

Iran's Rational Response For Nuclear Capability

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SAMUEL ABBOTT, OCT 4 2013

Introduction

The term nuclear capability as we understand it is to mean the ability to produce nuclear weapons. This is the ability to enrich uranium and collect it, in order to make these weapons.[1] For instance, 'Iran's leaders, despite their fanatical rhetoric at times, are fundamentally rational.'[2] They are not suicidal, and it is highly unlikely that they would use the bomb let alone give one to a terrorist organisation. Like every country Iran has as much right to possess nuclear weapons as that of any nations that already have them. It is not up to America or Israel to decide who they want to have nuclear weapons. In the current geopolitical climate, Iran is a classic example of the security rationale behind nuclear weapons, as they fit with this case theory perfectly. One only has to look at the spoken and military threat from Israel and the United States in the past few years to understand this. Historical evidence has shown that the only way to deter the threat from the United States is the possession of nuclear weapons. So it is a rational response. The classic argument for the acquirement of nuclear weapons still stands true in modern day. The Cold War reasoning of deterrence and security is arguably more relevant to Iran today than it was in the Cold War, as Iran is targeted by two nuclear powers of Israel and the United States.

Rational means exercise reason and sound judgment. In international relations theory, the rational actor model is that when making a decision, the rational decision maker takes into account the foreign policy goals of the nation and determines which one takes priority over others. Then the decision maker weighs up the cost and benefits of this action, and then makes the optimal choice depending on cost, effectiveness, and a variety of other influences, to which will benefit their country the best.[3] A more Western view of the rational model would be that there is a delegation of authoritative foreign policy makers made up of a small elite elected group, rather than a single person.[4] The rational actor model fits into the answer of 'Iran's search for a nuclear capability is a rational response to the threat from US and Israel' as the long term benefits of nuclear weapons as history has shown far outweigh the short term potential costs from sanctions and military action from Israel and the United States.

Background

The Iranian nuclear programme began over fifty years ago with support from the United States, as they were the first country to give their help in Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology. This was part of President Dwight Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace Program.[5] This started with a speech to the UN in 1953, and in 1954 the United States Atomic Energy Act was revised to allow the exportation of this knowledge to countries that wanted the technology but would not produce nuclear weapons.[6] They supplied Iran with a five-megawatt research reactor that began operation in 1967.[7] There was also an agreement between the United States and Iran in July 1978 which was designed to facilitate Iranian - American nuclear cooperation. This involved Iran purchasing equipment from the United States who also aided Iran in their search for uranium deposits.[8] The help to Iran's nuclear program stopped after the revolution in 1979 when the new government stopped the program. The revolution ended the United States' support of Iran, and the United States decided to support Iraq against Iran in September 1980 during an eight year war. Since then, Iran have been an enemy of the United States,[9] to the degree that George W. Bush put Iran in the "axis of evil"[10] in 2002 during his State of the Union address.

Can Iran's Nuclear Capability be Kept Non-Weaponised?

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It is virtually impossible to judge if Iran's nuclear weapons capability will or can be kept non-weaponised or not, until they have tested a nuclear weapon or declare themselves to be nuclear-armed state, or leave the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). [11] In 2007 the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) declared

'Only an Iranian political decision to abandon a nuclear weapons objective would plausibly keep Iran from eventually producing nuclear weapons – and such a decision is inherently reversible.'[12]

There have been many proposals from American and European policy makers on how to deal with the threat of a nuclear Iran and how to stop them reaching nuclear weapons capability. These theoretical policies and proposals ignore the basic rationale behind the Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons, which is the same rationale that the current nuclear powers had when they first sought their own nuclear weapons. The policies are a result of the suspicion surrounding Iran's nuclear capability. The ambiguity in Iran's nuclear program is a method of deterring attacks from the United States while work continues[13]; this can be put down to what happened in Iraq and a fear of a repeat in Iran.

