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DISCERNING IRAN'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY: AN  
EXAMINATION OF MOTIVATIONS, STRATEGIC CULTURE,  
AND RATIONALITY

by

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*Abstract*

Unable to forge a world consensus against the potential dangers of a nuclear armed Iran, US policy makers must prepare for the inevitable. The development of successful US policy with regards to this issue demands an appreciation of Iran's potential nuclear strategy. Does Iran view nuclear weapons as tools of coercion, useful deterrents, or the ultimate survival guarantee for Shi'ism and Persian culture?

Key to speculation about potential strategies is first discerning what motivates Iran's nuclear aspirations, the influences of what Colin Gray calls the "strategic culture," and speculation on the rationality of Iran's policy process.

The evidence suggests Iran is perhaps more rational with regards to strategy development than generally believed if we view decisions in terms of the Iranian experience and key influences on decision makers. It seems likely Iran intends to use nuclear weapons as deterrents to further US and Israeli action in the region, while at the same time enhancing its prestige. US policy based on traditional deterrence theory may apply with respect to countering Iran's eventual nuclear capability.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Perhaps no subject currently receives more attention from the U.S. nuclear non-proliferation community than the potential threat posed by an Iranian nuclear program. Following the purported “clean-up” of the remaining Iraqi capability and the recent progress made in efforts to turn back the North Korean nuclear clock, policy makers now find time to tackle another potential threat to U.S. interests and security. Unfortunately, several factors converge in the contemporary international environment that do not bode well for success with this problem.

First, the US has been unable to forge an international consensus against Iran with respect to the potential nuclear danger. Without such a consensus, the United States can bring little meaningful economic pressure to bear in an attempt to thwart nuclear ambitions.<sup>1</sup> Particularly troubling is Russia’s search for cash and its insistence on resuming the nuclear cooperation program begun by the former Soviet Union. By some estimates<sup>2</sup> the program is reportedly worth \$800 million to \$1.2 billion and involves the sale of nuclear reactors and additional training for Iranian technicians. Additionally, Pakistan’s continued assistance in the training of nuclear technicians further complicates the problem.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the break-up of the Soviet Union and the resultant potential “escape” of fissile materials, technical expertise, and weapons provides a unique opportunity for Iran to procure materials (or complete weapons) not previously available on the open market.<sup>4</sup> For the first time since the birth of the nuclear age, world events highlight the vulnerability of major power nuclear stockpiles. Serious questions now arise over the accountability of former Soviet non-strategic nuclear weapons and the nightmarish specter of weapons falling into the wrong hands. In addition to “misplacement” of a weapon because of political chaos, we must also concern ourselves with the motivations of Soviet military personnel who returned to Russia and other states only to find a severe lack of housing and food.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Iran remains a relatively “closed” society, revealing little to the United States in terms of its national policy, strategy, doctrine, and decision making processes. As Shahram Chubin points out, “the Iranian regime is not easy to understand. There is a gap between its rhetoric and its actions; between its sense of grievance and its inflammatory behavior; and its ideological and national interests.”<sup>6</sup> With little or no human intelligence resources remaining inside Iran, U.S. analysts must rely on scattered data from potentially unreliable external sources.

Both Defense Secretary William Perry and outgoing CIA Director James Woolsey estimate Iran could achieve an indigenous nuclear weapon production capability early in the next century in spite of current efforts to inhibit its program.<sup>7</sup> Circumstances suggest Iran is certainly capable of achieving a clandestine nuclear capability if willing to devote the required resources. While not suggesting the US abandon efforts to head off what may be an inevitable capability, it is time perhaps to explore the potential implications of a

nuclear-armed Iran prior to continuing development of U.S. security policy with respect to the region.

Despite the constant bombardment of rhetoric streaming from Iran, very few analysts focus on the question of Iran's nuclear strategy against the background of changes in the overall political environment. The West still knows very little about Iranian military doctrine and, in particular, Iran's beliefs about nuclear weapons as instruments of national policy. Any policy recommendations must therefore be made in the absence of any declared Iranian policy or strategy, let alone definitive knowledge of actual strategy.<sup>8</sup> This leaves few options for policy strategists. Perhaps the best approach remaining involves examining three key aspects of the policy/strategy formulation process: motivations, strategic culture, and the question of governmental rationality in the policy process.

The first step involves speculation on potential motivations. The amount of capital resources devoted to the pursuit of nuclear arsenals these past 40 years is perhaps unmeasurable. Certainly these efforts have been at the economic expense of societies in general. One need only examine Saddam Hussein's multi-billion dollar bill (while the population endured shortages to prosecute the Iran-Iraq war) to view the incredible allure nuclear weapons must have. Full understanding of the proliferation problem demands that one attempt to discern what makes pursuit of weapons so desirable.

The second step examines the proposition suggested by Colin Gray that distinctive national styles exist in nuclear strategy and that one can gain insight into strategy by understanding the nature of internal and external influences on national security and the historical precedents shaping policy.<sup>9</sup> This potentially might allow one to speculate on

whether Iran perceives nuclear weapons as militarily useful, tools of political coercion, instruments of prestige, or a complicated combination of the three.

Finally, however, analysts must recognize the issue is further complicated by the dynamics of Iranian strategy and the particular forces at work in policy development. At least three major players exist in Iran's policy and strategy process: the military, clergy, and "moderate" civilian political leaders. At work within these centers of influence are potentially different process models affecting the outcome of each group's decisions and the perceived rationality of resultant actions. Graham Allison long ago described conceptual models as a suitable framework for enhancing understanding of decision processes.<sup>10</sup> So too might these constructs prove useful in suggesting probable policy in the absence of empirical evidence or declared Iranian nuclear strategies.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Until President Clinton's 1995 decision to cease all economic activity with Iran, the US in 1994 was Iran's largest trading partner. US exports reached in excess of \$1 billion (primarily oil drilling equipment), and imports of Iranian oil exceeded \$3.5 billion. This suggests previous US policy makers may have taken a more pragmatic view of any potential Iranian threat. See "Tensions over Iran," *World Press Review*, June 1995, 31 and Geoffrey Kemp, *Forever Enemies?* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994), 7-18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. See also Jon B. Wolfsthal, "Iran, Russia Sign Nuclear Deal, Raising Proliferation Concerns," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 1995, 21.

<sup>3</sup> For an expanded discussion of external cooperation see Michael Eisenstadt, *Deja Vu All Over Again* (Wash, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1995) and Lt Col Frederick R. Strain, *Confronting Nuclear Addiction: The Challenge of Proliferation*, (Wash, D.C.: Headquarters USAF DCS/P&O, 1992), 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> "Iran Said to Have Purchased Nuclear Warheads," *PRAVDA*, 6 Jan 1992. See also "Kazakhstan's Denial of Nuclear Weapons Sales," Tehran KEYHAN-E RAVAT in Persian, 5 Aug 92; "Moscow Radio Denies U.S. Claims on Nuclear Weapons," *Tehran IRNA* in English, 5 Apr 95; and David Albright and Mark Hibbs, "Iraq's Shop-Till-You-Drop Nuclear Program," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 1992, 27-37.

<sup>5</sup> Major General Geli Batenin, a nuclear weapons advisor to the Russian Republic and former SS-18 brigade commander, best illustrated this concern when noting: "right now

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we are putting people out on the street, including large numbers of officers....It's essential that when we demobilize these soldiers we release them in many widely separated locations and keep them from gathering together in large groups. Weapons should be securely stored away in locked and guarded areas....If soldiers cannot find something to eat, they will figure out other ways of obtaining food. See "Soviet General Says Unrest May Spark Nuclear Terror," *Washington Post*, 16 October 1991, A2.

<sup>6</sup> Shahrām Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy: Capabilities Intentions & Impact* (Wash, DC: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfsthal, "Iran, Russia Sign Nuclear Deal," 21.

