

# The Defensive Iran: Rethinking Realism in the Case of Iran's Nuclear Programme

Written by Camilla Sundberg

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## The Defensive Iran: Rethinking Realism in the Case of Iran's Nuclear Programme

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/10/the-defensive-iran-rethinking-realism-in-the-case-of-irans-nuclear-programme/>

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### Chapter 1: Introduction

#### 1.1 *The Emergence of a Nuclear Programme*

Iran's nuclear programme was born on 5 March 1957 after the Shah had signed the 'Atoms for Peace' Programme, a US initiative to promote peaceful nuclear development in the world.[1] With support from western countries like the US, France, Germany and South Africa the nuclear programme accelerated fast, and by 1979 Iran had acquired basic nuclear capabilities.<sup>[2]</sup> The Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was signed in 1967, and in 1974 Iran completed its Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).[3] Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, however, Western concerns were raised about the intentions behind the programme. US, French and German support was withdrawn.[4] In combination with Ayatollah Khomeini's dislike of nuclear technology and the Iran-Iraq war, this meant a halt to the nuclear development. In the 1990s the programme saw a rebirth and development has continued at a relatively constant pace up until today, supported by material and expertise from China, Pakistan, North Korea, Russia and South Africa.[5]

The nature of Iran's nuclear programme is yet to be determined. In 2002 the Iranian opposition group National Council of Resistance disclosed detailed information about nuclear facilities in Arak and Natanz, previously unknown to the international community.[6] The subsequent IAEA report in February 2003 confirmed Iran's clandestine nuclear activities and concluded that Iran had:

'failed to meet its obligations under its Safeguards Agreement with respect to the reporting of nuclear material, the subsequent processing and use of that material and the declaration of facilities where the material was stored and processed'.[7]

This led to large international outcry and increased suspicions that the programme had dual purposes. Several reports since have failed to either confirm or repudiate suspicions.[8] Yet, the 2011 IAEA report marked a hallmark in that it noted the 'possible military dimensions' of the programme.[9] Notably, the report conveyed Iran's plans to move centrifuges to the underground facility in Fordow, with the aim to triple production of 20% enriched uranium.[10] In February 2012, the IAEA confirmed that this process had begun.[11] The latest IAEA report, released in February 2013, described how Iran has so far produced 280kg of 20% enriched uranium, with 167kg left in its stockpile after the rest was used in the production of uranium oxide (used to produce medical isotopes).[12] International experts are divided in their views on how much is needed to make one bomb, but estimates range between 240kg and 380kg.[13] As for missile development, the Stimson Centre 2012 report notes that Iran's Shabab-3 missiles are capable of delivering nuclear warheads, although they cannot reach as far as Israel, and that the development of the Shajil-2 missile, which can reach targets further away, was hampered by a covert operation in 2011.[14] In the realm of nuclear warheads, Iran lacks both sufficient knowledge and material to build them, although experiments on doing so are suspected to have taken place at a facility in Parchin since 2003.[15] The IAEA has tried to gain access to the site since early 2012 to confirm suspicions, but to no avail.[16] In conclusion, as the Stimson Centre report notes, 'only a small number of Iranians know how close the country is from developing an operational weapon; nor is it

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known whether or not Iran's leadership has made such a decision'.[17]

Iran's refusal to stop its nuclear development and the uncertain nature of the programme have made the international community impose harsh sanctions on the country. Efforts to reach a solution through negotiations have been made but have been fruitless so far. In the region, Iran's Gulf neighbours have answered by rushing to develop their own nuclear programmes and by addressing Iran in an increasingly hostile way. Israel – already a nuclear power – has also become more aggressive, threatening to attack and continuously drawing 'red lines' for Iran's uranium enrichment. The same is true for the US, where Obama has proclaimed that 'all options are on the table' with regards to the US's response to a nuclear Iran. The US's military presence in the region and its support for Israel and the Gulf States work to undermine its rhetoric. For every day that Iran keeps its nuclear posture, the external threats increase. And every day, we are one step closer to a war that could come to involve nuclear weapons.

A solution to the situation is crucial. However, as negotiations have so far been unsuccessful, another approach to Iran and its nuclear development seems necessary. This paper will argue for a perspective that depicts Iran as a primarily defensive actor, pressured by external factors to keep up its nuclear development. As will be shown, negotiations based on such an understanding of Iran's nuclear development can enable a peaceful rather than violent solution to the conflict.

## *1.2 Literature Review and Methodology*

When explaining Iran's nuclear development, the country is commonly portrayed as an aggressive state with hegemonic ambitions that tries to enhance its power at any cost.[18] Neoconservative political actors in the US commonly view Iran as 'hell-bent on developing nuclear weapons as a means to destroy the "Zionist" state of Israel and assert itself as a regional hegemon'.[19] Because of the integration of religious elements into politics and leadership under 'fanatics', Iran is viewed an actor that cannot be counted on, and with which negotiation is inevitably fruitless. [20] The proscribed action against such state, therefore, is military action.[21] This view of a confrontational Iran fits into the worldview of offensive realists. Arguing that the international system is anarchic, i.e. that there exists no supranational power to regulate the behaviour of states, they find that the primary interest of states is power: states, as John Mearsheimer notes, are power maximizers. States always desire more power and are willing to put their security at risk in order to gain more power.[22] From this perspective, the picture of Iran developing nuclear weapons in order to one day dominate the region – despite the risks that come with it – seems plausible.

