

# Pieces of the Persian Puzzle: The Three Layers of Iranian Nuclear Rhetoric

Written by Ariane Tabatabai

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ARIANE TABATABAI, OCT 19 2012

Iran's nuclear program is widely perceived as one of the greatest challenges and threats to international peace and security. However, before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which changed the country's status in the West from friend to foe, this aspiration was much less controversial.[1] Since then, Tehran's stance on international security issues, in particular, its contentious nuclear program has been puzzling. This confusion is generated by the inconsistency of the leadership's political rhetoric, which shapes the country's approach to foreign policy. This piece will address the inconsistency of Tehran's nuclear rhetoric, by identifying its three target audiences and the layers composing each discourse.

### 1 – State Interests

The first component of the Iranian rhetoric can be found in the regime's attempts to convince the population that the nuclear program it has undertaken is worth the increasingly high price that the state is paying. Given the recent escalations with Israel, the backbreaking sanctions, and the progressive isolation of the country from the international community, the regime needs to justify its decisions. In order to do so, two distinct lines of rhetoric have been adapted by the regime. The two are systematically presented together, but depending on the situation, one may be put forward alone to persuade the audience.

#### *Religious Ideology*

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has favored the Islamic component of the country's official name (Islamic Republic of Iran) over the Iranian component. In other words, the discourse has always been a religious one, rather than a nationalist one. As will be explained in the next section, the regime's displays of nationhood and national pride are a rather new development, happening as a result of its increasingly fragile legitimacy. The religious element continues to exist in the leadership's addresses, especially those of the Supreme Leader and his representatives, but the only instances where they remain the core of the line of reasoning are at religious events, such as the Friday prayer. Indeed, the leadership is aware of the fraction of the population who listens to the Friday prayer and knows that it can target it with religious rhetoric. This is not the case of an increasingly large portion of the Iranian population, which is no longer easily won by such arguments. In fact, the idea of a united Muslim world and 'the enemies of Islam' threatening this united front, as presented by Tehran and one of the pillars of the Islamic state, has become a mere slogan to the general population.

#### *Nationalistic Sentiments*

The Islamic Republic was founded on the idea of a Muslim community, *umma*, which transcends 'artificial' national boundaries. The concepts of nationhood and nationalism were seen as a means of promoting 'imperialism.' In fact, when asked upon his return to Iran after 15 years of exile how he felt about returning to his motherland, the Islamic Revolution's leader and the founder of its resulting political system, Ayatollah Khomeini's response was 'nothing.' Therefore, when Muslim clerics took power in 1979, they attempted to eradicate all signs of Iran's cultural heritage, especially the pre-Islamic Persian empire's legacy, attacking architectural landmarks, banning pieces of poetry,

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literature, cinema, and art that were not Islamic but rather nationalistic. As such, for some clerics, one of the first places that were to be destroyed was Persepolis, the capital of the first Persian kings, widely seen by Iranians as the symbol of their nation's glory.[2] However, the more disillusioned the Iranian population became with its leadership, the more the regime had to adapt its discourse to maintain a certain level of legitimacy.

Hence, when Iranian youth began to reject the Islamic identity, instead emphasizing its Persian heritage, the rhetoric became more nationalistic. This shift was highly accelerated with the contested 2009 Iranian presidential elections, which represented the greatest challenge to the regime's legitimacy.[3] During these elections and the subsequent unrest, the youth chanted 'we are not the *umma*, we are a nation'. The Supreme Leader's green light to use violent means against protesters and the subsequent imprisonment, rape, torture, and killing of protesters translated into the regime's greatest crisis of legitimacy in its thirty three-year history. As a result of this delegitimization, the nationalist component of the discourse, as presented to domestic audiences, has increased.

Hence, when addressing nuclear scientists, the Supreme Leader, knowing that many of these scientists do not participate in the program for the sake of Islam but rather for their country, highly stressed the implications of the program at the expense of the religious rhetoric:

Your work, this nuclear work, has given this nation pride. They [the 'enemy'] have tried and continue to try, in their propaganda, to show this [nuclear program] as ideological, that it has nothing to do with national interests, the interests of the country. This is while your work is directly connected to national interests. This is work for the nation, for the country, for the future.[4]

The addresses targeting the general Iranian public are also highly nationalist. Ahmadinejad's administration has actively sought to excite Iranian nationalist feelings, by emphasizing the element of national pride brought by the program.[5]

## 2 – Regional

On a regional level, the Iranian leadership tries to win the sympathy of its neighbors and fellow Muslim majority countries' by emphasizing the Islamic factor. In a sense, Iran is following Pakistan's footsteps, as it attempts to portray its program as a technological and scientific achievement for the entire Muslim world. The difference, however, is that Pakistan's Islamic rhetoric secured funding for its nuclear weapons program, while Iran's has failed to provide it with mere political support. Instead, it has had the opposite effect, as Saudi Arabia, for instance, has threatened to 'go nuclear' should Iran do so,[6] contributing to a fear of a nuclear arms race in the region.[7] Regardless, the Iranian leadership continues to seek support from its neighbors, emphasizing the idea of a common 'enemy' and the need for the Muslim world to collaborate to oppose the West.