<sup>8</sup> However, one may nevertheless still be able to discern a strategy after examining key issues. A similar dilemma faces those seeking China's nuclear strategy. See Chong-Pin Lin, *China's Nuclear Weapons Strategy: Tradition Within Evolution* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986), ix.

<sup>10</sup> Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crises," *The American Political Science Review* LXIII, no. 3 (September 1969), 698-718.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Motivations**

A certain mystique surrounded the possession of nuclear weapons the past 40 years. Nuclear mythology suggests to nations that the “atomic fleece” confers certain powers upon those willing to endure the odyssey. Like most myths in man’s history, there is a certain vein of truth running throughout the story. As Iranians watched the Titans duel (the US and USSR) they undoubtedly noticed advantages accruing to each as a result of nuclear programs.

#### **The Quest for Power and a Proposed Framework**

Although the superpowers and Iran may share many basic security interests in the contemporary environment, a host of additional incentives define a spectrum as diverse as their respective ideologies. Yet no matter how disparate these motivations appear, one must recognize that ultimately the desire for sufficient “power” to promote specific interests is the crucial objective. As the preeminent political realist Hans Morgenthau suggested, international politics is mostly a struggle for power that permits a state to achieve its goals.<sup>1</sup>

The desire for effective relational power to a large extent defines us as nations.<sup>2</sup> It permeates all aspects of human existence, from birth to death, and business to politics.

The pursuit of power is the most publicized and oft discussed obsession, but perhaps the least understood. This is because the definition and conceptual framework of power is perceived differently by dissimilar cultures. The West long considered power a matter of quantity, especially in military affairs,<sup>3</sup> perhaps as a by-product of our Clausewitzian heritage. In Iran, the concept and utility of power is shaped by the integration of centuries of varying influences provided by conquering nations, religious predominance, and experiences different from our own. Therefore the Iranian paradigm views both the pursuit of power and its relational significance differently from the West.

Attempting to comprehend the different forms of power and how they manifest themselves in nuclear ambitions (given unique cultural biases) is a daunting challenge. It was Maslow who suggested human existence is governed by a graduated scale of motivations or a “hierarchy of needs.”<sup>4</sup> This author suggested a similar hierarchy exists for examining nuclear ambitions.<sup>5</sup> The “hierarchy of nuclear motivations” model illustrated the predominant reasons why nations might pursue nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup> These included: survival, deterrence, prestige, security/hegemony, grand autonomy, and superpower status. The placement of each category within the hierarchy suggests increasing levels of motivational and policy sophistication. A nation residing towards the top of the hierarchy purportedly uses its nuclear capabilities differently (politically and militarily) from a player operating on lower levels of the pyramid;<sup>7</sup> a key point for this paper if the intent is to gain insight into potential Iranian policy.

The author believes the model important because it allows analysts to identify key indicators that may point to particular nuclear motivations of a state. Once analysts identify a state’s key concerns, one can potentially individually tailor policies to obviate

the desire for nuclear weapons. The author cautions however, that "...the discriminators and indicators are not always well defined or intuitively obvious...and the analysis is further complicated by the fact that the international environment is dynamic."<sup>8</sup> One can anticipate states might move up or down within the hierarchy depending on circumstances and may even appear to operate on more than one level during periods of transition. On examination of the key indicators, where might Iran reside on the hierarchy?

### **Survival**

"Survival is the most fundamental and basic of nuclear incentives. It is based on the perceived need to guarantee the very existence of a nation or culture"<sup>9</sup> Israel's political use of its undeclared nuclear capability creates ambiguity in the minds of its foes, suggesting it retains nuclear weapons as the "ultimate insurance policy."<sup>10</sup> Such concerns about survival understandably stem from a number of historical precedents including the holocaust and three more recent attempts in the last thirty years to eliminate the Jewish state. Similar survival concerns do not seem appropriate to Iran.

Iran currently faces no foe sworn to eliminate the nation. Following the Gulf War's destruction of most of Iraq's military force, even its historic nemesis no longer has the capability to realistically threaten Iran for some time to come. Although Iranian leaders often mention war with the US as inevitable,<sup>11</sup> they cannot believe this would lead to annihilation given that they watched much of Iraq's regime remain intact following coalition action. Clearly Iran faces no threats to its survival as a state even though it perceives the current environment as hostile to its interests.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond survival as a “state” lies the concept of cultural or religious survival. This view often manifests itself in the search for the “Islamic bomb” so often mentioned in the media. Often thought of as the “anti-Israel bomb,” the literature suggests motivations go well beyond this issue. Although a former Prime Minister of Pakistan often noted that the Christian, Jewish, and Hindu civilizations each had nuclear weapons and it was time for the Islamic civilization to also have a nuclear capability,<sup>13</sup> there are also those who suggest the desire for an Islamic bomb is tied much closer to oil than to Allah.<sup>14</sup> One finds little objective evidence to suggest Islam, or Shi’ism for that matter, is in much danger of extinction despite Iran’s rhetoric.<sup>15</sup>

## **Deterrence**

When considering the possibility Iran seeks its nuclear capability for deterrent purposes, the case grows more interesting. Some of the indicators suggesting a nation seeks nuclear weapons as a deterrent are:<sup>16</sup>

- the procurement of sophisticated and survivable means of weapon delivery, since a credible deterrent must be survivable;
- open declarations and concerns about a “balance of power,” especially if
- the nation expressing the concern is weak in relation to its perceived foes;
- continued rhetoric concerning the “shackles” of great power influence;
- residing in a region with confrontational neighbors with excessive military power;<sup>17</sup>
- a history of domination or bullying by a superior power.

In its most basic form, deterrence involves preventing action on the part of an opponent by raising the cost a foe must pay to unacceptable levels. Deterrence occurs when the costs credibly exceed the benefits.<sup>18</sup> For the purpose of discerning the motivations of Iran, one must examine two aspects of deterrence. First, the traditional

“balance of power” perspective where Iran might desire to counter a perceived threat.<sup>19</sup> Second is the concept of a desire for sovereignty within the context of deterrence.

The quest for a balance of power is a basic tenet of international relationships.<sup>20</sup> From a military perspective, this quest historically involved building big armies to counter a foe’s big army, a lesson not lost on countries in the Middle East. Having accumulated sufficient force, states assumed an enemy recognized the high cost of engagement.<sup>21</sup> But the advent of nuclear weapons altered the equation in a rather profound manner in the calculations of some states.

At the end of WWII, it appeared military power could no longer be measured in terms of simple numbers because technology provided the world with a great equalizer.<sup>22</sup> Nations like the US and USSR could now conceivably offset the quantitative advantage of an opponent by using the threat of nuclear warfare. Advocates of deterrence counted on the menacing effects of nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> The US, for example, relied on this strategy in Europe to counter Soviet numerical superiority. Supposedly, the threat of nuclear warfare deterred Soviet military aggression.<sup>24</sup>

A smaller nation such as Iran must also ask the question “How can we make conflict too costly for an opponent?” Building and maintaining a large army is often out of the question and is certainly no guarantee of success.<sup>25</sup> Even the threat of chemical weapons, often referred to as the “poor man’s nuclear weapon,” did not deter the U.S. from action against Iraq.<sup>26</sup> K. Subrahmanyam, a well known writer on nuclear options in India noted that “the thesis that nuclear deterrence has sustained peace in the industrialized world will make it difficult for leading nuclear-capable developing nations not to adopt the strategy of the dominant nations of the international system.”<sup>27</sup>

Only nuclear weapons seem to possess the magic ingredient required to achieve deterrence. A widely held perspective among smaller nations is that if Saddam Hussein had possessed a nuclear bomb, things might have been different.<sup>28</sup> The evidence these nations point to is almost 50 years of peace between the US and USSR. The suggestion that nuclear weapons can deter conventional conflict is the rationale often used by India and Pakistan to justify their programs.<sup>29</sup>