However, there is a significant flaw in the above approach. By providing such an alarmist account of Iran's nuclear ambitions and denouncing the possibility of negotiations, it drastically increases the risk for a military outcome of the crises. In particular, it fails to consider important aspects of the workings behind Iran's foreign policy and as such cannot provide a sufficient framework of analysis. In this respect, defensive realism proves a much better approach. Joseph Grieco argues that in the anarchical international system, security – not power – is the primary interest of states: states are security maximizers. They are defensive actors and will not seek power if it threatens their survival.[23] Kenneth Waltz further notes that 'the state among states... conducts its affairs in the brooding shadow of violence'.[24] From this perspective, Iran seeking nuclear weapons is a rational reaction to the immense external threats it faces, as these weapons can provide the vulnerable state with the deterrent capability needed to ensure its security. This is the approach developed by this paper. It will be assumed that Iran is indeed developing nuclear weapons, but that it will not take the final step to acquire them unless it really has to. It will also be assumed that Iran will neither, if eventually it becomes a nuclear state, use its nuclear capability in an aggressive manner – considering its threat picture, such an action could lead to the destruction of the Iranian state and as a rational actor, Iran will not take that risk. As Waltz notes,

'nobody but an idiot can fail to comprehend [the] destructive force [of nuclear weapons]. How can leaders miscalculate? For a country to strike first without certainty of success most of those who control a nation's nuclear weapons would have to go mad at the same time'.[25]

By enabling a better understanding for Iran's nuclear posture, this approach has significant advantages in providing the crises with a diplomatic rather than a violent solution.

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However, as will be subsequently explained, Iran's nuclear programme has worked to *enhance* rather than decrease its security threats. Because this works against defensive realist assumptions, this paper will also note the favours of a constructivist approach as a supplement in the discussion on the workings behind Iran's nuclear decision-making. The constructivist Alexander Wendt agrees that international society is anarchic, but adds that a state's perception of anarchy is not determined by its strife for security or power, but by its identity.[26] Constructivism thus goes beyond state-level analysis of realism to examine the norms and values of a state and their impact on foreign policy decisions.[27] In relation to Iran, one must note the importance of the country's past regional might and history of victimisation for the shaping of an identity which is characterised by strong opposition to the West and strife for independence.[28] For our purposes, this approach will add important aspects to the assessment of Iran's current nuclear posture.[29]

In order to reach an answer to the question "Why is Iran continuing to develop its nuclear programme", a problem-oriented approach has been used:

'investigat[ing] what has already been discovered about the subject before establishing the focus of the study and then researching the relevant primary sources. As [the] research progresses, a much clearer idea of what sources are relevant will emerge... as [the] knowledge of the subject deepens'.[30]

Secondary sources such as news articles, journal papers and books have been used to build an argument, and primary sources such as reports, economic data and speeches have been used to underline the argument.

## Chapter 2: External Drivers Behind Iran's Nuclear Programme: Iran's Security Concerns

Up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the main external driver behind Iran's nuclear programme was Iraq; the Iran-Iraq war worked to seriously trigger Iran's security fears, as did Saddam Hussein's covert nuclear development. However, following the change in US administration 2001, nuclear revelations in 2002 and the fall of Iraq the following year, new threats have arisen and Iran's security concerns today emancipate from both the US, the region and the international community.

### 2.1 The US Threat

The US threat to Iran's security originates in 1953's 'Operation Ajax', a US and UK coup that overthrew the Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh. Particularly, following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the US ended its diplomatic relations with the country, imposed sanctions and began addressing Iran in an increasingly hostile way. The US's support for Iraq during the 1980s war enhanced tension further, as did the end of the Gulf War when the US established significant military presence in the region. The real threat picture, however, did not develop until after the end of the Gulf War in 1991, when US foreign policy became increasingly focused on 'rogue states': Iran, North Korea, Iraq, Libya and Syria.[31] These states, it was argued, threatened international security through their involvement in terrorism and development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).[32] In Iran's case, the ties with Hamas and Hezbollah were pointed at, as well as its nuclear programme. The containment of these states became the cornerstone of the US's foreign policy and sanctions were imposed.[33] For Iran, which had not attacked another country for the last 300 years, the rogue state label was seen as a large humiliation and increased the distrust against the US.[34]

