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## Report

### Iran and its Sovereign Right to Nuclear Capabilities

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**Trump has called the Iran deal of 2015 'the worst deal ever [Reuters]**

Is there a principled reason why Iran does not have the sovereign right to deploy nuclear weapons and capabilities? If not, why is it subject to such a high degree of international pressure up to and including the threat of war? The claim is that countries bereft of democratic sovereignty tend to disregard core values such as respect of international laws and treaties and display war-like behavior. International relations has it that democracies do not make war; autocracies do.<sup>(1)</sup> In seeking to answer the two key questions raised by the article, the analysis also critically assesses this claim and deconstructs the Western position vis-à-vis the Iranian 'other', by reference to Edward Said's work, *Orientalism*. One finding in this article is that there is a discourse of power at play. In this discourse, Iran is 'imagined' as an irrational actor in the global arena.

## **Introduction**

The first part of this article will look at whether or not there is a principled reason why Iran does not have the sovereign right to deploy nuclear weapons in the Middle East. The second part of this article shall examine why, if not, Iran has been subject to such a high degree of international pressure – particularly from the United States – up to and including the threat of war. In the first section, I shall focus on four common arguments against nuclear proliferation as Hugh Gusterson sets out in his article, 'Nuclear weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination'.

From this, I will draw on Edward Said's argument about 'Orientalism' and the Eastern and Western world. However, I shall argue that there is no principled reason as to why Iran does not have the sovereign right to deploy nuclear weapons. In the second section, I shall closely examine U.S.-Iran relations, whilst focusing on the implications in the use of key terms such as 'regime', 'rogue states', 'axis of evil' and the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT). I believe that Iran has been subject to such a high degree of international pressure because it has strong geopolitical ambitions in the Middle East. Iran is also

known to actively support groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and insurgent groups in neighboring Iraq.

On July 1 1968, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) opened for signatories, and came into force in 1970 offering a distinctive divide between the countries that had nuclear weapons and those that did not have them. The five official nuclear states at the time included the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, China and France. Since then, one hundred and eighty-seven countries have signed the treaties except for Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea, who have all refused saying it is a system of global "nuclear apartheid".<sup>(2)</sup> Nonetheless, it is not surprising that Israel, India and Pakistan, as well most recently, North Korea, all acquire nuclear weapons today. Although the Non-Proliferation Treaty has promised to assist the other signatories in acquiring nuclear energy technology, it does not allow them to use the technology acquired to produce nuclear weapons in the future. In order to prove such compliance, the signatories must also submit to international weapons inspections.

However, article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty makes it clear that nothing in the Treaty "shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes..."<sup>(3)</sup> It is upon this that Iran has rested its claim for developing nuclear energy technology to enrich uranium for fuel for civil power reactors. In August 2002, it was publicly revealed that Iran was building two nuclear facilities, one of which of them was a uranium enrichment facility and the other one a heavy water nuclear reactor.

Although Iran is not strictly in breach of the NPT, to which they are a signatory, the Islamic Republic has been subject to a high degree of debate. To embark on creating such facilities in secret without informing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was highly suspicious. However, despite the fact that international interest in the Iranian energy sector tends to focus on opposition to the country's nuclear programme, Neil Ford argues that "Beyond the Nuclear Debate", electricity consumption in Iran is rising at a rapid rate and is encouraging cross-border trading.<sup>(4)</sup>

## Iran

Iran is governed by Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khomeini and an elected President, Hassan Rouhani. President Rouhani assumed office on 3 August 2013, after the 2013 Iranian presidential election. He succeeded the "fire breathing"<sup>(5)</sup>, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad<sup>(6)</sup>, who served eight years in office from 2005 to 2013. Iran is also governed by a Parliament known as the Majlis, which is made up of geographical and religious constituency representatives. The nature of Iran's Islamic regime, however, is at the heart of Washington's concerns with Iranian policies. Unfortunately, there is this common misconception in the western world that nuclear weapons and capabilities are

most dangerous when they are in the hands of Third World leaders. "Think what the world be like if Saddam Hussein would have a nuclear weapon. First of all, it would change the balance of power. Second of all, he would use it. And that would be most disastrous."<sup>(7)</sup>

