

Addressing the Iranian Nuclear Option

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Since 2002, the international debate on the real nature of the Iranian nuclear program has intensified. The United States has increased pressure on European countries and Russia to take the issue to the United Nations Security Council and impose sanctions on the Iranian regime for breaking the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). With the recent re-election of President Bush this pressure for isolating Iran is likely to increase.

Till now, this policy has been opposed by the European Union (EU) and Russia, which believe that a multilateral approach can produce better results than a unilateral one and are trying to reach an agreement with Tehran. Moreover, US policy has been counter-productive in Tehran, weakening the pro-Western political and social strata and paradoxically favouring the hardliners and the paramilitary forces by 'securitising' Iranian foreign policy.¹

Therefore, if the international community wishes to succeed in changing

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¹ According to Adam Tarock: "...In short, Iran is at present caught between the religious hardliners and the hawks in America...", A. Tarock, "Iran between religious hardliners and hawks in America", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.22, n. 2-3, 2003, p. 149.

the direction of Iran's nuclear policy positively, it needs to address Iran's political, economic and security concerns, realising that a policy which excludes engagement with the country cannot represent a realistic solution to the problem.

The new regional context

Some geostrategic elements and considerations concerning the Persian Gulf region must be underlined before tackling the Iranian nuclear issue:

- Currently, the macro-region of the Eastern Mediterranean, Caucasus and Central-Southern Asia is characterised by a wide arc of instability. The Islamic Republic of Iran is at the centre of this unstable scenario: its feelings of strategic and political insecurity have increased after 9/11 with the deployment of US troops on all its borders (in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Gulf, Caucasus, Iraq) as a consequence of the wars against the Taliban regime and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. These events have deeply affected Iranian perceptions of its security, exacerbating ideological and conceptual contradictions in its foreign policy as well as its traditional sense of "being besieged and under threat": instead of dealing with these problems in a rationale way, Iran "...has sought to depict the problem as a huge conspiracy directed at the Islamic Republic".²

- All countries in the region, including Iran, are dealing with several discriminatory and double-standard policies applied by the international community, and especially the world's superpower, the United States. Western activism in the Middle East is proclaimed as aiming to promote democracy. "...[A]t the same time, they promote substantive interests. ... this interplay of idealism and realism affects many Western policies. In particular, however, it affects those devoted to promoting democracy by embedding in them a tendency to practise double standards...".³ This results in an increased sense of frustration and injustice in the Muslim communities of the region – an extremely unstable situation.

- The region is trapped in what can be called a sort of 'geopolitics of excuses' *vis-à-vis* bipolar security relations. Israel, for instance, requires that all of its security concerns with the neighbouring Arab and Islamic countries be resolved before discussing its opaque nuclear deterrence posture. On the other hand, Iran continues to deny the factual existence of Israel and obsessively demands a solution of the Palestinian issue before starting any pragmatic talks with Israel.

- The region is subjected to a flood of rhetoric and ideological

² S. Chubin, "Iran's Strategic Predicament", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 14, n. 1, 2000, pp.13-14.

³ R. Aliboni, L. Guazzone, "Democracy in the Arab Countries and the West", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 9, n. 1, 2004, p. 87.

judgements, such as regime change, democracy exportation, Zionist Satanism, etc., which have the sole effect of creating still further mistrust, misperceptions and geopolitical paranoia. Furthermore, almost fifteen years after the end of the Cold War, a security cooperation framework in the Persian Gulf, capable of reconciling the regional actors' multi-dimensional security interests, has not been effectively organised nor even gained the support of local actors or the international community.⁴

Two overtly hostile and dangerous regimes for Iran in particular and, indirectly, for Israel have been removed, namely Iraq and Afghanistan. However, this new – in theory positive – situation has created further problems for regional stability due to the spread of Sunni radical Islamism and to the 'geostrategic vacuum' it has left. In this environment, regional players have pragmatic political interests and opportunities. Specifically, Iran sees the possibility of assuming a dominant regional role in the region, not least due to the large Shia communities in Iraq, and to the fact that "...in the arc stretching from Pakistan to Lebanon, the number of Shi'a matches that of Sunnis; in the Gulf region, the Shi'a clearly dominate...".⁵ But the international community, and especially the United States, instead of recognising this fact and trying to engage Iran in the stabilisation of the region as well as in nation-building in Iraq, has demonised the country still further, claiming that it has direct responsibilities in the recent Iraqi insurgency and terrorism.⁶

Iran's nuclear issue

If the international community wishes to succeed in bringing about a positive change in the direction of Iran's nuclear policy, it needs to address Iran's political, economic and security concerns in the current institutional

⁴ A. Rathmell, *The Changing Military Balance in the Gulf*, Whitehall Series (London: RUSI, 1996); B. Rubin, *The Tragedy of the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵ V. Nasr, "Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2004, p. 8.