It was however the 21<sup>st</sup> century that was of most significance to Iran-US relations: within a couple of years, the US threat became paramount to all threats faced by the Iranian regime. In January 2001, George W. Bush and the neoconservatives came to power. In comparison to their predecessors, the neoconservatives favoured military action above diplomacy in the conduct of international relations.[35] The 9/11 terrorist attacks offered them an opportunity to implement their vision. As part of the US 'War on terror', Bush's State of the Union Address in 2002 subsequently introduced the 'the Axis of Evil': Iran, Iraq and North Korea, Bush stated, were 'arming to threaten the peace of the world... By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger.'[36] With respect to Iran, Bush noted that it 'aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. Iran continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror'.[37]

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The three states became the main focus of US foreign policy; sanctions were imposed and the fierce rhetoric against the countries was stepped up. For Iran this was another large humiliation. Indeed, it had tried to be accommodating towards the US following the 9/11 attacks by clamping down on any al-Qaeda presence in the country, and by assisting the US in the rebuilding of Afghanistan.[38] Furthermore, Mohammad Khatami's leadership of Iran up until this point had led the two countries closer than ever; as Bonham and Heradstveit note, 'everything seemed to point towards collaboration, yet everything would change following the Axis of Evil speech'.[39] Most importantly, the Axis of Evil notion was more significant to Iran's threat perception than any previous US move, as it turned out to mean not only words but also action: on 19 March 2003, on allegations related to the Axis of Evil notion, the US invaded Iraq and removed the regime.[40] Iran's closest threat had been removed, but another, more threatening actor had taken its place – the US. More than ever, Iran feared a US intervention.

Even though an invasion never came, hostile relations between the two countries have continued. In 2003, for instance, Khatami suggested a 'Great Bargain' in order to improve relations. The bargain included several concessions on Iran's part, e.g. full transparency of its nuclear programme, decisive action against terrorism, and Iranian help to stabilize Iraq. The Bush administration, however, chose not to answer. Hopes were therefore high when in January 2008 Barack Obama was inaugurated as president. Indeed, Obama came to power on the promise to approach Iran in a more moderate way than his predecessors, favouring soft powers over military force.[41] In an interview to the television network Pan-Arabiya in January 2009, he stated:

'I do think it is important to be willing to talk to Iran, to express very clearly where our differences are, but where there are potential avenues for progress... If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us'.[42]

However, constrained by neoconservatives and Israeli pressure groups in Washington – and increasingly, as will be shown, by the Gulf states – Obama's promises have been hampered. On several occasions Obama has described Iran as a 'profound' security threat to the US.[43] Most notably, in January 2012 Obama stated that 'all options are on the table' should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, indicating that the US would not hesitate to use military force against the country.[44] Furthermore, dialogue between the two countries was down during the whole of 2011. They were taken up again in early 2012, but have been fruitless so far.[45] Thus, Iranian distrust of the US is still very much there.

The reason why Obama's promises has not convinced Iranian leaders is the lack of correlation between rhetoric and reality. To be sure, the US military presence on Iran's doorstep severely undermines any rhetoric coming out of Washington: Bahrain houses the US 5<sup>th</sup> fleet, and together with Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it houses substantial US military air, naval staging and port facilities. The US also has military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq[46], as well as in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.[47] The latest development include an increase in US military vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, additional combat aircraft that can reach targets deeper inside Iran, and the establishment of a docking ship in the Gulf that can be used as a basis for military operations.[48] The US has certainly been successful in encircling Iran. Adding to the pressure are the covert operations, undertaken together with Israel to an increasing extent since 2011, on Iranian nuclear facilities. In November 2011, an explosion seriously damaged Iran's main missile facility in Tehran. A few weeks later another explosion was reported at a uranium conversion facility in Isfahan. January 2012 saw the fourth murder of an Iranian nuclear scientist.<sup>[49]</sup> Furthermore, the US is today responsible for some of the strictest sanctions imposed on the country: in 2011, following the IAEA report released the same year, the US designated all Iranian financial institutions as entities of money laundering concerns, warning companies to do business with Iran. In December the same year, the US Congress enacted the Menendez-Kirk amendment, which sanctioned the Iranian Central Bank (ICB), as well as foreign financial entities that processed transaction connected to Iranian petroleum products. Since 2012 there have been reports circulating on a draft legislation that would sanction financial institutions engaged in non-oil transactions with Iran as well. The US has also frozen all assets of the Iranian government, including the ICB.[50] Last, let us add the US posture as a nuclear power, with 4,650 nuclear warheads for delivery by more than 800 ballistic missiles and aircraft; the largest stockpile of operational warheads – 2150 – in the world today; and its immeasurable conventional military weapons machinery.[51] Understandably, as Ehteshami notes, 'in strategic terms, a change of president in the US does not necessarily lead to fundamentally different policies in the Middle East'[52] and therefore, the US is

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still the greatest threat to Iran's security today.

