

THE WORLD'S NINTH NUCLEAR POWER: IRAN'S AMBITIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

Iran is feared because of the nature of the Islamic Republican system. This system does not limit itself to the geographic boundaries of Iran, but has a far grander vision. The fear is compounded when that vision has been substantiated with Iranian proxies in countries as far away as Argentina and as close as Iraq. The fear becomes more than just a transitory threat if or when Ahmadinejad's declaration that his country is the world's ninth nuclear state is realized. An Iran armed with a nuclear weapons capability would facilitate the accomplishment of Iran's regional ambitions.

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“Iran is among the world’s nine nuclear states.”¹ This statement made by Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad challenges Iran’s assertion that its pursuit of a nuclear capability is solely for advancing domestic nuclear power capacity. Too numerous to list, and far beyond eight, are the countries currently with nuclear power plants (NPPs). Ironically, Iran is not one of them yet until the Russians finally finish their work at Bushehr NPP in 2008 if all diplomatic, technical, and financial hurdles are cleared. So what did Ahmadinejad mean? Clearly, the number is significant. Looking around the globe there are currently eight members of the nuclear weapons club: China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, India, Pakistan and Israel. By his words, Ahmadinejad indicated that Iran does not intend, but already has joined this exclusive club. Despite his claims, however, Iran is not a state with nuclear weapons capabilities. Depending on an array of variables it is estimated that it will take Iran between two to ten years to develop a nuclear weapons capability using what is currently known to exist in that country and barring any direct foreign introduction of weapons grade uranium and technologies required for assembling a nuclear warhead compatible with the platforms available to the Iranians. This leads one to ask why he made such a statement. Was this a parapraxis on the part of Ahmadinejad, who in many other instances has insisted that his country is not pursuing nuclear weapons, or was this part of Iran’s posturing to portray itself as a power to be respected (or feared) and accepted? The excessive chatter about Iran’s capabilities in the nuclear field can be seen as part of Iran’s hegemonic ambition, which includes Iran’s becoming part of the elite nuclear weapons club.

Iranian Hegemonic Ambitions

After a century and a half of malaise, foreign intervention and dismemberment, Iran under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941-79) revived its historical imperial tendencies, not so much in action, but certainly in drama and throwback historical rhetoric. In Reza Shah’s words, he initiated a “shock program which would allow Iran to overcome in 25 years its centuries of suppression.”² With the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in the early 1970s; Iran’s becoming a strategic ally of the United States in the Cold War; and the soaring gasoline prices, Iran became an important regional power. Those opposing Iran’s growing influence and power during the Shah’s reign had dubbed the country as the “Gendarme of the Region.”

Following the 1979 victory of the Islamic Revolution, the Shah’s ousters did not change the Iranian historical narrative revived by the ousted monarch. In this narrative, Iran is regarded as an apex of civilization with millennia of historical supremacy and imperial legacy based mainly on the pre-Islamic Iranian heritage. The Islamic system gave birth to a symbiosis of Iran’s imperial legacy and an Islamic identity centered on a glorious future not limited to the current Iranian geographical boundaries.

¹ “Iran Not to Give Up Nuclear Rights: Ahmadinejad,” IRNA <www2.irna.com>, Tehran, July 26, 2007.

² Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (Briarcliff Manor, New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1980), p. 175.

These principles remain today and were reinforced by Ahmadinejad at a news conference in August 2007, during which he pledged his country’s support to help fill the vacuum in the region when coalition forces exit Iraq. He offered, “We are prepared, with the help of our neighbors, regional friends and [Saudi] Arabia, to fill this vacuum...”³ While there are contacts between Riyadh and Tehran, it would be odd at best if Saudi Arabia would depend on Iran for establishing security in Iraq or elsewhere. In fact, in Saudi security calculations the threat emanating from Iran tops the chart. As further evidence of Iran’s sense of regional significance, Tehran has called for an Iranian-led regional security arrangement, which has not found much support throughout the region. Without naming any countries, Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Purmohammadi has claimed that “neighboring countries have several times demanded Iran’s presence and activity for establishing security in their own countries and in the region.”⁴ Meanwhile Iran’s other military leaders have taken a more ominous route by issuing veiled threats stating that unless Iran’s “rights” as a regional power are accepted by the West, there can be no security in the Middle East. Its ambitions and sense of regional superiority have brought Iran into direct conflict with the United States and its allies who are present in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf region as well as with others in the region who do not share Iran’s vision for the Middle East. Iran is now seeking ways to bring to fruition these ambitions and plans for the region.

