

Iran's Nuclear Crisis

by Reza Ghorashi

I- Introduction

Iran's nuclear ambitions have raised concern all over the world. A lot has been said and written to reflect the point of view of other governments, most notably the US, Israel, and European countries. This article tries to investigate the issue from the point of view of Iran's democratic opposition. This refers to those who believe democracy and theocracy are incompatible. That there will be no real democracy in Iran as far as the current regime is in power. Also, they prefer a world void of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, as a member of this opposition, I believe it is time to take war as an instrument of foreign policy off the table and use non-violent means to solve international conflicts.

At face value, Iran's nuclear crisis seems a non-issue. President Bush and some other members of his administration have assured the "Iranian people" that their right to peaceful nuclear technology is recognized. The Islamic Regime (IRI) officials have repeated, time and again, that Iran's nuclear plans are strictly for peaceful purposes. In reality neither side is truthful in its statements. The US has done its utmost to deny Iran access to any type of advanced technology, nuclear or otherwise. The Islamic Regime has hidden its nuclear activities for eighteen years. Its claim that the policy is solely for peaceful purposes and that it has no intention of using it for military purposes has not been taken seriously even inside the regime itself. We believe the reality is that the IRI administrations of the past eighteen years started with the intention of actually building the bomb. But now, after being exposed, they have settled for acquiring the technology and, if they can get away with it, enough enriched uranium to be able to assemble a bomb if the need arises. This has serious consequences for the region and the world. But of even more interest to both the Bush administration and the IRI are the domestic consequences of the "crisis." Each side is using these "external" threats as a means of silencing its internal opponents. For both of them the "process" (continuation of the pseudo crisis) is more important than the "product" (nuclear weapons, or cutting-edge technology). In the next section we will discuss the IRI's motives.

II- IRI's Motives

1- Foreign Policy. According to the US government the IRI wants nuclear weapons for offensive purposes and intends to use them against US interests and allies (Israel). "Experts" in talk shows warn against a worst case scenario in which the IRI shared its bombs with terrorist organizations. Although one should be careful and "never say never" with the IRI, using a nuclear bomb as an offensive weapon is very unlikely. The IRI is a brutal, suppressive regime and lacks a vision for the future. But it is not suicidal. Any such use would spell a quick and disastrous end. The IRI sees the bomb more as a deterrent. They have seen what has happened to (the bomb-less) Saddam. They look around and see nuclear powers all over the map. To their north is Russia. To their east is

Afghanistan with American and other NATO troops present. To Afghanistan's east is China. Pakistan is to Iran's south-east, and India is next door to Pakistan. There is an American military presence in the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, all in the Persian Gulf, south of Iran. To the west are Iraq and Turkey. Only last week the Turkish media claimed that there are 60-80 American nuclear warheads in Injelic, the Turkish air base being used by the US. Israel is not much further to the west. To the IRI, in its quest for survival, a nuclear deterrent makes perfect sense.

The real danger to Iran's *national interests* is not from the US or Israel, contrary to the IRI's claims. If anything, by getting rid of two of the most notorious actual enemies of Iran (the Taliban and Saddam), the US has done a great service to the IRI (and might I add Iran's national interests). The threat to Iran's national interests comes from more immediate neighbors and regional powers. Russia and some of its ex-Soviets, for example, are denying Iran's rights in the Caspian Sea. Saudi Arabia and small Persian Gulf countries are chipping away at Iran's sphere of influence in the south. There are many unresolved issues between Iran and Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan... To stand up to these challenges, *any regime* in Tehran must be strong militarily. The capacity to produce nuclear weapons is a viable deterrent.

There are those who argue that nuclear weapons, or the capacity to produce them, will not enhance Iran's security. The potential costs of such a policy may outweigh its benefits. This is a valid argument. I take issue, however, with those who oppose Iran's nuclear capacity because it strengthens the IRI and decreases the chances of its being replaced.

A stronger IRI can be harmful in two ways: against domestic enemies (opposition forces); or against external (non-Iranian) threats. While it is not below the IRI to use nuclear weapons against Iranians if that is what would keep it in power, I find such an event very unlikely. It is the second possibility that concerns those opposed to Iran's nuclear capacity. The underlying assumption here is that the IRI will go down in the same way that the Taliban and Saddam have, via US military intervention. Having a bomb may delay, or cancel, such an intervention. Unfortunately, it is naïve to think concerns for democracy and human rights in Iran will drive the US to such a major military adventure. No doubt there are many serious differences between the IRI and the US. Support for terrorism, opposition to US policies in the region, anti-Israeli measures, and of course access to nuclear weapons top the list. But all of these are negotiable. One may speculate that by being ambiguous in its nuclear policy, the IRI is taking a page from North Korea's book in trying to force the Bush administration into direct negotiations. We are aware of a number of attempted secret negotiations that were exposed and thus failed. A number of others, on Afghanistan and Iraq to mention a couple, have successfully taken place. At the top of the list of IRI demands in such negotiations will be assurances of its survival and a free hand against its domestic opposition. In exchange for giving up its nuclear ambitions and other anti-US policies, it is very likely that US and European powers will be more than happy to comply. In a sense it is giving up their nuclear policy, not pursuit of it, that enhances the prospects for the IRI's survival and despotic rule!