## 2.2 The Regional Threat

### 2.2.1 Israel

Second to the US threat to Iran today, is Israel. The enmity with the country goes back to the 1980s when Iran, due to its involvement in the creation of Hezbollah and its ties with Syria, became more involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. To date, Iran has kept its ties with Hezbollah as well as with Hamas and Palestinian jihadist groups, and Israel, fearing these connections are to be used as a platform for an attack, has responded with aggressive rhetoric.[53] Tension has increased particularly in recent years due to the revelations of Iran's clandestine nuclear activities in 2002 as well as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's threats to 'wipe Israel off the map', his controversial speeches about the Holocaust, and firmer stance in the Israel-Palestine question.[54] Benjamin Netanyahu and the neoconservatives, in power for another four years following the victory in the January 2013 elections, have on their part more than any other Israeli administration threatened to attack Iran should it not stop its nuclear programme. In March 2012, for instance, Netanyahu warned that Israel would not wait to attack until Iran's programme has gone underground, hinting in particular at the Fordow facility.[55] At the UN General Assembly summit in September the same year, Netanyahu famously drew a 'red line' of 20% Iranian uranium enrichment. Based on the current development pace it was estimated that Iran would reach the limit in the spring or summer of 2013, and 'from there, it's only a few months, possibly a few weeks, before they get enough enriched uranium for the first bomb'. [56] Although Israel's limit was rejected by both US and UK officials, Israel's proclamation that Iran reaching the limit would constitute an 'intolerable risk' to Israel indicates the urgency of a solution to the crises.[57]

Because of Israel's nuclear status, its threats are taken most seriously by Tehran. Through significant financial support from the US and European powers, Israel has been able to develop a triad nuclear capability on land, in air, and in water[58]: the country possesses a considerable assortment of delivery vehicles for nuclear warheads; has ground-to-air missiles that can be fitted with nuclear warheads; and submarines capable of delivering nuclear attacks.[59] Although never officially acknowledged, the country has possessed nuclear weapons since 1973, and in 1982 it was reported to have over 200 nuclear devices. The total number today ranges between 100 and 400.[60] Adding to the threat picture are, as mentioned, the covert operations on Iranian nuclear facilities since 2011. Notably, Israel has been successful in erasing a country's nuclear programme once before – in Osirak in Iraq 1981 – and as Khan notes, the country today possesses the kind of low-yield nuclear weapons that can be used to target underground centrifuges like the one Iran has developed in Natanz.[61] Moreover, being one of the world's most sophisticated military manufacturers, Israel has a highly developed conventional weapons machinery as well.[62] Last, Israel is in a strategic alliance with the US, its survival being a matter of 'national security' for the Americans. As such, Israel is very influential on US foreign policy in the region, and is continuously pushing for a much tougher US stance on Iran.[63] Most significantly, in October 2012 unnamed sources briefing the *Foreign Policy* magazine on talks between Israel and the US noted that the US is considering a limited, surgical-like US-Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.[64] The Israeli threat to Iran today is therefore clear. In a similar way, Iran sees an emerging threat in its closer neighbours as well.

### 2.2.2 The Gulf

Iran's history with its Gulf neighbours is one characterised by conflicts and distrust. Alliances and agreements change regularly and states' pursuit of self-interest in conflicts is evident.[65] Gause notes that the main driver behind threat perceptions in the region is cross-border links, e.g. sectarian (Shia vs. Sunni), ethnic (Persian vs. Arab) or ideological (Iranian revolution, jihadists).[66] Therefore, being both religiously, ethnically and ideologically different from its neighbours, Iran has always been viewed with suspicion. In particular, the Iranian revolution increased the tense relationship, with the Gulf leaders' fearing the rise of a 'Shia crescent' and the spread of revolutionary ideas by Iran.[67] For similar reasons, most of Iran's neighbours sided with Iraq in the war 1980-88, despite Iraq being the aggressor and issuer of chemical weapons.[68] Even after the Gulf War, where Iran took a neutral position, the Gulf States hardened their attitudes towards the regime.[69]

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The environment Iran finds itself in today is even more hostile. The fall of Iraq in 2003 seriously altered the balance of power in the region: earlier between Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and now between Iran and Saudi Arabia – or rather, between Iran and an emerging 'Arab core' led by Saudi Arabia.[70] Due to Iran's increased influence in Iraq today and its continued nuclear development under Ahmadinejad's confrontational rule, the Gulf states have responded by building closer ties with each other and enhancing their hostile rhetoric against the country.[71] Notably, since 2007 these 'core' states have rushed to develop their own nuclear programmes.[72] 2009 saw the start of the United Arab Emirates' programme[73], and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have been in discussions with foreign nuclear companies since then. Although the aim of the programmes is asserted to be merely peaceful, it sends the signal to Iran of an emerging nuclear arms race in the region. Furthermore, Wikileaks reports say the Gulf States are increasingly pushing for the US to take military action against Iran. In 2008, for instance, the Saudi king repeatedly called for the US to 'cut off the head of the snake' with reference to Iran[74], and in 2010, the UAE ambassador to the US emphasised the UAE's support for a US military action to stop Iran's nuclear programme[75], proclaiming that '...out of every country in the region, the UAE is most vulnerable to Iran. Our military, who has existed for the past forty years, wake up, dream, breath, eat sleep the Iranian threat'.[76] The Gulf leaders are also – covertly – moving closer and closer to Israel in security negotiations.[77] Indeed, the Gulf States seem increasingly willing to assist either Israel or the US in a potential attack on Iran.[78]