⁶ The press has recently contained allegations of concrete Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs, such as support for Moktada al-Sadr's so-called *Mahdi* Army. However, without excluding the possibility of action by some Iranian individuals or independent paramilitary groups, Tehran seems to maintain a cautious and pragmatic policy towards Iraq, and it seems that destabilisation of the latter represents an evident threat to Iranian security. K. Barzegar, "The New Iraqi Challenge to Iran", *Heartland – Eurasian Review of Geopolitics*, no. 10, 2004 <<http://www.heartland.limesonline.com>> and Nasr, "Regional Implications ...".

framework.⁷ Consideration of nuclear issues should start out from the security challenges and risks perceived by the Iranian leadership, and then move on to the formulation of counter-measures or solutions so as to persuade Iran not to cross the nuclear threshold and to remain in full compliance with NPT provisions.⁸

The current claim that Iran is working to build nuclear weapons and will have them within a few years has been in the air for almost a decade and a half and has, so far, always proved false. Nevertheless, the last two years of investigations by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have, from a technical point of view, shown that Iran has developed and tested all those elements necessary for an effective nuclear weapons program (uranium conversion, uranium enrichment activities, manufacturing of centrifuges for enrichment purposes, radiochemistry expertise, neutron source activator, reprocessing knowledge, etc.), and trained domestic experts to carry out the program, so that the country does not need to resort to an external procurement network for either materials or technical knowledge. It appears, therefore, that Iran has left *open* the *nuclear weapons option*, and the crucial question is whether the Iranian leadership realistically considers nuclear weapon deterrence the correct solution to its political and security interests.

Assuming that the Iranian leadership is a 'rational player', the following points should be underlined:

- *Existential deterrence* is aimed at countering one of the two nuclear weapon states that Tehran perceives as a security threat, namely the United States and Israel (Pakistan is simply not a genuine security threat to Iran, since its nuclear deterrent has only one target, India). Yet, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons might increase rather than decrease its vulnerability, since it is reasonable to suppose that Iran would not have the technical and economic resources to develop an effective *nuclear second-strike capability* in the short term. In this scenario, therefore, it would be irrational and not at all cost-effective in economic or political terms for the Iranian leadership to assume that the possession of a small nuclear weapons arsenal could deter Israeli and/or US military action. On the contrary, Iran's continued or perceived pursuit of nuclear weapons might trigger a pre-emptive missile or air strike by Israel (see also the following point, the 'Israel factor').

⁷ M. Sariolghalam, "Understanding Iran: Getting Past Stereotypes and Mythology", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2003; A. Ehteshami, "Iran's International Posture After the Fall of Baghdad", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2004, pp. 186.

⁸ See M. Martellini and R. Redaelli, *Towards a Non Discriminatory Nuclear Diplomacy versus Iran: some Hints*, Landau Network - Centro Volta Policy Paper (Como: Centro Volta, August 2003) <www.centrovolta.it/landau/Iran%20Project.htm>.

- *Regional security threats.* It is true that Iran faces a variety of security challenges from within its region, but none of them can be plausibly addressed with nuclear weapons. Furthermore, a nuclear-armed Iran could have a *destabilising* domino effect in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region which would in the end make Iran *less secure*, as some regional states (for instance Saudi Arabia or Egypt) might pursue a nuclear deterrent of their own. On the other hand, Iran has sufficient conventional military capability to deal effectively with regional security threats. If it were to be further isolated economically, however, or made the target of another sanction regime, in addition to ILSA (the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, approved by the US Congress in 1996) – as a consequence, for instance, of discussion of the Iranian nuclear issue in the UN Security Council – this would also affect its future strategic choices regarding the modernisation of conventional military capabilities. Indeed, a reduction in Iran's economic resources would hamper reinforcement and modernisation of conventional military capabilities, forcing the Iranian leadership to turn to nuclear weapons as a sort of 'security equalizer'.

The testing of a Shihab-3 missile⁹ capable of reaching Israel must be seen as linked to these regional security challenges and Iran's strategic solitude. Many analysts, still thinking in terms of an old Cold War paradigm, believe that a medium-range missile makes no sense from an economic point of view unless it is endowed with a nuclear warhead. However, they do not grasp the destructive psychological impact that almost daily Iraqi Scud missile attacks had on Tehran's population during the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war:¹⁰ Iranian military forces might regard a robust arsenal of Shihab non-nuclear missiles as a credible – and cheaper (with respect to fighter-bombers, for example) – conventional deterrent to deal with its regional security environment.