Iran’s Quest for Achieving Hegemonic Goals

Not being capable of directly confronting the U.S. and other coalition forces in the region, Iran has resorted to conducting war by proxy by extending support to a variety of terrorist outfits, criminal networks and legitimate political oppositions in Iraq, Lebanon, among the Palestinians and increasingly in Afghanistan. In the words of Ali Akbar Velayati, former Iranian foreign minister and current senior advisor to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, to “support Palestine is to support Iran. To support Lebanon is to support Iran. To support Iraq is to support Iran.”⁵

Iran’s long arm in the Greater Middle East has various dimensions. Some of the elements that Tehran “supports” are actively engaged in terrorist activities be they against coalition forces in Iraq, against targets in Israel or against Lebanese, Palestinian and Iraqi political movements and personalities who are viewed as standing in the way of the interests of Iran and its allies and clients such as Syria and Hezbollah. In these cases, Iran either directly provides its allies with

³ “Iran ‘Ahmadinejad: Qodrat-e siyasi-ye eshghalgaran-e ‘Iraq dar ham shekasteh shodeh ast.” [Ahmadinejad: Political Power of Occupiers of Iraq Has Been Defeated] *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 28 August 2007 <http://www.irna.com>.

⁴ “Minister Terms Iran Significant Actor In Region,” *Fars News Agency*, 24 August 2007 <http://english.farsnews.com>

⁵ “Roundtable Interview with Ali Akbar Velayati, the Supreme Leader’s Senior Advisor on International Affairs and Former Foreign Minister,” 17 May 2007, *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 2*. Obtained through Gulf2000 <https://www1.columbia.edu>.

monetary and material support, including training conducted chiefly by the Quds (Jerusalem) Forces of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) or uses a secondary state or entity, such as Syria or Hamas, as the conduit. Iran openly regards the Second Lebanon War of 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel as part of its own training in asymmetric warfare that it has vowed to use in the event Iran is attacked by Israel or any other power.⁶

Another dimension of Iran's reach issues more subtle threats to Iran's adversaries and potential foes. A prime example of this is Iran's policy in Afghanistan, active since early 2007. In a country where Iran has had longstanding involvement and has maintained allies representing almost all Afghan factions, Tehran has begun dispatching traceable light weapons and sophisticated explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) to the myriad insurgent groups –the neo-Taliban– opposing the current state of affairs in Afghanistan.⁷ The weapons being sent to Afghanistan are a reminder to NATO and other international military forces stationed in Afghanistan that if Iran's nuclear facilities are attacked or the country is brought under severe economic and political pressure because of its nuclear activities or other alleged misdeeds, then Iran can ensure that these forces would stand to pay a heavy price in Afghanistan. IRGC Commander-in-Chief Mohammad Ali Jafari has indicated that his forces have “discovered major weakness points of the U.S. occupation forces in Iraq and Afghanistan” that would be exploited in case of any attack on Iran.⁸

From Fantasy to Reality

The Islamic Republic of Iran in its stated “manifest destiny” has proclaimed that there are three forces in the Greater Middle East: Iran, the United States and Israel. Somehow, all other players in this vast region in Tehran's calculation are either impotent observers or are ready to accept Iranian supremacy in the region not only in terms of military and economic strength, but also in terms of ideology. Of course, no other country in the region, except maybe Syria and to a lesser extent Armenia, would agree to an Iranian-led Greater Middle East. Perhaps Tehran is trying to impose its will on the region and become a hegemon by force. It is important to remember, however, that despite claims to the contrary by Iranian officials, Iran's conventional military power is not that of a regional superpower. Economically, Iran, especially under President Ahmadinejad, has not only failed to take advantage of the soaring oil prices to improve its situation,

it has gone on an economic tailspin. A conflicting image of Iran surfaces and provokes the questions: Why is Iran feared? And despite its threatening posture in the region, why does Iran seem to be obsessed with gaining more acceptability and respect?

Iran is feared because of the nature of the Islamic Republican system. This system does not limit itself to the geographic boundaries of Iran, but has a far grander vision. The fear is compounded when that vision has been substantiated with Iranian proxies in countries as far away as Argentina and as close as Iraq. The fear becomes more than just a transitory threat if or when Ahmadinejad's declaration that his country is the world's ninth nuclear state is realized. An Iran armed with a nuclear weapons capability would facilitate the accomplishment of Iran's regional ambitions. In Iran's calculations, a nuclear weapons capability – immaterial of it being opaque or demonstrated –would grant the Islamic Republic the respect it believes it not only deserves, but has a right to be afforded based on its past imperial legacy and its current position of vanguard of Islamic values.

⁶ Comments to the effect were made by Brig. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC; see, “Sar-Lashkar Ja'fari: Ba shivah ha-ye jang-e namotaqaren ba doshman robaro mayshavim.” [Commander Jafari: We Will Face the Enemy With Asymmetrical Warfare Tactics] Fars New Agency, 24 September 2007. Khamenei appointed.

⁷ See, Amin Tarzi “Iran's Disruptive Hold Over Afghanistan is Rising,” *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 14 August 2007 <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb>>; also see, Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (editors), *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁸ “Iranian Guards' Chief Says Iran Will ‘Respond Harshly if Attacked,’” *Al-Alam* Television (Tehran), 11 September 2007. Obtained from Open Source Center.