

Review - The Permanent Crisis

Written by Gawdat Bahgat

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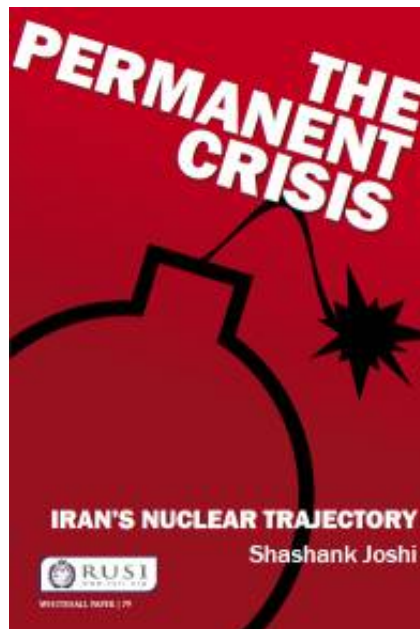
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The Permanent Crisis: Iran's Nuclear Trajectory

By: Shashank Joshi

London and New York: Routledge, 2012



'The Permanent Crisis: Iran's Nuclear Trajectory' is a well-researched and well-written book on the Iranian nuclear crisis. Joshi defines his objectives for the book as follows: first, to situate Iran's nuclear program in the context of the security concerns of other parties; second, to position Iran in a comparative and thematic context; and third, to investigate potential Western responses to the evolving nuclear crisis.

In this 130-page monograph, Joshi provides an extensive analysis of the history and recent controversies surrounding the Iranian nuclear issue. His analysis covers both domestic and foreign policy. In addition to examining the United States and the Islamic Republic stances, Joshi discusses the roles played by other global powers particularly Russia, China and the European Union.

One of the most interesting and informative discussions is on the so-called Arab Spring and how these recent uprisings in several Arab countries might impact the nuclear dispute. Joshi suggests a mixed outcome. He states that the weakening of Arab states and of anti-Iran actors (i.e. Hosni Mubarak of Egypt) automatically represents an Iranian victory. He also illustrates that popular Arab opinion, or the 'Arab street', is far less hostile to Iran than elite Arab opinion. Still, Joshi points out that the Iranian political model did not motivate the democratic activists and Iranian influence was non-existent or negligible. In other words, given the Shiite-Sunni and Persian-Arab rifts, the recent uprisings in the Arab world were little impacted by the Iranian model.

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Joshi also examines Iran's role in the Syrian civil war. He concludes that Iran's material and military support of Syria is a distraction, diverting its military operatives from other areas. Most likely Tehran's support to the Assad regime in Damascus will become a burden on the Iranian economy, particularly as the sanctions bite further. In chapter 3, Joshi discusses different approaches the West can adopt in dealing with the Iranian nuclear crisis, mainly compellence, the use of incentives to influence an opponent's behaviors, and denial, strategies that directly deny an adversary's ability to pursue an undesirable policy. However, in most cases the actual approach is not either one or the other. Rather, a combination of compellence and denial is often employed to change a particular policy. A clear example of this is the United State's approach to North Korea, in which a combination of incentives and penalties has been employed to influence the state's trajectory. In chapter 4, Joshi examines Iran's nuclear options. He discusses in some detail nuclear posture, nuclear restraint, and nuclear fanaticism. He also analyzes how the nuclear dispute might evolve (including crises, brinkmanship, and instability). The dispute over Iran's nuclear program cannot be seen in isolation of similar disputes. Joshi explores potential lessons that can be learned from South Asia. The experience there suggests that a nuclear power might adopt a more aggressive and assertive foreign policy approach.

An important feature of the modern Middle Eastern policy is the rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This rivalry includes the Sunni-Shiite and Arab-Persian rifts. Despite occasional meetings between top officials from the two countries, relations are characterized by mutual suspicion. Several Saudi officials and analysts have expressed great concern about Iran's nuclear program. Despite living with nuclear Israel for more than four decades, Saudi officials have stated in recent years that if Iran goes nuclear their country would consider its options. Indeed, a number of security and proliferation analysts have argued that if Iran crosses the line and makes the bomb, several Middle Eastern countries, mainly Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, will follow suit. A few analysts refute such argument and suggest that an Iran with nuclear weapons will not trigger a nuclear weapons race in the Middle East. Turkey is already member in NATO and is under NATO protection. Egypt is consumed by its huge economic problems and Egyptian leaders know that any efforts to acquire nuclear weapons would make a bad economic crisis much worse. Saudi Arabia is certainly in much better financial position than Egypt. However, the kingdom lacks the necessary technical and human infrastructure to develop domestic nuclear capabilities. The assumption is that Saudi Arabia might try to "buy" a bomb from Pakistan, given the strong ties between the two countries.

The Permanent Crisis: Iran's Nuclear Trajectory makes a good contribution to the large and growing literature on Iran's nuclear program. However, like all other books, it suffers from some major shortcomings. First, the Iranian nuclear crisis is not static. Almost every day there is new development. This means by the time the book is published it is already outdated. There are new developments in Iranian and American domestic politics, the sanction regime is evolving and Tehran is making progress on its nuclear stockpile and military industrialization. Joshi provides good analysis of all major events up to 2012.

Iran's nuclear dispute is also not purely academic. The repeated claims and counter-claims by all sides make it hard to be objective. Despite sincere efforts to present the two sides' arguments, Joshi occasionally takes sides. For example he states, "Iran cultivated links to international terrorist groups..." (p.12). However, as everyone knows, 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.' Some countries classify Hezbollah, Hamas and other organizations as terrorist groups and others do not. Iran categorically denies any relations with terrorist groups. Another example is when Joshi states that "Iran cannot be compared to Japan" (p.34). True, every country is unique in one way or the other. But some analysts argue that Iran wants to follow the Japanese model in developing civilian nuclear capability without crossing the line (for example, see Gawdat Bahgat, The Iranian Nuclear Crisis - An Assessment, Parameters, Vol.43, No.2, Summer 2013).

Despite these shortcomings, The Permanent Crisis: Iran's Nuclear Trajectory makes a valuable contribution. Specialists and lay people alike will find the book informative.

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Asia Center for Strategic Study. He has written several books on nuclear proliferation and energy security, including Energy Security: An Interdisciplinary Approach (2011); Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East (2008); and American Oil Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea (2003).