Almost all said however, this is ironic because the United States was the only country to initiate the use of nuclear weapons, on Hiroshima in 1945, in which over 2000,000 people died instantly and 350,000 required long-term treatments, consequently. This is despite the fact most thought that nuclear weapons would be used by a Third World country. Furthermore, if Saddam Hussein did have weapons of mass destruction then he would have used them during the Iraq war of 2003. The real danger does not come from some miserable Third World country, which decides to use these weapons either out of desperation or out incivility, as Kenneth Adelman, a senior official in the Regan administration, once said.

There is this common conception, or rather misconception, amongst leaders of opinions on nuclear weapons – including U.S. defence intellectuals, politicians, and pundits – that while we can live with the nuclear weapons of the five official nuclear nations, we cannot, however, live with nuclear proliferation in the Third World – especially in the Islamic or Muslim world. Regardless of the rights and wrongs of this position, Western powers seem to be driven not by principled reasons as to why Iran does not have the sovereign right to deploy nuclear weapons, but rather by an emotive excuse.

### **Gusterson Nuclear Weapons and the Other in Western Imagination**

In his article, 'Nuclear Weapons and the Other in Western Imagination', Gusterson claims that some states are not allowed nuclear weapons because they are viewed as being incapable, irrational, and immature, to the norms of acquiring nuclear weapons. The four common arguments that he puts forward against nuclear proliferation areas are as follows:

1. Third World counties are too poor to afford nuclear weapons;
2. Deterrence will be unstable in the Third World;
3. Third World governments lack the technical maturity to handle nuclear weapons, and finally;
4. Third World regimes lack the political maturity to be trusted with nuclear weapons.

First, it is considered as "economic lunacy" when Third World countries wasting their billions of dollars for nuclear development when instead they should be using their resources on education and on building schools and hospitals. However, no country has the right to interrogate Third World country's military spending, especially when they have not been able to solve the social and economic problems of their own. Second, it

has been argued by defence officials that the world would be a safer place if it were free from weapons of mass destruction (WMD). But this could just make the world safe for conventional war.

This argument has more to do with the third one. It is more about the psychology and culture of people in the 'West' and 'East'. Leaders in the Third World would make decisions differently as to their counterparts in the west. The argument goes that because these leaders are more likely to take risks, to make rash and irresponsible calculations whilst ultimately gambling with millions of people's lives. In other words, Third World leaders lack not only the moral, but also, and especially, the technical maturity to handle weapons of mass destruction. They cannot be trusted. "The nuclear nations are likely to be less sophisticated technically and thus less able to develop safeguards against accident or unauthorized action". (Bear in mind, that the U.S. accidentally dropped a nuclear weapon one time).

However, if the West – in particular the U.S. – were so concerned about safety problems in new nuclear nations, then they should consider sharing safety technologies with the Third World. Weapons scientists in the United States have developed nuclear safety equipment such as the Insensitive High Explosive (IHE) and the permissive Action Links (PALs). Furthermore, this idea that Third World nations lack the technical maturity to be trusted with nuclear arsenal only helps to feed the typical stereotype that the society in these countries are backward.

Finally, the fourth argument that Gusterson gives is that Third World regimes lack the political maturity to be trusted with nuclear weapons. So once again, they cannot be allowed these weapons, because of their political instability or irrationality. The West fears the emergence of an "Islamic bomb" and a Muslim holy war. The late Mary McGrory feared that "nothing is more important than keeping the 'Islamic bomb' out of the hands of Iran. Let it be introduced in the Middle East and you can kiss the world we know goodbye."<sup>(8)</sup>

None of what has been discussed in the four arguments put forward by Gusterson provides a solid principled reason as to why Iran does not or should NOT have the sovereign right to deploy nuclear capabilities. Nonetheless, let us briefly look at the idea of the nuclear 'Orientalism' as Edward Said first introduced in 1978. This will help make things clearer during the second part of the article in which we will look at why all this has been subject to such a high degree of international pressure up to and including the threat of war.