Further increasing Iran's vulnerable position in the region are two things. First, Iran's weakness in the conventional weapons realm. The Gulf States, having invested heavily in their countries' arms industry since the 1990s, have a well-developed conventional military.[79] Iran, on the other hand, does not. Due to the war with Iraq in the 1980s; sanctions imposed by the US since the late 1970s and the international community since 2006; and the economic problems that have followed, Iran has had to largely rely on its domestic arms industry and on imports from other countries (Russia, China and North Korea most notably) to develop its military.[80] Though Iran's ground forces are large, the lack of technical expertise and the questionable quality of imports have made Iran's navy, air force and armoured units both un-modern and inefficient.[81] Further increasing the country's vulnerable position is the lack of allies. As with the military, this does not seem solvable in the near future: Iran's sole remaining regional ally, Syria, has since the beginning of 2011 been in what could be likened with a civil war. Should the Assad regime fall, Iran would not only lose its last ally; its ties with Hamas and Hezbollah, crucial for the promotion of Iran's interest in the region, would be seriously threatened too.[82] Furthermore, Iran's relationship with Turkey was severely impaired due to Iran's support for Assad in the early days of the Arab Spring, leading Turkey to strengthen its ties with the US instead.[83] On a global level, even though Russia and China are often counted as its allies, should it come to conflict it is highly unlikely that they would go as far as supporting Iran militarily, particularly seeing that the rest of the region would enjoy support from the US and other western countries. Indeed, Iran can count neither on its military nor its allies to support them in a potential conflict – and as will be shown below, not on the international community either.

## *2.3 Distrust of The International Community*

Iran's distrust of the international community emerged after the Iran-Iraq war, during which the latter chose to take Iraq's side – despite Iraq being the aggressor and user of chemical weapons. Some countries, the US most notably, even supported Iraq militarily. As a result, as Khan notes, Iran 'lost faith in international norms, rules, procedures, or treaties'.[84] Undermining this feeling was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which proved to Iran the UN's inability to act against a US foreign policy decision.[85] Indeed, 'America did what it wanted'.[86] For Iran, therefore, the international community does neither seem to be on its side, nor can it be trusted in times of crises.

The first note has been further underlined by the sanctions imposed through the UN Security Council (UNSC) since the 2002 revelations. In 2006, the UNSC resolution 1696 imposed financial sanctions, travel bans and restrictions on the sales of nuclear technology to Iran.[87] Further sanctions have been imposed under resolutions 1737, 1747 and 1803. The UNSC resolution 1929, released in 2010, increased sanctions further, 'expanding an arms embargo and tightening restrictions on financial and shipping enterprises related to "proliferation-sensitive activities"'.[88] Following the release of the IAEA report in November 2011, the rope around Iran's neck was tightened even further. As mentioned, the US imposed unprecedented measures, and so did the EU: a freeze of Iranian governmental assets and, most importantly, an embargo on Iranian oil exports were imposed.[89] The effect on the already declining Iranian economy has been notable. Inflation and unemployment is continuously rising, and it is likely to get

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worse as the effects of the latest sanctions set in. For instance, an estimate by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in late 2012 said Iran's economy was likely to contract 0.9% in 2013, that inflation would rise to 25% from last year's 21.5%, and that its current-account surplus would fall to 3.4% from last year's 12.5%. Adding to the pressure is a likely plunge in the value of Iran's currency, which would further increase inflation and hamper investment.[90] Importantly, investors, insurers and financial institutions are fleeing the Iranian market, as are energy companies, so important for Iran's gas and oil production.[91] In Iranian eyes, therefore, the international community has played a major part in contributing to the vulnerable position it finds itself in today.

Further underlining the country's distrust in the international community is the failure of negotiations. These have been ongoing since the revelations in 2002: first between Iran and the EU-3 (UK, France and Germany), and later between Iran and the P5+1 (the former three and the US, China and Russia). Unfortunately, because negotiations are characterised by distrust and misunderstandings, they keep breaking down.[92] In 2009, for instance, Iran agreed to sending 1,200 kg of low-enriched uranium to Russia for further enrichment and to France for fuel fabrication. However, Iran subsequently rejected the deal and proposed that the swap would take place in stages instead – and was dismissed by the IAEA and US.[93] The latest development includes a Russian five-step plan proposed in 2011, according to which Iran would limit its enrichment activities in five stages and in return the P1+5 would gradually lift the sanctions imposed. Iran accepted the idea, but the US, the UK and France did not, and talks broke down. During early 2012, on the initiative of the EU's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, new rounds of talk were held, but have been fruitless so far. Essentially, the P5+1's demands a stop to Iranian uranium enrichment to the 20% level, while Iran insists on its national right to enrich uranium and demands economic sanctions to be lifted before any halt to its enrichment will take place. The P5+1 has answered that any lift of sanctions must be preceded by a stop to enrichment.[94] Consequently, talks were stalled again in June 2012, and have only just been taken up again in February 2013.[95]