- *The 'Israel factor'.* Israel recently claimed to be preparing itself for a possible 'hit' on its (Dimona) nuclear reactor by terrorist groups or, perhaps, Iran in retaliation for possible Israeli pre-emptive military attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. This situation represents an additional highly destabilising factor. On the other hand, the hostility of the Tehran theocracy to Israel is still very deeply rooted. Tehran does not recognise Israel's existence as a sovereign state and supports militant Palestinian groups. Such deep mistrust,

⁹ The Shihab-3 is a single stage, surface-to-surface, intermediate range ballistic missile, powered by liquid fuel, a clear derivation of North Korea's Nodong-1, launched for the first time in 1998 and recently upgraded. *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, vol. 2, n. 7, 2000, p.1 and *Shahab-3*, "Global Security", 17 November 2004 <www.globalsecurity.org>.

¹⁰ A. Hashim, *The crisis of the Iranian State*, Adelphi Paper no. 296 (Oxford: IISS, 1995) pp. 58-9.

misperceptions and 'subjective' mindsets in Iran and Israel are of the most serious concern for the stability and security of the whole Middle East region. Furthermore these threats, as perceived by both sides, might be used by *al Qaida* to trigger a destructive conflict involving the entire region: *al Qaida* could carry out a sudden, devastating terrorist attack against the US and its allies (including Israel) and let the blame fall on Tehran. Iran and Israel should, therefore, find a secret channel of dialogue, perhaps at the level of security services and/or academic track-2 meetings, to address the main issues of reciprocal concern, while preserving the usual rhetorical language and ideological frameworks for the benefit of their respective domestic constituencies.

- *A tough choice.* The most disturbing fact for the non-proliferation regime is its lack of universality, with three nuclear weapon states (Pakistan, India and Israel) outside of it and North Korea's withdrawal in 2002. A future Iranian withdrawal from the NPT would probably mean the end of the global non-proliferation regime.

The US administration has on several occasions argued that Libya's decision (December 2003) to renounce its weapons of mass destruction demonstrates that the US strategy to go to war in Iraq last year sent an unmistakable message to regimes that seek or possess weapons of mass destruction.¹¹ Reality, however, is far more complex.¹²

First, Qaddafi was already talking about opening his country to inspections before Bush became president. As we know today, one of the main reasons was that the so-called Libyan nuclear weapons complex was – unlike that of Iran or North Korea – simply a clandestine procurement network without any effective R&D, scientific and technological capabilities or industrial defence organisation capable of supporting an effective domestic nuclear weapons program.

Second, although both Libya and Iran have been the object of almost twenty-five years of constant US hostility from all positions on the US political spectrum, the two are hardly comparable. Iran, with its historical, geographic, economic and demographic weight, is far more resilient to outside pressure. Indeed, it is because of this that the US has 'scaled up' its tone and political rhetoric against Tehran in recent years, as with the President's 'State of the Union' address of January 2002 in which Iran was labelled a member of the 'axis of evil'; the Iran Democracy Act of May 2003,

¹¹ *The New York Times*, 20 December 2003.

¹² G.D. Porter, "The faulty premise of pre-emption", *The International Herald Tribune*, 3 August 2004.

which gave new prominence to the policy of 'regime change'; and the latest International Religious Freedom Reports which emphasised the religious discriminations and persecutions in Iran.¹³

Third, Libya was not, and is not, surrounded on all sides by US forces. Iran is faced with a US presence in the Central Asian republics to the north, in Afghanistan to the east, in some Persian Gulf states to the south and in Iraq to the west. And finally, Libya had not been submitted to multiple IAEA inspections or to specific, strongly worded resolutions by the IAEA Board of Governors.

Therefore, Libya cannot convincingly be taken as a model for Iran (or North Korea). Indeed, the lesson that some conservative sectors of the Iranian government may have learned from the current US administration's policy is to give up a potential weapons program immediately or develop it as fast as possible. Iran (and perhaps North Korea) suffers a sort of 'security guarantees deficit', so that economic rewards (as in the Libya model) are not enough to convince all those in power to choose *not* to pursue a nuclear weapons program.

