iraq and uncertainty in Azerbaijan and Pakistan are most noteworthy. Extensive US presence in many of the areas in Iran's immediate vicinity or in the wider region is challenging and poses a problem – the lack of any meaningful buffer or physical space between the two sides that regard each other with deep suspicion and hostile intentions. Iran and the US are literally neighbours – all around Iran, to the South, East, West and North. Such an unenviable position for Iran is bound to enhance the impact geopolitical issues, situations, and considerations have on the country's security and defence policies

4. Iran's Nuclear Programme

In contradiction to a common belief in the West that all Iranians have the same view of their nuclear programme, three general views on it can be identified. The following discussion will outline the three main opinions in Iran and their relevant features.

4.1 The Nuclear Programme as a Source of Energy

A small number of people argue that, due to environmental and economic reasons, nuclear energy is not a necessity for Iran. They argue that the cost of investment for generating a kilowatt of electricity is more expensive using nuclear energy than it is by other means, such as oil. This view, which is also Washington's main line of thinking, has few adherents in Iran.

A significantly larger group believes that Iran needs nuclear energy and should acquire expertise and technology in this area; it is seen as the technology of the advanced world and a potential source of pride and prestige for Iran. This group argues that the right to nuclear technology is enshrined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and does not see any reason to forego it. It is a popular view amongst numerous university students, members of academia, government officials and many in the Foreign Ministry. People in this camp, however, maintain that Iran should have access to nuclear technology for civilian uses only and that nuclear weapon technology should be prohibited, as this would violate Iran's international commitments and would contribute to regional proliferation. Proponents of this position argue that if Iranians are denied the right to access nuclear options, the international community will push Iran into a more isolated position that will adversely affect oversight and monitoring of Iran's nuclear programme.

4.2 Supporters of Nuclear Weapons Capability

Some argue that Iran should not only have nuclear technology for alternative sources of energy, but also possess nuclear weapons capability. For supporters of this outlook, the security environment of Iran, given the past history of being victimized by chemical weapons, the poor track record of the international community in aiding Iran during times of crisis and the numerous threats perceived by Iran necessitate the development of this capability. There is a nuance that should be appreciated in this perspective. Some merely argue that the capability to produce fuel for the reactors is sufficient. Their main concern is not typical security per se, but rather that they can be self-sufficient in the event that other states cannot or will not provide nuclear fuel for reactors. Another part of this group argues that it is, in fact, important for Iran to have all the necessary elements and capabilities for producing weapons. Full capability, put simply, includes mastering the knowledge and technology of the fuel cycle, a reliable delivery system, and an appropriate warhead. The first two components are considered legal and coincide with the predominant interpretation of the NPT. I have co-authored an article in Farsi about the differences between legal capability and full capability, which one Iran is seeking and which one would serve Iran's foreign policy objectives best; due to lack of space I cannot repeat them here. Note, however, that Iranians only want the capability, not the actual physical weapons. The capability alone is an important strategic deterrent in their view, and it can make a positive contribution to Iran's defence and national security; that is, the simple fact that Iran could develop nuclear weapons

relatively quickly with the materials at hand within the country enhances Iran's power while not becoming too threatening to others.

4.3 Supporters of Acquiring Nuclear Weapons

A small number of people indeed argue that Iran should withdraw from the NPT and develop nuclear weapons as quickly as possible, even if it must pay the price of international sanctions to do so. This stance is justified by citing international hostility towards Iran, Iran's precarious security environment, and how such weapons would provide an ideal deterrent. With nuclear weapons, Iran could preserve its territorial integrity, ensure its security, and enhance Iran's status in the region and the world at large. Few people in academia and the military would support this view.

The last group has few supporters in Iran because it represents an extreme position. The majority of Iranians, including elites and governmental officials, support the more moderate first or second views.

However, few relevant elites in Iran would doubt that if Iran wants to develop the actual weapons, hardly anything can stop it. The United States and the West have already placed severe economic sanctions on Iran in an attempt to modify the behaviour and attitude of Iranian officials on issues such as terrorism, WMD, and the Arab-Israeli conflict; none of these objectives have been achieved. According to the US State Department, Iran is still on the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism and continues to oppose the peace process in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the IAEA claims that Iran has made vast improvements in its nuclear infrastructure and capability. Some would argue that if the international community imposed much tougher sanctions, it would force those who favour weaponization of Iran's nuclear programme to quit, but the bottom line is that if Iran is determined to develop nuclear weapons (although this author does not believe that is so), it has the capability to do so and nothing can stop it. For example, Iran's financial resources that can aid a nuclear weapons programme even now are significantly greater than those of Pakistan. Thus, additional sanctions will likely be unsuccessful in changing the minds of Iranians who favour weaponization.