Indeed, the threat picture that emerges against Iran is immense, and is increasing. The country's underdeveloped conventional military and lack of allies only adds to the country's vulnerable position. The only means by which the security of the Iranian state can be assured, therefore, is the development of a nuclear deterrent. The mere *potential* to do so is however enough – the rhetorical threats from both the region and the US matched by their strategic capabilities have ensured Iran that a fully developed nuclear device would only guarantee one thing – retaliation. However, Iran's insecurity does not seem to be the sole driver behind its nuclear development since, as the above examination has shown, the nuclear development has also *contributed* to the threat picture: it has made the US and Israel increase their fierce rhetoric; triggered an arms race in the already volatile region; and increased the sanctions issued by the international community. Therefore, it seems, we must look at other drivers than merely security to enable a full understanding of Iran's nuclear development. These factors can all be summed up under one term: identity.

## Chapter 3: Other Drivers Behind Iran's Nuclear Programme

### 3.1 The Evolution of Iran's Identity

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iran's identity has circled around opposition to the west. The roots of this feeling lie in Iran's modern history, characterised by victimisation by foreign entities. In 1794, the Safavid Empire saw the ascension of the Qajar Dynasty. The Qajar rulers were subsequently defeated by the Russians, to whom Iran had to cede large proportions of land. As a consequence, the Iranian economy went into decline, enabling Russia and the UK to increase their influence in the country in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The next foreign interference came in 1953, when the Prime Minister was toppled through the US and UK coup. Understandably, after these events Iranian identity came to be based upon a strong opposition to foreign interference.[96]

What made Iran oppose *western* interference in particular was the new Shah's modernisation policies, aimed at reforming the Iranian system into a top-down sovereign governance system with clear resemblances to the western model. However, his reform tries failed markedly as they destroyed the Iranian traditional economy as well as the traditional social support system.[97] Consequently, the Shah's western-based ideas and values became a source of resentment. Once in power in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini was not late to play on this feeling, decrying all things

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associated to the west and the Shah as anti-Islam, and as such anti-Iran.[98] The Iranian identity came to be based upon opposition to the west, and was even codified in the new constitution:

'The foreign policy of Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination... the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects [and] non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers'.[99]

The sentiment was further underlined by the US rogue state and Axis of Evil labels in the 2000s which, despite merely indirect, were seen as largely interfering with Iranian identity. As concluded in the survey by Heradstveit and Bonham, these labels worked as a unifying force in the country by mobilising support against the common enemy.[100] Thus, Iran's modern identity has come to circle around three interconnected characteristics: national pride, opposition to the west, and defence of its independence. Importantly, this identity has translated into domestic politics in many different ways, influencing Iran's decision to keep its nuclear posture.

## 3.2 Internal Drivers

### 3.2.1 Political Legitimacy and Energy Needs

First, the nuclear programme is a symbol of Iranian national pride. Peaceful nuclear development enjoys large support amongst the people and a step-down from Iran's current nuclear posture would be seen as largely interfering with Iranian identity.[101] As such, Iranian leaders use the nuclear programme as a rhetorical tool to mobilise support; keeping and supporting the programme is a 'rational move to increase domestic legitimacy'.[102] Diamond further notes that 'in order to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, Iranian leaders must publically resist the will of foreign powers'.[103] and Hermann and Hagan note that leaders can 'seek to consolidate their domestic position by pushing a foreign policy that mobilises... support'.[104] This would explain why, for instance, Iranian negotiators keep reminding the international community about the 'inalienable right of all parties to the Treaty [NPT] to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination'.[105] However, this argument is weakened by the fact that public support for the programme is waning today, indicating that Iranians are beginning to note the effects of keeping the nuclear posture, as the effects of the sanctions begin to affect the economy and everyday life.[106] Thus, although important factors, national pride and political legitimacy cannot fully account for Iran's continued nuclear development.