In February 2012, the Supreme Leader addressed the Arab world in his Friday prayer speech.[8] An unusual element of the speech was that half of it was done in Arabic, a language understood by a very small portion of the Iranian population. Indeed, this move by the Supreme Leader did not help his popularity among Iranians. Indeed, the head of state of a country speaking the language of countries traditionally seen as rivals and aggressors in an official speech in his own country would not increase his popularity, especially in the case of Iran and the general anti-Arab sentiment which reigns in the country. This decision shows the desperation of the leadership to receive regional support. The other attempts to gain support from non-Muslim states and states beyond the Middle East are discussed in the next section.

## 3 – International

Since its foundation, the regime has had an ambivalent relationship with the international community. During Khatami's presidency, Iran tried to be perceived as the instigator of the 'dialogue among civilizations.'[9] While under his successor, the country is increasingly viewed as a reckless and irrational actor, thus becoming gradually more isolated. In order to show that the country is not a hermit state, like the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, President Ahmadinejad has attempted to engage with some states, while provoking others. In the former category,

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one generally finds non-aligned states, while the second is composed of the West and its allies.

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has supported various Shiite and other Muslim groups opposing Israel and the United States, and organizations in Lebanon and the Syrian government. This support has been merely political in some instances, financial in others, and military and logistical in a few, the most recent one of which is the Syrian conflict. But in recent years, and more specifically since Ahmadinejad took office, maintaining that the world is not 'limited' to a few European countries and the United States, Tehran has tried to expand its influence beyond the Muslim world, namely in Latin America.[10] By doing so, the leadership shows to its domestic constituency that it is not completely isolated, as the 'enemy' tries to show and that it has friends and allies across the globe. Nevertheless, to the Iranian population, a large portion of which is affected by the sanctions, and struggling to maintain its standards of living, whether or not Iran is popular in Latin America makes little difference. Whether or not the rest of the Muslim world sees Iran as a friend or foe is also secondary, as Iranians want their country to be recognized by the international players 'that matter,' such as the United States and Western Europe as a state that matters.

The West continues to be portrayed as the 'enemy,' as it has been since the embryonic stages of the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This notion of the enemy has become the very foundation of the regime. In the words of Carl Schmitt:

As long as a people exists in the political sphere, this people must, even if only in the most extreme case—and whether this point has been reached had to be decided by it—determine by itself the distinction of friend and enemy. Therein resides the essence of its political existence. When it no longer possesses the capacity or the will to make this distinction, it ceases to exist politically.[11]

Upon its creation, the Islamic Republic claimed it would lead the country to 'independence' from foreign influence. Whether this independence materialized, and whether the independence sought by the revolutionaries is even achievable in an increasingly globalized world, is beyond the scope of this piece. However, one thing must be noted: regardless of its negative impact on Iran's standing in the international sphere, the enemy narrative as applied to the West and Israel, has become an indissoluble component of the regime's ideology. It is this enemy narrative that is responsible for the polemic around the nuclear program.

Regardless of the differences underlined in this piece, there is one point that is presented to all three audiences: Iran's willingness to share its scientific and technological advent. As such, unlike the other nuclear states, Iran does not see its nuclear program as the key to an exclusive club, but rather as a way to universalize nuclear science and expertise. With this approach, Tehran pursues its strategy of divide and conquer, which the Islamic Republic was built upon. The world is consequently not composed of a single international community, facing the same challenges, but rather of the non-aligned movement and its enemy. The general confusion caused by this reckless rhetoric holds its roots in three factors. First, the Islamic Republic is an inherently perplexing system, as it is founded on Islamic thinking, which is full of inconsistencies. Second, the regime is deeply divided from within and the different levels of leadership seem to have great disagreements. Lastly, the regime strives to maintain a certain level of confusion, by playing a dangerous game, which is not in its own interest, let alone in the interest of the international community. Indeed, while Iran's nuclear program as such may not be an existential threat to peace, its discourse certainly is.

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