On a fundamental level, pursuing a nuclear programme aiming at acquiring atomic arms implies security contradictions for Iran. There are several reasons and factors explaining Iran's refraining from acquiring nuclear weapons, including the following:

1. *The risk of an arms race breaking out:* Iranian acquisition of nuclear arms could stimulate its neighbours and other regional states to follow a similar path. Regional states' efforts to acquire nuclear arms could transform the region into an insecure one with nuclear arsenals and lead to the beginning of an arms race instead of the realization of a nuclear-free zone;

2. *Iranian awareness of risks:* We in the region are well aware of the dangers of nuclear weapons for the security of all the nations in the Middle East. We *know* that we do not have a sophisticated communication network or command structure; we *know* that the most probable vehicle for use of such weapons would be missiles, and we *know* that it would take only a few short minutes for these missiles to hit important sites in the targeted country. In other words within a few minutes the incoming missiles should be detected, distinguished from other kinds of conventional missiles, directed to relevant channels and command structures, and respond appropriately in time. I *know* the relevant elites and government officials are

quite *knowledgeable* about these facts. Scenarios of this kind are a strategic nightmare to them that should be avoided by all means and at all cost;

3. *Losing conventional superiority*: In the event of atomic weapons acquisition by Iran followed by nuclear proliferation in the region – including Iran’s neighbours – Iranian conventional superiority, which is founded upon elements including its conventional arms, population, vast surface area, geopolitical situation etc., would be weakened;

4. *Emergence of nuclear terrorism*: Apart from the risk of the possibility of an effort by other states to get nuclear arms, the prospect of extremist and terrorist groups gaining access to such weapons is another threat which is far more dangerous. Despite America’s considerable geographical distance from al-Qaeda’s headquarters and possession of sophisticated equipment to detect such weapons, it is clear that the threat of al-Qaeda and other radical terrorist groups potentially gaining access to nuclear weapons along the borders of Iran poses considerable danger to the Islamic Republic. In fact, both from a logistical and ideological viewpoint, the likelihood of the use of nuclear arms against Iran by radical groups is higher than such an attack on the US;

5. *Institutionalization of the American presence in the region*: Iranian acquisition of nuclear arms could lead to other countries in the region feeling threatened and cause them to become more closely aligned with the US. This could strengthen and stabilize the U.S. situation in the region. It is also possible that due to the way a nuclear-armed Iran would be perceived, regional states would move towards forming regional military alliances with or without the U.S.;

6. *Vulnerability to production and maintenance costs of nuclear arms*: Production and maintenance of nuclear arms requires considerable funds. High expenditure in this regard would be followed by a reduction in the performance in other sectors, leading to weakening of the economic potential of the whole country;

7. *Harming Iranian ties with some regional and international actors*: Iranian acquisition of nuclear arms could impact Iranian ties with some regional and international actors and have a detrimental effect on these relations. A perceived Iranian threat and risk could change the balance of relations at some levels and in some areas. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members have revised their security priorities and are moving towards modern arms procurement and strengthening their military capabilities due to their perceptions of an Iranian threat;

8. *Religious prohibition of the acquisition of nuclear weapons*: According to some interpretations of Islam, the production, stockpiling or use of nuclear weapons are forbidden on religious grounds. Thus, the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot in principle include acquiring nuclear arms as a goal within its atomic energy programme due to religious precepts. Based on such interpretations of Islam, weapons of mass destruction are incompatible with Islamic faith in Iran. The issue of the contradiction between the acquisition of nuclear arms and Islamic teachings has been repeatedly emphasized in explicit terms by the Supreme Leader of

the Islamic Republic, who has said: ‘We believe that apart from nuclear arms, other types of WMDs like chemical and biological [arms] pose serious threats against humanity. Being a victim itself of chemical weapons use, the Iranian nation feels more than any other nation the risk associated with production and stockpiling of such weapons. And it is ready to use all its possibilities for countering them. We consider using such weapons as unlawful, and struggling to protect mankind against this great affliction as a universal obligation’ (Ayatollah Khamene’i: 2010).

5. Conclusions

Iran has long supported the creation of a Middle East free of WMD and is fully committed to promoting a stable security environment in the region. The current impasse in the 5+1 dialogue with Iran does not change the latter’s position that a zone free of WMD in the Persian Gulf and greater Middle East region is a desirable objective for regional security. Iran remains committed to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – signed and ratified by Iran in 1970 – as well as the Additional Protocols (AP) signed by Iran in 2003 and implemented voluntarily for more than two years. Thus, Iran would have no objection – in principle – to an agreement such as one formalizing a Middle East free of missiles and WMD if it enhances security for everyone. Iran’s nuclear facilities are under such close surveillance that no regional arrangement can conceivably be more thorough or intrusive. In Iran’s assessment, others have reason to be wary of such inspections. But such an agreement, should it ever transpire, could also be an important first step towards a more cooperative security arrangement between Iran, its neighbours and the Middle East as a whole.

The US and EU-3 (Russia and China have different views and policy objectives) must realize that their options are limited. A military strike on different nuclear sites in Iran, either by Israel or the US, will only convince Iran to pursue the weaponization of its nuclear programme; it will not destroy Iran’s dispersed nuclear infrastructure. Furthermore, Iran is undeniably confident, due to the regional influence it wields and the potential instability that it is capable of creating in neighbouring countries. Considering international sentiments regarding Iran’s nuclear programme, the creation of a zone free of missiles and WMD is a positive step towards diffusing tensions and building confidence, provided that the international community ensures that every member country agrees and complies with this proposal.

A related issue is Iran’s missile programme remains. Asking Iran to stop or dismantle its missile programme would simply not work. Considering the missile attacks by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and the importance of missiles in defence policy, Iranian military planners are convinced that it is imperative for Iran to invest in missile research and development. Iran has successfully tested mid-range missiles, such as the Shahab-3 and the Sejil. However, it is possible that Iran might be persuaded to cease developing longer-range missiles or to limit the deployment of its arsenals so that sensitive areas in Israel and Europe are not within their range. This would be a bargaining chip in a comprehensive deal to resolve disputes with the West and the United States. Iran and the West could agree on a verification regime to check and monitor missile deployments. It is conceivable that reaching agreements along these lines would serve as confidence-building measures.