Another argument points to the strengthening of the Iranian economy as a driver for nuclear development. Shifting energy production from oil to nuclear power, it is argued, would make more oil available for exports, thus making the Iranian economy less vulnerable to fluctuations on the oil market or disruptions in the flow of oil.[107] It would also ensure to cover Iranian energy needs. Already in 1972 a major study undertaken by the Iranian government found that Iran would need alternative energy sources in order to meet future demand.[108] And the demand today is certainly high: Iranian energy consumption rose from 1.583 quadrillion Btu[109] in 1980 to 9.108 quadrillion Btu in 2010, marking an almost 500% increase.[110] Iran's per capita energy consumption is today 15 times higher than that of Japan, and 10 times higher than that of the European Union, placing it on top of the global energy consumption index. The pressure has increased further by the growing population, which has doubled in size during the last three decades.[111] In this respect, nuclear fuel could take away some of the pressure from the energy industry, and fits nicely into Iran's pursuit of self-sufficiency and independence from foreign powers. However, this argument can be questioned: considering the economic and political costs that comes with the nuclear programme, it is questionable why Iran would incur them when it could just keep relying on its vast oil and gas reserves.[112] Indeed, Iran has the fifth largest oil reserves and the third largest natural gas reserves in the world today.[113]

### 3.2.2 Regional and Global Ambitions

Related to the part of Iran's identity that concerns national pride are Iran's regional and global ambitions. Looking back at its past glory, Sadeghinia notes that:

'Iran intends to return to its pre-revolution stage of regional hegemony in the PG, it perceiving itself as a strong



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Middle Eastern state that has the privilege of supervising affairs in the PG'.<sup>[114]</sup>

Or as Ashley notes, there is a 'deeply ideological desire to become the predominant power in the region.'<sup>[115]</sup> As mentioned, Iran's neighbours are weary about its potential intentions to create a 'Shia crescent' in the region. Indeed, the power that stems from Iran's nuclear programme would facilitate the pursuit of such an aim. However, this is not the easiest of ambitions. To rise to the position to a regional hegemon, as Ehteshami notes, Iran would need the consent of its neighbours, and that is 'unlikely to be forthcoming in the foreseeable future' considering the opposition Iran faces from the Arab core today.<sup>[116]</sup> Sadr also notes American 'superpower's formidable military' in the region as having a seriously dampening effect on Iranian regional ambitions.<sup>[117]</sup> Furthermore, Gause argues that the rising Shia socio-political movement has in fact already peaked: in Iraq, Shia groups have taken power but they have not yet been able to consolidate it; Hezbollah has 'ridden a wave in Lebanon' but has failed to overthrow the government and it is doubtful how long it can keep its support; and in Iran, if ever there was such an ambition, the Iranian leadership have long-gone realised its failure and is now pursuing a policy which is more aimed at challenging the regional status-quo than anything else.<sup>[118]</sup>

Globally, the power that comes with a nuclear stance could enhance Iran's negotiations stance and as such enable the country to further assert its independence. North Korea, for example, has not been subject to interference since the start of its nuclear programme in the 1990s, and it is argued that Iran has the same tactic in mind. Furthermore, an enhanced negotiation stance would increase Iran's possibilities to do business in Asia where the country sees much of its future market and which includes several nuclear states.<sup>[119]</sup> As Ehteshami notes, 'the key policy makers [in Iran] are fully aware of advantages of implicit nuclear capabilities for Iran's global power games'.<sup>[120]</sup> However, this argument can be questioned. As Perkovich notes in the case of India, its quest to become a great power through the acquisition of nuclear weapons failed because 'the world's leading actors [had] determined that economic strength and political stability [were] greater measures of power'.<sup>[121]</sup> From this perspective, unless Iran's nuclear development is accompanied by a similar development in the economic and political sphere, there is no guarantee that this tactic would work. Therefore, explaining Iran's nuclear development through its regional and global ambitions is insufficient as well.

### 3.2.3 Domestic Political Dynamics: The Role of The Leader

Last, the impact of Iran's identity on Tehran's leaders and their subsequent impact on the nuclear issue must be noted. Indeed, as Sadeghinia notes, because governmental institutions are weak and personal networks of leaders are strong, 'individuals still substantially influence the final decisions'<sup>[122]</sup> in Tehran. Khatami, president 1989-97, was a moderate leader whose basis for foreign relations was dialogue and a reduction of tension. His emphasis on the Iranian identity was relatively small, proclaiming an Iran more open to the rest of the world rather than the opposite.<sup>[123]</sup> Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, soon became known for his aggressive rhetoric against the US – the Great Satan – and Israel – a 'disgraceful stain' on the world map.<sup>[124]</sup> Representing the conservative strand in Iranian politics, Ahmadinejad came to power under the promise to 'return to the values of the revolution' through a confrontational and aggressive foreign policy.<sup>[125]</sup> As such, more than any other leader Ahmadinejad has emphasised the nuclear programme as a means to assert Iran's identity and independence.<sup>[126]</sup> As Ashley notes, 'with nuclear decision-making power concentrated in the hand of hardliners and religious elites, the nuclear programme allows the regime to enhance its self-image as an anti-western and Islamic power.'<sup>[127]</sup> However, the extent to which the president's political and ideological convictions affect Iran's nuclear development must be questioned, seeing that it is the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei that has the final say in foreign policy matters.<sup>[128]</sup> Khamenei has issued several *fatwas* against nuclear development, and as late as February 2013 he stated 'we believe that nuclear weapons must be eliminated. We don't want to build atomic weapons'.<sup>[129]</sup> Furthermore, recent developments point towards the Supreme Leader and his hardline supporters having the upper hand in the power struggle in Tehran. Already dominating parliament, the hardliners saw a re-boost after a sweeping 75% victory in the 2012 parliamentary elections.<sup>[130]</sup> Furthermore, prior to the elections Khamenei reversed several appointments made by Ahmadinejad that had been aimed at positioning his supporters in a favourable position before the elections. Khamenei also established a constitutional process which would enable him to scrap the presidential office altogether.<sup>[131]</sup> Khamenei will most certainly further affirm his power after the June 2013 presidential elections and in the meantime, Ahmadinejad remains a 'lame duck' severely constrained by his