But the nuclear reality emerging from the cold war and understood by the US and USSR is that nuclear weapons only deter nuclear weapons.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, opponents must choose to be deterred.<sup>31</sup> It was obvious the U.S. nuclear arsenal did little to deter conventional conflict in Korea,<sup>32</sup> Vietnam, or Iraq.<sup>33</sup> But this argument is of little utility to Iranians who believe they face aggressive neighbors. To states like Iran, nuclear weapons have, and always will provide deterrence<sup>34</sup> and therefore remain worthwhile objectives.<sup>35</sup>

To Iran, a desire for some degree of sovereignty also seems a key motivator.<sup>36</sup> “It’s the Third World’s anti-imperialist revenge on the snooty nuclear club,” noted Tina Rosenberg of the Overseas Development Council.<sup>37</sup> The primary utility of nuclear weapons within this context of sovereignty is to provide “freedom of action” with respect to the major powers. The *Muslim*, a Pakistani newspaper, reflected the general sentiment when it noted, “[our nuclear program]... is under attack because we are a Muslim entity with the spine still intact....That’s [the call for adherence to the NPT] an excuse to bring us down on our knees, fall in the queue of the vanquished Arabs...”<sup>38</sup>

A smaller nation like Iran with nuclear capabilities could conceivably create a significant level of apprehension within a superpower’s decision making apparatus.<sup>39</sup> This

provides, to some extent, an effective barrier (deterrence) to major power hegemony<sup>40</sup> and intervention, especially in matters judged not “critical to national security interests.” The non-deterrent effect of chemical weapons and large armies in the Gulf War undoubtedly sent Iran seeking alternative ways of keeping larger powers out of regional affairs.

## **Prestige**

This is not to suggest that Iran seeks nuclear weapons for the deterrent effect alone. As previously suggested, the dynamics of nuclear motivations are such that a state can transition adjacent levels of the model as internal and external conditions change. The result is a state that simultaneously appears to operate on two levels; such is the case for Iran. If the evidence suggests “deterrence” as a motivator, one can make an even stronger case for “prestige/hegemony” as the more sophisticated motivation. The key indicators of prestige/hegemonic-oriented nuclear desires reads as a list tailored for Iran:<sup>41</sup>

- overt acknowledgment of programs funded for national prestige;
- expressed dissatisfaction with the nuclear double standard;
- growing nuclear programs with significant investment in training and education;
- a government controlled by a dictator, monarch, or military regime;
- a historic overestimation of the state’s regional importance; and
- the tendency to attribute more influence to one’s state than is logically supported by the instruments of national power.

Prestige as a motivation for the procurement of nuclear arsenals also manifests itself when discussing the quest for an “Islamic bomb.” This occurs because prestige, especially regional prestige, is an important qualification among Middle East nations.<sup>42</sup> Although rarely an end unto itself, prestige is an important element of the hierarchy and a definite stepping stone to hegemonic desires.

Hans Morgenthau defined the utility of prestige in international relations in his book *Politics Among Nations*. He noted: “its purpose is to impress other nations with the power one’s own nation actually possesses, or with the power it believes, or wants the other nations to believe, it possesses.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, Morgenthau suggests prestige can be based on cold hard reality or a creative manipulation of “perceived reality.” Historically, the acquisition of powerful, numerically superior military forces served as the primary means of advancing state prestige. But the equation changed somewhat over the past 40 years, a fact certainly verified by the Gulf War in 1991.

Military superiority today is less simply a quantitative measurement, but now includes an important qualitative factor. The affordability of modern battlefield technology tends to narrow the gap between large and small military forces.<sup>44</sup> Small forces equipped with technically superior weapon systems now possess an apparent disproportionate degree of lethality and a proportional increase in influence and prestige in some cultures. Iran’s drive to modernize its military force serves more than one purpose. Nuclear submarines, advanced fighter aircraft, ballistic missiles, and nuclear weapons conceivably place Iran on par with a number of key states.<sup>45</sup>

To Iran (and others in the region), a nuclear weapon places a nation at the pinnacle of military capability and, consequently, at the pinnacle of military prestige. The view of lesser powers like Iran is that nuclear weapons appear to provide a level of prestige disproportionate to one’s true military position. The publicity and notoriety afforded by the media only serves to reinforce this belief.<sup>46</sup>

Demonstrating one’s state is on a technological par with others is another key component of prestige. “Our nuclear programme is not a weapon of attack. It is now our

honor,” noted one Pakistani.<sup>47</sup> Another author described this need as “a rite of passage out of technological backwardness.”<sup>48</sup> Iran’s development of an indigenous nuclear program easily becomes a symbol of patriotism and national ability.

On the instigation of the Zionists, the West, particularly the United States, is striving to keep Islamic Iran on the defensive and prevent it from using nuclear energy peacefully. Thus it wishes to keep our elite experts in a state of technical backwardness in this new field of science and technology.<sup>49</sup>

Because the official nuclear club remains so small and refuses to admit new members, Iran undoubtedly perceives a potential gain of an inordinate amount of prestige among envious neighbors. In the corporate mind of Iran, it signals an ability to stand as an apparent equal (or at least a contender) with the “advanced” nations. It serves as a challenge to the nuclear hegemony of major powers and is fueled by the contempt openly exhibited for the restrictions imposed by the Nonproliferation treaty (NPT), a treaty viewed by some as one more example of the “haves” versus the “have nots,” imposing a double standard on the world community.<sup>50</sup>

The cornerstone is thus laid and sets the stage for the second component of the equation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 4th ed. 1968), 161-175.

<sup>2</sup> Rochester Institute of Technology, *Japan: 2000* (Draft of treatise), Rochester, New York: 1989, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology Of Being* (New York: Van Nos Reinhold, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Lt Col Frederick R. Strain, “Understanding Nuclear Addiction,” *Strategic Review*, Summer 1993.

## Notes

<sup>6</sup> The author acknowledges the dangers of anthropomorphism when suggesting that states pursue certain courses of action based on unique motivations. Yet, it only seems logical that states, and more specifically the leadership and citizenry, must find some reasons for seeking military might more compelling than others. A hierarchy similar to Maslow's is used as a model for illustrating such situational priorities and is intended to be suggestive in nature.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Kaysen et al., "Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1991, 96 and Lewis A. Dunn, "The Nuclear Agenda: The Middle East in Global Perspective," in Shai Feldman and Ariel Levite, eds., *Arms Control and the New Middle East Security Environment* ed. Dore Gold (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 34.

<sup>11</sup> Eisenstadt, *Deja Vu All Over Again*.

<sup>12</sup> Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Rodney W. Jones. *Nuclear Proliferation: Islam, The Bomb, and South Asia* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 1981), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>15</sup> "Khameme'i: Madrid Conference 'Bullying' Islam," *Tehran IRNA*, 4 October 1991 (FBIS LD3010161691). See also "Power of Islam Said Greater Than Nuclear Weapons," *Tehran JOMHURI-YE ESLAMI* in Persian, 7 Dec 92, 1 and "Besharati Denies Nation Seeking Nuclear Weapons," *Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran First Program Network* in Persian (FBIS LD2711124492), 27 Nov 92.

<sup>16</sup> For expanded list of indicators see Strain, "Understanding Nuclear Addiction," 61.

<sup>17</sup> i.e. military force structure in excess of perceived need.

<sup>18</sup> Warren G. Nutter, *Kissinger's Grand Design* (Washington D.C.: AEI Press, 1975); Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper, 1957); and Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, 1946).

<sup>19</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 161-175.

<sup>20</sup> Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's 1984 report to Congress stated: "...the critical point in deterring war and preventing aggression is maintaining a balance of forces." Quoted in Steven Kull, "Nuclear Nonsense," *Foreign Policy*, Num. 58, Spring 1985.