What is needed is a 'grand bargain',¹⁴ with both economic rewards – the signing of a new, more favourable, trade agreement with the EU; future access to the WTO; the end of ILSA; etc. – and, even more important, political inducements – a more moderate US line towards Iran; establishment of a multilateral security assurance system by a group of regional and Islamic countries, plus the EU and the Russian Federation; and establishment, as soon as possible, of a regional Security Conference in the form of a multilateral regional security arrangement (MRSA) in which Iran would have a prominent seat.¹⁵ After all, without addressing and understanding Iran's perceptions of isolation and insecurity, the international community cannot achieve any durable form of stabilisation in the Persian Gulf region. Moreover, "if Iran's sense of isolation continues to deepen its

¹³ See the 2004 report at <www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004>.

¹⁴ The idea of a 'grand bargain' with Iran is widely disputed. In the recent report by an independent task force, "Iran: Time for a New Approach", sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, this idea is dismissed as a 'non realistic goal' (p. 3). In the same report, however, H. P. Goldfield submits the view that "... a 'grand bargain' may be the only realistic option for breaking out of the current impasse in U.S.-Iranian relations...", p. 46. It is important to underline that a pragmatic 'grand bargain' does not mean establishing formal reciprocal relations (which are not realistic at present). For the full report <<http://www.cfr.org>>.

¹⁵ Discussed at the "International Workshop on MRSA in the Middle East", organised by Centro Volta and held in Rome on 5-6 July 2004 <www.centrovolta.it/landau/Iran%20Project.htm>.

siege mentality, then it would be logical for it to look at the nuclear option even as a tactical pawn...".¹⁶

- *Nuclear weapons as a symbol of cultural pride and national greatness.* A frequently stressed argument is that nuclear weapons are perceived as a way of gaining higher regional and international status (this has been the main reasoning of India, but not of Pakistan and Israel) and some believe that Iran reasons the same way. Iran's political and economic interests and ambitions provide the main drive for its intention to develop independent, indigenous nuclear energy technology, and the possession of nuclear technology is seen as a matter of cultural pride and national greatness.¹⁷ However, it is not obvious that the same drive is behind the pursuit of a nuclear weapons program. Indeed, Iran is a very special and particular Islamic country which is very proud and self-reliant, compared to other Middle Eastern countries, backed by a great thousands-of-years-old civilisation. More importantly, it has a very young population endowed with the typical Western commodity myths and internet-globalisation goals of all young people on this planet. Consequently, can Tehran's decision-makers, policymakers and clerics be so naive as to think of selling their young population a very costly (politically and economically) 'nuke dream' as a way of achieving a greater role in the Middle East and on the international stage? If Tehran's government is going to cross the nuclear threshold, that will be done under real or perceived security threats, and not as the result of deep cultural motivations or the aspiration to become the 'leader' of the Islamic world.

However, while waiting for a 'grand bargain', the Iranian leaders should come to an agreement with the US and the EU to implement a nuclear fuel cycle arrangement that would be free of any proliferation risks and would, at the same time, address the country's energy security concerns. Such a proposal, to be inserted later into the 'grand bargain', should address all security concerns of the international community and of Iran itself, and in a later phase, with the improvement of mutual trust between the parties, could pave the way for settlement of other key security issues in the Middle East. In the long run, this process could gain some sustainability if all the major

¹⁶ Ehteshami, "Iran's International Posture", p. 193. See also K. N. Schake and J. S. Yaphe, *The Strategic Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, Research Report, (Washington: National Defense University, 2001).

¹⁷ According to the NPT, Iran has the right to develop a domestic civilian nuclear energy program in compliance with IAEA safeguards and the IAEA Additional Protocol, which should be ratified quickly by the Iranian *Majlis* in order to avoid further international misunderstandings.

regional powers of the Middle East and Persian Gulf, *without exclusion*, were to become protagonists in ensuring the future strategic stability of the region. Such a task would necessarily call for establishment of a regional Security Conference among the parties, as previously proposed.

- *Pre-emptive pre-emption' of Iran's nuclear facilities.* According to the US neo-conservative doctrine, the 'democratic liberation' of the greater Middle East, including Iran – which is allegedly mastering a covert nuclear weapons program and fostering Shia resistance to US forces and the new Iraqi interim government around and in Najaf – might achieve two main results:

- 1) reboot the doctrine itself and the underlying idea that the removal of autocratic, illiberal regimes would create the conditions for local populations to welcome Western culture and would thus reduce the terrorist challenges directed against the US;¹⁸

- 2) with respect to Iran, induce a regime change, possibly from within the country or through external pressure. According to this reasoning, a military first strike against Iranian nuclear facilities would exacerbate domestic contradictions and political tensions – a simplistic idea, considering the nationalistic stance of Iranians: any violent pressure from outside will reinforce the more conservative and paramilitary factions of the Iranian political elite and will have adverse consequences in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁹

At the same time, an Israeli pre-emptive strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, which is technically feasible, would have two major negative consequences: it would jeopardise any future hope for a peaceful and stable security environment in the Middle East; and it would kill the NPT regime. It would, in fact, constitute a unilateral military action by a non-NPT state without any UNSC resolution backing against an NPT state that is permitted by the NPT to pursue nuclear technologies and which has not been declared in material breach of its NPT provisions by the IAEA Board of Governors. If the US wants to put an end to the non-proliferation regime (and the Middle East peace process), the easiest way is to bomb the Natanz facility in Iran.