## **Nuclear 'Orientalism'**

In his controversial book *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that once a group has been "Orientalized", then "virtually anything can be written or said about it, without challenge or demurrals." He says that the Western knowledge about the Eastern world is not generated from facts but worryingly from imagination about what Eastern society encompasses. This frames certain types of countries, including Iran, as a problem, especially when they seek to deploy nuclear weapons. Therefore, it ceases to be about nuclear weapons and capabilities themselves, but about the people who seek these weapons, and who may be in control of them. These people are not responsible.(9)

The idea of an Iranian regime is a key theme throughout this discourse. The use of the word 'regime' implies the idea of an illegitimate government. In addition, the lack of democracy in this regime is often looked upon as a form of 'disease'. Since the end of the Iraq war, Iran has been subject to such a high degree of pressure from the United States (and its allies including Great Britain and Israel) up to and including the threat of war in order for them not to deploy any form of nuclear weapons. Including Iran alongside North Korea and the late Iraq in the "axis of evils" only serves to demonize this 'regime' further.(10)

The nature of Iran's Islamic regime is at the heart of Washington's concerns about Iranian policies. Previous U.S. administrations advocates such a regime change for a free and democratic Iran (i.e. the "Freedom Agenda"). These efforts to influence Iranian policies are futile because attempting to interact with the Iranian elite would be politically risky for the U.S. Plus, U.S. officials continue to fail to grasp the complexity of political culture and day-to-day dynamics.

International pressure from the United States and its allies on Iran could lead to economic sanctions, diplomatic and cultural isolation, and the threat or use of military force. This would provoke nationalistic responses, and in turn rally the Iranian people behind their regime. Furthermore, this would lead to a multidimensional impact on relations between the West, now led by the United States, and the 'domain of Islam', in the aftermath of the apocalyptic attacks of September 11, in the 'Global War on Terror'. However, "U.S. policy is not to impose change in Iran but to support the Iranian people in their quest to decide their own destiny". Zalmay Khalilzad, a former U.S. diplomat, says that "our policy is not about Khatami or Khamenei, reform or hardline; it is about supporting those who want freedom, human rights, democracy, and economic and educational opportunity for themselves and their fellow countrymen and women".(11)

## **Conclusion**

All this can be seen as yet another form of aggressive interventionism from the U.S. administration. The truth of the matter is that the United States does not want an

Islamic nation or 'regime' to deploy or acquire any form of nuclear weapons and capabilities, particularly in the Middle East. A nuclear nation or an 'Islamic bomb' in the Middle East would cause great instability in the existing and overly problematic current climate of the region, despite the fact that Israel, Pakistan, India and now North Korea are already nuclear nations in the near or far east region. Pakistan, for example sees this as a form of stability rather than instability. The father of the Pakistani bomb, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, says, "the nuclear weapon is a peace of guarantor. It gives peace to Europe; it gives peace to us... I believe that my work has saved this country from many wars".(12)

Furthermore, if Iran does deploy weapons of mass destruction then this strategic umbrella of nuclear weapons and capabilities could extend to the rest of the Arab world. Inevitably, this could lead to another Cold War.

Throughout this discourse, there have been many flaws and double standards, which remain today. Third World nations should no longer be portrayed as children, and the United States as a parental figure. The U.S. has not treated nuclear weapons and capability as the ultimate weapon in self-defence, but unfortunately as a weapon that can be used to threaten developing nations, in the pursuit of their own interests and values abroad.

Therefore, this is the real danger. The only question that remains is to bomb, or not to bomb.

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