<sup>21</sup> Assumes rational players. See Richard N. Lebow and Janice G. Stein, "Rational Deterrence Theory: I Think Therefore I Deter," *World Politics*, Vol. XLI, January 1989, 208-224; and George W. Downs, "The Rational Deterrence Debate," *World Politics*, Vol. XLI, January 1989, 225-237.

<sup>22</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 114-116.

<sup>23</sup> McGeorge Bundy, "Nuclear Weapons and the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall, 1991, 84.

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<sup>24</sup> Hans A. Bethe, et al., "The Nuclear Threat: A Proposal," *The New York Review*, 27 June 1991, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Kipper, *Middle East in Global Perspective*, 226.

<sup>26</sup> "3rd World Quest for Nuclear Arms Seen," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 May 1991, 8. See also *Washington Post*, 4 June 1991, 12, for correlation.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Kathleen C. Bailey, *Doomsday Weapons in the Hands of Many* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Bundy, "Nuclear Weapons and the Gulf," 89.

<sup>29</sup> "India Shifts Stance on N-Weapons Conference," *London Financial Times*, 25 November 1991, 3. See also "Pakistan Wants U.S. to Take Lead In Ending Nuclear Race," *Washington Times*, 12 December 1991, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce M. Russett, "Extended Deterrence With Nuclear Weapons: How Necessary, How Acceptable?" *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 50, Spring 1988, 282-301.

<sup>31</sup> Gray, "Deterrence Resurrected: Revisiting," 14.

<sup>32</sup> Although some suggest nuclear weapons may have played a key role in ending the conflict when the U.S. suggested to China and North Korea that the US might be willing to escalate.

<sup>33</sup> Russett, "Extended Deterrence With Nuclear Weapons," 288-291.

<sup>34</sup> Some authors have gone so far as to suggest we encourage limited proliferation on the belief that nuclear weapons will inject a significant degree of caution into regional affairs. See Martin Navias, "Ballistic Missile Proliferation in the Third World," *The Adelphi Papers* (Summer 1990), 3 and also "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1990.

<sup>35</sup> The belief that nuclear weapons are not fundamentally different from conventional weapons is often covered when discussing the topic of "Perception Theory." This theory accounts for the general misunderstanding of superpower relationships held by smaller nations. See Kull, "Nuclear Nonsense" and also Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategic Power: Military Capabilities and Political Utility* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 1976).

<sup>36</sup> "Rafsanjani on Nuclear Weapons, Other Issues," Tehran IRIB Television First Program Network in Persian (FBIS LD0902223595), 9 Feb 95. See also "Syria, Iran, Reportedly in Nuclear Weapons Pact," *Hamburg DPA* in German, 23 Jan 92, and "Commentary on US, USSR, Turkish 'Plots'," Tehran ABRAR, 2 Nov 91, 2 (FBIS NC1111060591).

<sup>37</sup> Tina Rosenberg, "Nuking the Nukes," *The New Republic*, January 26, 1991, 22.

<sup>38</sup> "Pakistan's Honor Is Not For Sale." *THE MUSLIM* (Islamabad) in English, 12 August 1991.

<sup>39</sup> The Cuban missile crisis is an example of how proliferation can limit major power actions, especially in times of crisis. See Keith B. Payne, Testimony before the U.S. Congress, House Subcommittee on Legislation and National Security of the Committee on Government Operations, *Hearings on the Assessment of Ballistic Missile Threats to the United States (and SDI)*, 1 October 1991.

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<sup>40</sup> Muchkund Dubey, "Deterrence Masks Superpower Hegemony," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, February 1985, 28-30.

<sup>41</sup> Strain, "Understanding Nuclear Addiction," 62.

<sup>42</sup> Navias, "Ballistic Missile Proliferation in the Third World," 10.

<sup>43</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Mahnaz Ispahani, "Pakistani Dimensions of Insecurity," *Adelphi Papers*, Winter 1989/1990, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy*, 34-44.

<sup>46</sup> David Jablonsky, *Strategic Rationality Is Not Enough: Hitler and The Concept of Crazy States* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1991), 6.

<sup>47</sup> *The Muslim*, "Pakistan's Honor Is Not For Sale."

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Hull, "The Role of Ballistic Missiles In Third World Defense Strategies," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Oct 1991, 464.

<sup>49</sup> "Power of Islam Said Greater Than Nuclear Weapons," *Tehran JOMHURI-YE ESLAMI* in Persian, 7 Dec 92, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Bethel, "The Nuclear Threat: A Proposal," 51.

## Chapter 3

### Understanding Strategic Culture

Colin Gray notes that strategic culture is a direct descendent of political culture.<sup>1</sup> It is the framework within which a state debates strategic ideas and finalizes defense decisions.<sup>2</sup> Strategic culture is subject to a number of unique geopolitical, economic, and historical influences. “In realpolitik terms,” suggests Gray, most “strategic cultural traits are rational” given the experiences of that nation.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, one finds that supposedly different cultures often share some common strategic cultural traits. It is this common ground that provided a basis for a certain amount of mutual understanding on nuclear issues between the US and USSR during the Cold War. However, it was the essential *differences* in strategic cultures that Gray suggests US policy makers completely misunderstood; differences that led to a potentially cataclysmic US nuclear strategy in Gray’s estimation; a lesson the US must learn with respect to Iran.

Gray found that much of the US thought on deterrence, stability, escalation, arms control, and conflict reflected little more than “the character (strengths and weaknesses) of *our own culture*.”<sup>4</sup> Western theorists and leaders paid little attention to Soviet perceptions, wrongfully assuming the USSR viewed nuclear matters through the same set of tinted glasses. As a result, for example, the West viewed escalation as a “process of political bargaining.” The Soviets simply “approached war as war, not a bargaining

process.”<sup>5</sup> But Gray rightfully cautions that cultural empathy is not enough to preclude war. War, as we learned from Clausewitz, is a political conflict. Understanding cultural influences is useful, but international security problems are usually complicated and not likely to be “defined solely in terms of misunderstanding.”<sup>6</sup> What influences do we find affecting Iran’s distinctive strategic culture and national style?

### **The Shah**

The current strategic culture and national style is first shaped by the legacy of the deposed Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. “His distrust of all potential competing centers of power and the necessity that he remain the center of the state,”<sup>7</sup> his aggressive modernization program, and the strong-arm tactics and repression he condoned became closely associated with the US, his primary supporter. Additionally, the Shah created an atmosphere where those practicing the art of flattery, pandering, deceit, and treachery survived. “Mistrust became the first line of defense.”<sup>8</sup> It came as no surprise when a severe anti-Western backlash took place following the fundamentalist coup. Unfortunately for Iran, the religious revolutionary strategy quickly distanced Iran from not only the US, but Western technology, military arms, and military strategy as well. This policy inevitably proved disastrous during the Iran-Iraq War.

### **The War With Iraq**

The eight-year war with Iraq also weighs heavily on Iran’s strategic culture. The military, political, and psychological damage suffered manifests itself in several post-war programs and almost all rhetoric. After impressively winning early battles and repelling Iraq, the Iranians foolishly pushed-on in an effort to invade Iraq and topple Saddam

Hussein in what Shahram Chubin suggests was the first step in exporting revolution outside their borders.<sup>9</sup> Iran quickly found itself out-gunned by Iraq's western hardware and out-maneuvered by a more realistic operational strategy.

Additionally, Iran found itself the target of two particularly troublesome Iraqi weapons: tactical ballistic missiles (SCUDS) and chemical weapons. Although capable of responding in kind to the SCUD attacks with its limited supply of North Korean missiles,<sup>10</sup> Iran was ill prepared for chemical warfare. Iran's outrage further intensified as it watched the Western world sit quietly on the sideline during what was a clear violation of international law and chemical weapon treaties, a point Iraq never allows the West to forget.<sup>11</sup> After eight years of war, Iran found itself with few allies (save Syria, North Korea, and Pakistan), no sources of spare parts for its Western arms, limited ability for naval interdiction,<sup>12</sup> a military strategy found lacking, and no way to deter or respond to attacks by weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons).