¹⁸ For a critique of the Broader Middle East initiative, see M. Ottaway, T. Carothers, *The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start*, Carnegie Policy Brief, no. 29 (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, March 2004).

¹⁹ S. Peyman, "Pressure on Iran could backfire", *Interpress Service* <www.iranexpert.com>, 8 November 2004. According to Ray Takeyh: "...at a time when the conservatives are on the defensive, Washington has come to their rescue. Iran's hardliners have cynically employed the Bush team's incendiary rhetoric and calls for regime change as ammunition against their democratic detractors....", R. Takeyh, "Iran: From Reform to Revolution?", *Survival*, vol. 46, n. 1, 2004, p.140.

Last but not least, these nightmare scenarios for the Middle East and the entire international community that would be triggered by a military attack on Iranian nuclear assets, would impact seriously on the EU's energy security, founded as it is on substantial energy supplies from the region.

Conclusion

It is unrealistic to think that a durable solution to the Iranian nuclear issue can be found merely by adopting reactive and 'negative' policies. Instead, it can only be reached through a comprehensive agreement that addresses the political, economic and strategic concerns of all the actors in the region.

Therefore, the EU should make it clear that any unilateral military first strike against Iran poses a serious threat to regional security and international peace. On a broader political level, the EU should reaffirm its position as possible mediator in the nuclear dispute, favouring pragmatic engagement with the Iranian government, like the negotiations going on with the 'big EU 3' (France, Germany and Great Britain).²⁰

At the same time, Iran should: foster efforts to stabilise the new Iraq by calling for greater moderation on the part of the Iraqi Shia community; cooperate with the IAEA as soon as possible to resolve any open questions regarding its nuclear program; and consider initiating unofficial trilateral party talks (Iran, US and Israel), possibly sponsored or hosted by the EU (which already have a close dialogue with Tehran) in any format – track-2 meetings, low-level secret working groups and talks, arrangements through a 'facilitator' party, etc. – with the purpose of at least establishing the terms and issues for possible future negotiations or critical dialogue arrangements.

In 2003²¹ and more recently at the Sea Island G-8 Summit (summer 2004), IAEA Director General Mohammed el-Baradei stressed the need to strengthen the non-proliferation measures regarding civilian nuclear energy activities allowed by the NPT. Hopefully, the next NPT Conference in May 2005 will enhance both measures and guarantees.

The new measures envisaged will: 1) make the Additional Protocol compulsory for all members who sign the safeguard with IAEA; 2) impose a

²⁰ As pointed out by Amir Ali Nourbakhsh, the European states "despite their pro-dialogue discourse, are becoming discouraged about politically backing Iran as US pressure mounts". This situation has offered conservatives and security-related groups a pretext "to take over foreign policy as diplomatic efforts and Khatami détente have failed in a situation of high security risk". A. A. Nourbakhsh, "Who calls the shots in Iran's foreign policy offensive?", *Iran Focus*, vol. 17, no. 7, 2004, p. 4.

²¹ *The Economist*, 18 October 2003.

ban on all enrichment and reprocessing activities for all the Non-Nuclear Weapon Member States (now still allowed by the NPT); and 3) render the NPT provisions effective for the NPT states even if they wish to withdraw from the regime.

Should this new policy become effective, the question of multinationalising the front and back ends of the Iranian nuclear fuel cycle will be unavoidable. The best way to deal with international concerns and to guarantee Iran a nuclear fuel supply is by setting up an *ad hoc* EU-Iranian international consortium for the enrichment of uranium or, lacking that, by establishing an external country provider (for instance Russia, which is going to provide low-enriched uranium for the Bushehr nuclear power plant). Moreover, a pragmatic policy of engagement with Tehran, together with an acceptable agreement on the enrichment problem, could be the way to build a new confidence environment in the region. These efforts would certainly contribute to preventing further destabilisation in the eastern Middle East and favour a more balanced and credible non-proliferation policy in the area.