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conservative adversaries.[132] Thus, it would be fair to argue that the impact of Ahmadinejad's radical views on foreign policy decisions such as the nuclear issue is lesser than ever today.[133]

## Conclusion

Iran's continued nuclear development in combination with the failure of the IAEA to determine the nature of the programme has led to international assumptions of an aggressive Iran, intent upon developing nuclear weapons in order to pursue its power ambitions. As this paper has shown, however, a full examination of the external threats that Iran faces, as well as its weak conventional military and lack of allies, are essential to enable a full understanding for Iran's vulnerable position, and thus its desire to develop nuclear weapons as a means to primarily secure itself. Only when Iran's status as a defensive rather than offensive actor is understood can appropriate measures in relation to the country be taken, and a diplomatic rather than violent solution to the crises be achieved.

By focusing on the external threats faced by the regime, the defensive realist approach tells the story of a vulnerable country in an increasingly threatening neighbourhood. Globally, the US has emerged as a greater and greater threat since the Iranian revolution. Events following the turn of the century – in particular the Axis of Evil notion – worked to significantly increase Iranian fears of a US intervention. Hardliners in Washington, harsh sanctions and covert operations – not to mention US nuclear status and strong military presence in the Gulf – have all worked to undermine any promise that Obama made when first taking office. The US's support for Israel is particularly threatening to Iranians, considering Israel's triad nuclear capability and Netanyahu's hostile rhetoric. Indeed, a combined US-Israeli attack is what seems most imminent at the moment. Further adding to the threat picture is the deteriorating relationship between Iran and its Gulf neighbours. The Arab core that has emerged in recent years in response to Iran's nuclear development is becoming increasingly supportive of an attack against Iran – if not through their own military means, so through US military presence in the region. If nothing else, a nuclear deterrent could ensure security for Iran in a highly volatile region which lacks a regional security framework and in which a nuclear arms race might occur in the future. Furthermore, the failure of negotiations and the pressure from the internationally imposed sanctions have done nothing else than ensuring Iran that the international community cannot be trusted in times of crises. Indeed, Iran does not have allies or a competitive conventional weapons machinery to rely on either.

It is a vulnerable and insecure state that we see. Despite ensuring Iran's security however, the nuclear programme has also increased the security threats as faced by the regime. The constructivist approach is informative in this respect as it explains the impact of Iran's identity on the nuclear policy as well. National pride, political legitimacy, energy needs, power ambitions and leaders' ideology all contribute to Iran's nuclear posture. Importantly, however, for reasons examined above these factors are still insufficient in providing a complete framework of analysis according to which to judge Iran's continued nuclear development. The reason is that security is still the main and overall driver. Importantly, this is also the reason why Iran would not develop a nuclear device unless it really had to: considering neither US nor the region would accept a nuclear Iran, Tehran knows that a nuclear capability would threaten not only the security of the Iranian state – but also its survival.

To conclude, an understanding of Iran's nuclear posture as offered by a defensive realist approach has many benefits. Rather than radical and confrontational, Iran is understood as a defensive actor, backed into a corner by immense external pressures to which the only viable response is nuclear development – despite the enhanced threats that come with it. The programme might have been merely peaceful at first, but the continued pressure on the regime has transformed it to take a military dimension. The defensive realist approach therefore tells us that a solution to the crises can only come if the threat picture against Iran is reduced: sanctions must be mitigated, the US military presence in the Gulf decreased, covert operations halted and Iran's right to peaceful nuclear development must be acknowledged. Considering the US's influence in the region, a change in the US's posture would enable a change of policy in the Gulf and Israel as well. Only in this way can Iran's feeling of victimisation and insecurity be decreased, and enable the country to back down on its nuclear posture. Furthermore, as security as a driver for nuclear development becomes less important, the bad consequences of keeping the nuclear posture – the triggering of external threats and the bad impact on Iran's economy – would become more apparent to the foreign policy-makers in Tehran. This would in turn seriously decrease – potentially even eliminate – the need for a nuclear programme. Negotiations that are based on this approach would thus be markedly more fruitful both in the short- and

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in the long run, and a peaceful solution to the crises would be enabled.

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