### **The New International Order**

Another key factor shaping Iran's strategy and decision process is the new international order. Iran now finds itself in an environment apparently hostile to its interests.<sup>13</sup> Its ideological nemesis, the US, emerged as the primary power without any apparent counterbalance to its perceived imperial ambitions. Furthermore, the new economic dimensions of power placed the West in even more enviable positions vis-à-vis smaller, poorer nations like Iran. The magnified importance of economic relationships resulted in what Iran perceives as new US-Arab alliances that now thwart additional Arab-Persian ties so critical to Iran's future strategy. All these facts serve only to confirm Iran's

suspicions regarding US desires for regional hegemony and permanent basing in the Middle East.<sup>14</sup>

### **Domestic Failures**

Next, Iran's political environment, characterized by internal failures that potentially challenge the fabric of religious beliefs and success of the revolution, also affect its strategic culture. Its strategy of supporting violent religious upheaval and terrorism in foreign states has made Iran a pariah on the international scene. Iran's attempts to disrupt several secular governments and regional monarchies further alienates Iran from those neighbors Iran needs the most. This lack of success, particularly with domestic economic programs, serves as a poor example to those it seeks to attract. The domestic economic decline continues to feed the disruptive effects<sup>15</sup> while undoubtedly diverting critical resources from military to social programs, thus exacerbating security issues even further.<sup>16</sup>

### **Historical Tradition**

Belief that Iran is the best candidate for regional leadership based on a strong historical precedent also pervades the strategic culture. Persian history spans more than 25 centuries and includes periods of conquest over Babylon and Egypt. Persian rule extended to the Nile Valley and almost to Asia Minor before several centuries of Greek, Roman, and Arab invasions shrank the empire. The past grandeur of the Persian Empire, coupled with Iran's geographic position, size, and demographic status suggests to Iran's leaders that their country rightly deserves the position of dominant state in the region,<sup>17</sup> and still has a mission.<sup>18</sup>

Few analysts doubt that Iran seeks “establishment of a Pan-Islamic bloc dominated by Iran, not Arabs.”<sup>19</sup> The current regional role Iran envisions is tied closely to its anti-US posture. “Iran should establish a united anti-imperialist front on the regional level from among the countries opposed to the various policies of the West, particularly the United States,”<sup>20</sup> noted one editorial. This Iranian-led collective security arrangement would “become the sole authority for maintaining peace and stability without foreign interference.”<sup>21</sup> Should formal security arrangements fail, Iran is not beyond using coercion, subversion, or more subtle variants of its expanding power.<sup>22</sup> As Hoseyn Musavian, Iranian Ambassador to Germany noted: “Iran is a powerful country in the region and has the final say in the world of Islam at present, and is a cultural and political superpower...such a country cannot be ostracized.”<sup>23</sup>

## **Islam**

Finally, Islam plays a major role in Iran’s national style, both to unify the nation internally and isolate it externally. The split that occurred in the later half of the seventh century over Islamic leadership that resulted in conflict between Shi’ia and Sunni, lives on to today. The tradition of martyrdom among Shi’ias that grew out of the assassination of Ali and later his youngest son, lends Iran’s national style a characteristic unique to the region. The belief during the Iran-Iraq war that military success would come from waves of young boys armed only with their faith and a copy of the Koran, led to disastrous results.<sup>24</sup> The notion that Islam provides instruction on military affairs, running state economies, and international affairs has landed Iran in a sad condition that some internal pragmatists are just now beginning to recognize.

Whether Iranian patterns of thought, behavior, culture, and national style reside more in the past or are founded on contemporary events is not a large issue. What can be determined are the key characteristics of the *strategic* culture resulting from these influences. These include:

- a political environment characterized by internal failures that potentially challenge the fabric of religious beliefs and success of the revolution;
- a seemingly insatiable quest for prestige not only within the region but also as the international banner carrier of Islam;
- an assumption that Iran is fighting a struggle against international influences set on the destruction of Islam, a battle worthy of martyrdom;
- a belief that Iran cannot have too large or sophisticated a force given the suffering endured, particularly at the hands of Iraq's chemical weapons and missiles;
- a belief that the potential for conflict with the US and Israel is high (if not inevitable); and
- a military strategy that is dominated by the ill conceived beliefs of religious and civilian leaders rather than sound doctrine.

Iranian intentions are written in Persian history and recent experience. They become obvious given the geostrategic logic of Iran's security concerns as interpreted by its leadership and cannot be easily deduced simply from overt military preparations. Before drawing conclusions on strategy, one aspect of the analysis remains; the rationality of the security decision process.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style*, 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>7</sup> Richard G. Davis, *Roots of Conflict: A Military Perspective on the Middle East and Persian Gulf Crises* (Center for Air Force History, 1993), 38.

<sup>8</sup> Graham E. Fuller, *The Center of the Universe: The Geopolitics of Iran* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy*, ix.

## Notes

<sup>10</sup> Militarily, the infamous “war of the cities” was largely a disaster for both sides. Few targets of significance were hit, the effect being mostly against the morale of the citizenry. Some claim it was the futility of the exchange and realization of stalemate that eventually forced Iran and Iraq to truce. See Davis, *Roots of Conflict*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> “Habibi Claims Nuclear Weapons Report ‘Big Lie’,” *Tehran IRNA* in English, 4 Nov 91. See also “Mohajerani Denies Tehran Seeks Nuclear Weapons,” *Tehran IRNA* in English, 13 Nov 91.

<sup>12</sup> Freedom of navigation is a particularly critical issue since Iran’s oil, accounting for 95% of revenues, must transit the Gulf. See Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy* and also James Wyllie, “Iran - Quest For Security and Influence,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 5, no. 7 (July 93), 311-312.

<sup>13</sup> Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> “Strong Words,” *World Press Review*, May 1995, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Despite the diversion Iran still manages to allocate an estimated \$2 billion to arms programs. See Wyllie, “Iran - Quest For Security and Influence,” 311-312 and Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Wyllie, “Iran - Quest For Security and Influence,” 311-312.

<sup>18</sup> Fuller, *The Center of the Universe*, 241.

<sup>19</sup> Yossef Bodansky, “Iran Acquires Nuclear Weapons and Moves to Provide Cover to Syria,” *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* 20, no. 1 (February 92), 1-4.

<sup>20</sup> “Commentary on US, USSR, Turkish ‘Plots’,” *Tehran ABRAR*, 2 Nov 91, 2 (FBIS NC1111060591).

<sup>21</sup> “Dailies Say US Involved in Iraqi Defections,” *Tehran IRNA*, 22 Aug 95 (FBIS LD2208124095).

<sup>22</sup> Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Comments of Amb. Hoseyn Musavian as quoted in *Tehran IRNA*, 21 Aug 95 (FBIS LD2108085395).

<sup>24</sup> One might assume Iran learned a valuable lesson during the war; however, in a December 1992 response to US and Israeli discussions about Iran’s nuclear program the government responded as follows: “Islam has generated a strength in the nature of the Muslim nations more powerful than any atomic bomb. It is the ‘concentrated’ energy of the world of Islam, the evidence of which we perceive with our own eyes in every nook and corner of the region...The slightest effort on the part of Tel Aviv...will generate a massive and destructive tidal wave of attacks by selfless and martyrdom-seeking forces. See “Power of Islam Said Greater Than Nuclear Weapons,” *Tehran JOMHURI-YE ESLAMI* in Persian, 7 Dec 92, 1.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Policy And Questions Of Rationality**

At issue is which faction within Iran's political apparatus is most likely to have the greatest influence on nuclear matters, particularly with respect to strategy development, and whether one can characterize the process involved as "rational."<sup>1</sup> The Iranian revolution has been unable to harness Shi'ite doctrine to a clear structure of political authority. As a result, many competing factions claim legitimacy. As noted in the introduction, three forces currently play a role in Iranian affairs: the clergy (generally fundamentalist or radical), civilian politicians (both moderate and conservative), and to a lesser extent the military. What the evidence suggests is a more rational/pragmatic decision making process than previously believed, given Iran's motivations and strategic culture. The test will be to examine the general policies of Iran in three areas: military decisions, foreign policy, and internal affairs.