2-Domestic consumption. The IRI is an ideological regime of the worst kind! Its messianic ideology of otherworldliness will promise everything in the afterlife and very little for this life. It has no economic, social, or political vision for the future of Iran. Governments can not rely on sheer force to rule in the long-run. There must be some legitimacy to justify their rule. Usually a vision of the future will provide this legitimacy. In the absence of such a vision, the IRI has relied on crises and pseudo-crisis to legitimize its oppressive rule. This has been the modus operandi from the time of the 1979 Revolution. That is why the “hostage crisis” of 1979, originally meant to be a 2-3 days affair, lasted 444 days. It ended only after a bigger crisis, the war with Iraq, was at hand. The current crisis has already enabled the IRI to brutally suppress Tehran’s transit bus workers’ strike. Human rights violations, as bad as they were, have gotten even worse. Dissidents, journalists, bloggers, and university students are arrested and jailed indefinitely for speaking out against the IRI’s nuclear policy. The more the world’s attention is focused on the “nuclear crisis,” the freer is the IRI’s hand to destroy whatever is left of democratic institutions and ideas in Iran.

The problem with this mode of operation in an ideological regime with no vision and multiple centers of power is that no crisis will be resolved rationally and promptly. A crisis will only be resolved long after it has run its course. As long as it has some street value, it is hard for anyone to offer a compromise solution. In order to argue that the benefits of such a compromise outweigh its costs, there must be a yardstick to measure the costs and benefits. This yardstick is a vision of the future. It is needed to justify giving up something of value today for a better value at a future date. For example, giving up “nuclear policy” now for, let’s say, better economic relations in the future requires a strong commitment (vision) to improving the economy. In the absence of this strong commitment, the existing rival “factions” will prevent a compromise solution as long as it has the potential to mobilize their supporters and could be used to criticize rivals. Only when a crisis has no “value” and all costs will political factions stop utilizing it to further their internal rivalries. By this time the other parties (foreign governments) see no reason to offer anything of value either. The “hostage crisis” was not resolved based on more generous offers from Jimmy Carter. Only after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated and the “crisis” had no value were they let go. Nor was the war with Iraq settled under the far better terms offered earlier. In the end Iran got nothing in terms of war reparations. Until recently in this crisis, too, the IRI had refused compromises and “managed” to help the US government get it to the Security Council.

The difference here is that the international political environment favors the IRI. The war in Iraq has been much more difficult and costly than the “Neo-cons” anticipated. The Bush administration is unable, both in military and economic terms, and unwilling, due to the potential political costs, to start another full-fledged war. Less drastic military actions such as targeted bombardments, although more likely, will not be effective. With so many US soldiers and military installations around the area, such actions would be very risky and might result in a high retaliatory toll. IRI officials have concluded that a life-threatening action by the US and its allies, at least in the short run, is unlikely. Aware of such limitations, they have become bolder in their defiance. In addition to some degree of respectability that they have earned in the region, this has resulted in increased support within certain segments of Iranian society.

The explanation of the IRI's ability to make this such an appealing issue lies in the high value that the Iranian and the Shii cultures put on fairness and standing up at any cost for what is right. The official hierarchy of Shii Islam has the Prophet Mohammed at the top, followed by Ali, the first Imam; Hasan, his elder son, the second Imam; and then Hossein, Ali's younger son and the third Imam. In reality Hossein is the most revered one. His martyrdom is celebrated (Ashura) much more rigorously. He stood up to a false Caliph and started a revolt with a handful of his supporters. Even though it was obvious that his movement was doomed, he refused many offers of compromise, and sacrificed his life for what was right. This has been the ideal model for the Shia during the last fourteen centuries. The outcome is not that important as long as the cause is right. Beyond the abstract concept, governments and regimes are made up of people. The IRI is made up of religious Shiats. They believe in this case they are right. Even ordinary people who despise the IRI see double standards here. Five permanent members of the Security Council, all of them nuclear powers, deny Iran's right to it! India, who did not ask anybody's permission to get the bomb, is now being rewarded for it. Israel is not even being mentioned! To stand up to such injustice is an obvious obligation of any decent human being. The IRI Mullahs, experts at exploiting such situations, are very busy doing so.

These internal "benefits" are more important to the IRI officials than a nuclear bomb. Their number one concern, survival, is better served if they can convince people that they are fighting injustice.

III- Solution?

For those who would like to see a genuine secular democracy in Iran, the sooner this "crisis" is resolved, the better. The IRI, with or without the bomb, is a menace and must go. From this point of view, having a nuclear weapon does not make a crucial difference unless one expects the IRI to be overthrown from outside, ala Saddam. This is neither feasible nor desirable. Of course external pressure is helpful. But the IRI shows little response to such pressure as it is. Continuation of this "crisis" hurts the cause of a democratic opposition. A compromise solution in which safeguards are put in place so that the IRI can not build a bomb but is permitted to continue research, seems achievable. Neither hard-liners in Tehran nor neo-cons in Washington, however, are enthusiastic about such a compromise. Only pressure by the people will make them accept it and end the pseudo-crisis.