#### **The Military**

Previously under Khomeini, two branches of the military existed. Much of the "regular" army was purged out of mistrust of the officers potentially loyal to the Shah. To balance the regular army, Khomeini created the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Mostly radicals with little or no military training, the IRGC was placed in charge

of most important matters including non-conventional weapons. Their utter incompetence was clearly demonstrated in battle when they preferred the “human” component to military hardware during the Iran-Iraq war.

A number of key decisions regarding Iran’s military emerged following the death of Khomeini and the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars; decisions suggesting a more pragmatic decision making process as compared to the rule of Khomeini. First, Iran seems to have developed a comprehensive plan for military modernization based on lessons learned during the wars. Over \$10 billion has been invested to date since 1989 in procurement of air and naval assets; capabilities that proved their worth in the region. Additionally, Iran is investing in longer-range ballistic missiles, developing its own version of a Chinese anti-ship cruise missile called the Silkworm, and has plans for a reconnaissance satellite also produced with the help of China.<sup>2</sup>

Iran seeks to reduce dependence on third parties for weapons procurement. It has undertaken programs to ease this dependency and recently announced it can produce a modern tank and additional small arms.<sup>3</sup> The indigenous production of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons is also a priority and seems to be coming about in a logical manner. Investment in the infrastructure required to support these activities is receiving priority funding.<sup>4</sup> A general reorganization of the military is taking place with an announced consolidation of the regular army and IRGC and a plan to emphasize military professionalism in the new service.

All these events seem consistent with a rational policy and strategy process within the government. Iran seems to be pursuing the type of capabilities it needs given that it believes a war with either Israel or the US is inevitable.

Our fight with the United States is definite, and the fate of everything will be determined with this fight and conflict” noted the General Commander of the Guard Corps as late as May 1995....One day, ultimately, we must begin our destiny making operations against the United States; hence the forces and the commanders of the Guard Corps must have the necessary capability and readiness.”<sup>5</sup>

An additional element of pragmatism within the military has also manifested itself within the context of domestic security. The military, both Regulars and IRGC, failed to respond to recent riots in Iran over economic conditions. One well-known general officer actually lauded the clergy’s spiritual guidance and then called for the resignation of incompetent government officials, and the staging of free elections. The failures within the economy that force the diversion of funds away from modernization and towards solutions for social problems pose a dilemma for the military. Its conventional forces will be unable to achieve the desired objective, leaving only nuclear weapons as the capability that can make Iran into a major regional power. No analysis suggests any degree of irrationality with regard to military decision making. It seems the rational policy model is at play within the military.

### **Foreign Policy**

If one views the conduct of Iran’s foreign policy a definite change is also afoot. Iranian support for terrorism appears to be diminishing in Western Europe, particularly in Germany and France, major trading partners, suggesting a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy. New cooperative agreements are being sought with the new states on Iran’s northern border in an effort to create a “buffer zone” between Iran and Russia, as well as to head off potential Kurdish issues that might spill over into Iran. New agreements with China seem evident, perhaps betting on deterioration of US-China

relations; a split that might portend a new international counter-US bloc of states. Finally, Iran fully cooperated with the United Nations and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on all requested nuclear inspections.<sup>6</sup> If one could characterize the foreign policy of Ayatollah Khomeini as reactionary and illogical, the recent trend in Iran seems once again to support a rational strategy.

### **Internal Affairs**

Only the decisions made with regard to internal matters seems to suggest a different model of analysis is required. Following the revolution, Khomeini became the head of both government and clergy. In this role he was the final authority in all governmental matters and social issues. In 1979 he stated “there is not a single topic of human life for which Islam has not provided instruction and established norms.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to the 270-seat Majlis (parliament), Khomeini established a number of committees and councils to assist in the decision process. These included councils composed of Islamic scholars who passed judgment on legislation, revised the constitution, oversaw the revolutionary guards and numerous political matters linked to mosques. This period of the revolution can best be described as reactionary, chaotic, and ineffective.

Following Khomeini’s death in 1989, Iran’s government took on a slightly different character. Ali Khamenei emerged as the heir to the clergy while Hashemi Rafsanjani, considered a moderate, became President.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, a number of key interest groups maneuvered for power within Iran. A coalition of pragmatists<sup>9</sup> and conservatives<sup>10</sup> initially emerged, only to be replaced after the economic failures with a coalition of conservatives and radicals. These multiple centers of influence have demonstrated a

number of characteristics that suggest, at least domestically, Allison's organizational process model is at work. President Rafsanjani's first five-year plan, representing the government's strategy for reconstruction of the economy, was approved only after years of negotiations and compromise among groups.<sup>11</sup> The sheer number of consultative bodies and bureaucratic organizations established to carry out day-to-day affairs in Iran creates a situation where "bureaucratic arrangements become the principal allocative and distributive mechanisms in the economy" and each desires an input into the decision process.<sup>12</sup>

Although seemingly preoccupied with internal matters, one author suggests "bureaucratic factors often form an underestimated set of pressures for going nuclear."<sup>13</sup> In India, it was the scientific community that was behind the nuclear program; Mrs. Gandhi did not even discuss the matter with her political advisors.<sup>14</sup> Iran may be on the same track. To date, only scattered accounts exist as to what pressures are brought to bear and by whom. In spite of the clergy's constant reminders that nuclear weapons are an affront to humanity,<sup>15</sup> it is the clergy seemingly most involved in the process. A former energy advisor to the Shah was reportedly told by advisors to Ayatollah Khomeini, "it is your duty to build this bomb. Our civilization is in danger and we have to do it."<sup>16</sup> We also know that Khomeini decided to keep Iran's 15 percent ownership stake in the Rossing uranium mine in Namibia.<sup>17</sup>

This brief look suggests two policy process models may be involved in nuclear strategy development; a rational actor model and an organizational process model. Internal decisions and policies may be naive, but certainly cannot be characterized as

irrational. When taken in the context of Iranian motivations and the strategic culture, potential strategy options emerge.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rational in terms of expecting policy decisions based on logical responses to circumstances and perceived costs/ benefits to the state. Rationality must be examined based on the perceptions of the decision makers and their unique environment; not the desires of Western policy makers.

<sup>2</sup> Eisenstadt, *Deja-Vu*, XX.

<sup>3</sup> "Iran Claims New Arms Provide 'Self-Sufficiency'," *Washington Times*, 26 September 1995, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Eisenstadt, *Deja-Vu*, XX.

<sup>5</sup> "Military Official on Preparation for US Fight," *TEHRAN JOMHURI-YE ESLAMI*, 1 May 95.

<sup>6</sup> "Commentary Denies Development of Nuclear Weapons," *Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran First Program Network in Persian* (FBIS LD0807191492), 8 Jul 92.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel C. Diller, *The Middle East* (Wash, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1990), 154.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>9</sup> Favoring a more realist view of the new international scene, they suggested opening a dialog with the US and returning to a more civilian-led form of government.

<sup>10</sup> Mostly clergy and influential businessmen.

<sup>11</sup> Massoud Karshenas and M. Hashem Pesaran, "Economic Reform and the Reconstruction of the Iranian Economy," *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1995).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Savita Pande, *Pakistan's Nuclear Policy* (New Delhi, India: B.R. Publishing, 1991), 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> "Khamene'i Denies Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons," *Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran First Program Network in Persian* (FBIS LD1307101292), 13 Jul 92. See also "Mohajerani Denies Tehran Seeks Nuclear Weapons," *Tehran IRNA* in English, 13 Nov 91.

<sup>16</sup> Shyam Bhatia, *Nuclear Rivals in the Middle East* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Strategy Options**

This paper suggests three possible nuclear strategies exist for Iran assuming US analysts perceive the current state of affairs and policy dynamic within Iran correctly. The first strategy closely parallels the traditional East-West deterrent paradigm emerging from the Cold War and is best ascribed to Iranian military planners. The second possible strategy envisions nuclear weapons as tools of compellence, coercion, and hegemony and is conceivably based on a complete misunderstanding of nuclear politics by the civilian leadership. Finally, the third strategy envisions nuclear weapons as logical extensions of Iran's Islamic revolutionary objectives; another tool in the fight against Zionism, the West, and survival of the faith.

### **Tools of Deterrence**

The least interesting strategy is the one US analysts feel the most comfortable with; nuclear weapons as traditional tools of the military for deterrent purposes. The military, more than other components of the Iranian power structure, seemingly took to heart the lessons of the past two regional wars. In this context, nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems seem but a logical extension of Iran's weapons modernization program.

Nuclear weapons in this regard, act to counterbalance Israel's capability while complicating the decision process of US military planners.

At least one author suggests that the procurement of nuclear weapons (as tools on the far end of the conflict spectrum) perhaps allows a nation greater freedom of action at the lower end of the spectrum.<sup>1</sup> No longer fearing Israeli nuclear action perhaps provides Iran the opportunity (should it be required) for more aggressive conventional military action; an area where it might prevail. Iran may be taking its cues from its friend Pakistan in this regard. Pakistan, like Iran, believed it faced a hostile, nuclear armed India capable of thwarting Pakistan's ambitions. Only after achieving its own nuclear capability did Pakistan feel comfortable enough to challenge India in a number of areas.

Whether the Iranian military leadership actually believes nuclear weapons deter major conventional attacks is debatable. It most certainly understands that the possession of a long-range delivery capability reduces the effectiveness of a foe's conventional assets.<sup>2</sup> But whether we could expect Iran to transition swiftly to a nuclear option during a conflict, particularly with Israel or the US, seems to depend mostly on whether it perceives its nuclear forces as vulnerable, whether either state possesses any strategic defense capability, and how resolute Iran's leadership is with respect to exercising nuclear options.

If one believes the military is in firm control of all military matters and the employment of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is within the jurisdiction of military planners in Iran, then there is reason to believe traditional deterrence theory may apply. The new Iranian military planners, being seemingly rational to date, may realize the

military disutility of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the available evidence indicates the military has been left out of most WMD decisions.<sup>3</sup>

### **Tools of Coercion, Compellence and Prestige**

More worrisome is the potential that the civilian leadership might drive Iran's nuclear strategy. As previously discussed, the civilian leadership has been placed in the position of carrying-out key aspects of the revolution. To the extent they have failed, and may seek other paths to glory for Iran on the international scene, they could greatly complicate matters. If one considers the military leadership mostly motivated by the need for a deterrent in the face of more capable foes, it is the civilian leadership that is most motivated by the quest for prestige. In the search for technological prestige, no project remains more illusive (and therefore more desirable) than indigenously developed nuclear weapons. Because the official nuclear club refuses to admit new members, those nations achieving nuclear capability (in spite of the barriers) perceive a gain of immense prestige among smaller states.

Iranian leaders, like the Chinese, may seek indigenous development of nuclear weapons to provide a significant amount of national esteem and send a clear signal to the US that they no longer feel hostage to the whims of other powers.<sup>4</sup> To the Chinese, their technological achievement, in the words of Chong-Pin Lin, "...whitewashed the stain of past humiliation with the dazzling and purifying light of the mushroom cloud."<sup>5</sup> Technological prowess, in this sense, becomes a counter to semi-colonial pasts. In the corporate mind of a country, it signals an ability to stand as an apparent equal (or at least a contender) with the "advanced" nations.

There are two additional objectives of prestige: “prestige for its own sake and prestige in support of the status quo or imperialism.”<sup>6</sup> The former objective is less important and most often sought for nationalistic reasons, while the latter objective recognizes the dynamics of the foreign policy environment.<sup>7</sup>

Morgenthau points out that “only foolhardy egocentrics are inclined to pursue a policy of prestige for its own sake.”<sup>8</sup> This particular tendency emerges from a dictator’s (or in Iran’s case, the radicals’) monopoly on domestic power where the rulers or key leaders revel in the personal influence they wield (a characteristic of Iran’s strategic culture). They tend to confuse the international and domestic scenes, regarding “international politics as a kind of personal sport where in the exaltation of one’s own nation and in the humiliation of others, one enjoyed one’s own personal superiority.”<sup>9</sup> The foolishness, Morgenthau illustrates, is that one can afford this at home, but not in international relations where there are dramatic implications for those whose “power is not commensurate with his belief or pretense.”<sup>10</sup>

Such is the case with Iran’s civilian leadership. They have created an artificial environment for themselves within Iran; an environment that celebrates rhetoric and caters to their inflated prestige. They believe they have “a mission transcending mere national interests.”<sup>11</sup> Shi’ia self-aggrandizement confuses personal glory with the political interests of the nation. Without the power to support perceived prestige, forces can fall to those capable of calling their bluff. The acquisition of nuclear weapons makes it more difficult for states, especially the US, to “call their bluff.”

Even more disconcerting is the suggestion one can expect the current radical/conservative civilian coalition to be even more aggressive with regard to military

matters than the religious leadership.<sup>12</sup> It is the civilian leadership that most often openly stresses the danger of relying on “the self-restraint of future adversaries or adherence to international commitments.”<sup>13</sup> The “political” motive for weapons is at times the more dangerous since emotion often triumphs over reason. Just as the radicals pressed the attack in the war with Iraq in spite of overwhelming odds, one potentially faces the danger of an emotionally charged leadership desperate to prove their legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> Without a history of intellectual assessment of nuclear politics, nuclear policy under control of an ill-prepared civilian leadership portends disaster. Furthermore, Chubin illustrates a potentially dangerous point with regards to nuclear weapons as political tools: “Attempts to heighten US anxiety and inhibitions by acting irrationally, in order to convert nuclear weapons into a multi-purpose instrument of day-to-day diplomacy, would risk releasing the United States from its remaining inhibitions about ‘punishing’ Iran.”<sup>15</sup> Whether Iran’s current coalition of radical and conservative leaders is savvy enough to fully appreciate this fact is yet to be seen.

### **Weapons as Defenders of the Faith**

For the clergy, a unique dilemma exists. On one side lies the fact that nuclear weapons and their effects are at great odds with Islamic teachings, and the clergy have noted as much in many official proclamations and sermons.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Islam’s fundamentals stress that God endowed man with the powers and faculties necessary to achieve a life worth living. These powers and resources are intended to be used for the good of others and the work of God on earth.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, much of Iran’s clerical

leadership “feels that the key to Iran’s strategic posture is in an Islamic *bloc*...that would compel the Arab states to gravitate towards Iran’s influence;”<sup>18</sup> not alienate them.

Competing with the peaceful tenets of Islam is the singular belief of Iran’s Shi’ia clergy that the existence of Israel is an affront to Islam. “Because a Muslim land in the heart of *dar al-islam* (the abode of Islam) can only be ruled properly by a Muslim authority, Israel...must be met with *jihad* (holy war).”<sup>19</sup> The perceived need to confront the Zionists is strong and many clerics believe the battle is inevitable. One clergyman noted: “...The Muslim nation will, God willing, fulfill the prayer of Noah [from the Koran]: ‘And Noah said, Lord, leave not a single family of Infidels on the Earth for if thou leave them, they will beguile thy servants and will only beget sinners, infidels.’”<sup>20</sup>

While Islam does not recognize divisions between secular and religious matters (they are “two sides of the same coin”<sup>21</sup>) the distinction in Iran between the beliefs of the religious clergy and desires of the political clergy (my characterization) seemingly appear at odds. Ayatollah ‘Ali Hoseyni Khamene’i’s transition from President (replaced by Rafsanjani) to head of the clergy illustrates this point.

As President, Khamene’i indicated on several occasions his preference for nuclear weapons. As early as 1987, he urged Iranian nuclear scientists to intensify their work “in defense of your country and your revolution.”<sup>22</sup> Bodansky reported that Khamene’i later dispatched several teams to Central Asia in search of nuclear weapons for sale following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Once such a purchase became potentially possible in Kazakhstan, Khamene’i convened a high-level commission to study the validity of the offer. He reportedly put Sayyid Atta’ollah Mohajerani, the Vice President, personally in charge of the effort.<sup>23</sup> Mohajerani aggressively championed the need for nuclear weapons

in Iran “as a pan-Islamic undertaking to confront Israel.”<sup>24</sup> “This regime wants to continue to have the upper hand; one way of doing this is to have a nuclear capability...all Muslims, including Iran must reach a high level in the nuclear field in order to confront the Israeli nuclear challenge.”<sup>25</sup>

At issue is whether Khamene’i now sees nuclear weapons as a theological or political issue and what might a clergy-centered strategy look like. The available evidence suggests a disconnect between the ideals of the common clergy and those actually wielding power. It is hard to believe much beyond pure power politics is at work in this regard. Influenced by the inevitability of a confrontation with Israel and the United States, Khamene’i undoubtedly seeks nuclear weapons to ensure the survival of the faith. As the bastion of Shi’ism, Iran could ill afford to lose face or battles against either state. With nuclear weapons, he potentially achieves a “draw” vis-à-vis Israel. Iran (and Shi’ism) is free therefore to continue the revolution in incremental steps with some certainty it will not be destroyed. A clergy-centered strategy is one of survival and creating an environment of greater freedom of action.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gupta, *India Redefines Its Role*, 53.

<sup>2</sup> Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> The IRGC is in charge of all nonconventional weapons, not the Regular Army. See Eisenstadt, *Deja Vu All Over Again*.

<sup>4</sup> For additional similarities with China see Chubin, “Does Iran Want Nuclear Weapons,” 95-96.

<sup>5</sup> Lin, *China’s Nuclear Weapons Strategy*, 106.

<sup>6</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 75-78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## Notes

<sup>11</sup> Chubin, "Does Iran Want Nuclear Weapons," 87.

<sup>12</sup> Clawson, Iran's Challenge to the West," 49.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Although, Chubin notes, there is no evidence from the past 15 years that suggests Iran is unaware of power realities. See Chubin, "Does Iran Want Nuclear Weapons," 98.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "The Islamic Republic has never been after gaining unconventional and mass-destruction weapons, since it is in apparent contradiction with its Islamic ideology which promotes peace for the cause of the human being and the society." See "Mohajerani Denies Tehran Seeks Nuclear Weapons," *Tehran IRNA* in English, 13 Nov 91.

<sup>17</sup> For a general overview of Islam's tenets see Abdul A'La Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding Islam* (Gassim, Saudi Arabia: Islamic Foundation, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Yossef Bodansky, "Iran Acquires Nuclear Weapons and Moves to Provide Cover to Syria," *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* 20, no. 1 (February 92), 1

<sup>19</sup> Louis Rene Beres, "Israel, Iran, and Prospects for Nuclear War in the Middle East," *Strategic Review* 21, no. 2 (Spring 93), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Yossef Bodansky, "Radical States and Nuclear Proliferation: Racing to the Finish," *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* 19, no. 6 (Winter 91-92), 12.

<sup>23</sup> Bodansky, "Iran Acquires Nuclear Weapons, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

Given the existing circumstances in Iran and the historical propensity for some states to seek-out new capabilities first and develop strategies only as an “after thought,” it is possible Iran’s leadership has no comprehensive strategy with regard to nuclear weapons.<sup>1</sup> While suggesting possible nuclear strategies in this paper, it is perhaps not possible to identify the “official” strategy to any degree of certainty. What is known is the influence of motivation, strategic culture, and perceived rationality result in potentially common threads that weave a picture suggesting a “probable” strategy. The common points are:

- concern with the political and spiritual survival of Iran in a world changing so fast the revolution is in danger of becoming irrelevant;
- a quest for leadership based on political, spiritual, and military prestige; and
- a decision process that appears rational given Iran’s perspectives, but one which probably gives the military no voice with respect to policies involving unconventional weapons.

Factionalism and interference by religious organizations hinder the formulation and conduct of consistent policy in Iran as evidenced by a number of key failures these past 17 years. As Ahmed Hasmin points out:

Neither president Hashemi nor Supreme leader Ali Khamenei has the stature to dominate decision making as Ayatollah Khomeini did. The two leaders are more and more at odds, and the conservative-dominated legislature, the Majlis, is increasingly obstructionist. The ruling elite is no longer concerned with effective governance, but with ensuring the survival of the regime<sup>2</sup>

In all likelihood, Iran's coalition of power elites seeks a nuclear weapon strategy that is designed to limit the ability of the United States to operate freely in the region without potentially high costs. Additionally, Iran's strategy must encompass its concerns with regard to potential nuclear attack by Israel. Since it cannot reasonably expect to hold the military capabilities of these two states at risk, the most likely strategy must center on "counter-value" targets. In a crisis, the ability to threaten the destruction of cities of US coalition members could potentially create rifts in alliances that are tenuous at best. To implement such a strategy, one would expect to see Iran focus on survivable long-range delivery systems. The current emphasis on mobile ballistic missile systems certainly supports this orientation.

Policy makers may take comfort with regard to key points in this argument. First, as has been discussed, one sees little to suggest Iran is irrational in its approach to most key policy issues. No one accuses its government of being particularly brilliant or insightful, but to date Iran's decision authority generally demonstrates it understands the fundamentals of power and political maneuvering. Second, because of the points outlined in this paper and the likelihood Iran is approaching nuclear policy in a rational manner, those concerned with countering a nuclear-armed Iran may find traditional tools and strategies useful for the challenge. Although often discussed, the suggestion of nuclear terrorism as an Iranian strategy is widely discounted.<sup>3</sup>

There is a clear linkage between Iran's domestic politics and its foreign and security policies. Whether it is still possible to thwart Iran's nuclear desires is highly questionable; however, the recent success in turning back North Korea's nuclear clock seems to suggest all is not lost. Much depends on the stability of particular power centers within Iran. If

the radical-conservative coalition continues, only additional confrontation may have any effect. Should the pragmatists succeed in moving issues towards the middle ground, Chubin suggests an “olive branch” approach might work.<sup>4</sup>

Bodansky rightfully noted a profound change in Pakistan’s nuclear policy from Ali Bhutto’s quest for an “Islamic Bomb” to Zia ul-Haq’s view of nuclear weapons as the last resort in Pakistan’s survival against India.<sup>5</sup> The evolution of Iran’s nuclear doctrine owes its initial development to its experiences during the war with Iraq, its observations of the Gulf War, and the harsh realities of the new international environment. Should peace endure between Israel and the Arab states, Iran’s strategy will undoubtedly mature.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one could argue it took the US some time to initially develop its own nuclear strategy following Hiroshima. Even after 40 years of policy debate, some suggest the US still misunderstood the nuclear equation. See Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style*.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Hashim, *The Crisis of the Iranian State*, Adelphi Paper 296 (Wash, DC: IISS, June 1995).

<sup>3</sup> For a convincing discussion see Karl-Heinz Kamp, “Nuclear Terrorism - Hysterical Concern or Real Risk?,” *Aussenpolitik - German Foreign Affairs Review* 46, no. 3, 211-219.

<sup>4</sup> Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 75-78.

<sup>5</sup> Bodansky, “Radical States and Nuclear Proliferation,” 2.

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