Why Iran Wants Nuclear Capability

The reasons for Iran seeking nuclear weapons are much the same as that of any nuclear power in the current world—that of deterrence, security, symbolism, and power. Having a nuclear programme has brought Iran prestige in the Islamic world as well as global political credibility; it allows them to have the same stature as the big players in world affairs on the U.N. Security Council.[14] The most rational decision that the Iranian leaders could make is to have the technology to produce nuclear weapons but not in actual fact produce any. This would arguably give them the most international prestige and significance and lessens the risks of an attack.[15] This path remains to be seen. However, this course of action still leaves Iran open to attack, as they will not have the deterrent of nuclear weapons to stop an Israeli or United States attack. It gives Iran an international voice but no force to back up their policies until they have nuclear weapons where they would be listened to out of fear.

The fundamental underlying question here is: is there a rational argument for Iran to not have nuclear weapons? A statement in September 2012 by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad shows that there is little logic in the argument to stop Iran.

"Let's even imagine that we have an atomic weapon, a nuclear weapon. What would we do with it? What intelligent person would fight 5,000 American bombs with one bomb?"[16]

This shows how Iran becoming a nuclear power in no way means that they are threatening United States dominance, their ability to influence world affairs, or even threatens the United States directly. No rational person would believe that once Iran obtains nuclear weapons, they would attack the United States or Israel, who both have large stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, even though the United States labelled Iran in their "axis of evil," the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The pretence of invading Iraq was because they believed that they had nuclear weapons. This shows that Iran has a perfectly legitimate fear of invasion or the use of force against them by the United States. For example, when comparing military capabilities of the two nations, the scale overwhelmingly tips in favour of the United States, whose military spending makes up 45.7% of the whole world's military expenditure.[17] Therefore, nuclear deterrence is arguably the only cost-effective way of stopping America and Israel from attacking Iran.

Moreover, Iran does not have the military might to influence global affairs. That is why a lot of their foreign policy has been conducted through organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. This so called "axis of resistance" used to promote Iranian interests around the Middle East, to combat that of Israel's and the United States. Iran funds Hezbollah in a war of attrition against Israel estimated at \$700 million a year.[18] Iran undertakes this foreign policy style as it is cheaper than extensively expanding their military and avoids a fully-fledged war with Israel. The acquisition of nuclear weapons may mean that Iran will have a less controversial foreign policy, as they will have the symbolic power of nuclear weapons and greater recognition on the international stage and not resort to the use of terrorist groups. Their regional concerns will be listened to, and they may not resort to funding terrorist organisations,

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as Israel will be forced to treat Iran on an equal level if and when they achieve nuclear capability. Thus Iran is rational in acquiring nuclear capability to produce weapons as it could lead to a more stable Middle East and maybe even a more stable relationship with Israel.

When comparing to the new nuclear states of India, Pakistan, and North Korea, there is no rational argument to say to Iran that they cannot have any, when these countries do. In many ways Iran is a much more stable country than Pakistan. Pakistan has a vehement rivalry with another nuclear power and neighbour in India. This has resulted in them spreading the weapons across their country. This in turn has put the security of the weapons at greater risk as it makes them much more vulnerable to attacks or being stolen by terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda, who operate in the tribal regions of Pakistan.[19] This poses a greater threat to the use and proliferation of nuclear weapons than Iran does. There is no solid argument to say why Iran should not gain nuclear capability when these countries have nuclear weapons along with others like China, Russia, France, Great Britain, and the United States. There is no logical reason why nuclear powers in the West and Israel can say Iran is too dangerous to have nuclear weapons, when they themselves have the same but much more powerful nuclear weapons. Still, the United States is the only nation to ever use these weapons back in 1945. To people in Iran and the Middle East, it looks like the West is deciding for everyone who is good and bad, and to people in this region, the United States must appear to be the most dangerous country in the world, with their nuclear and conventional forces and willingness to invade and seemingly police the world.

The deterrence principle is mainly directed towards Israel and the United States. The main reason that the United States does not want Iran achieving nuclear capability is because it gives Iran the power to deter the United States threat. The lesson of recent history lends weight to Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability. In the cases of Iraq and Libya, two dictators who gave up their goal of gaining nuclear weapons and within the last decade have both been ousted from leadership with the help of the United States.[20] Therefore the only way to guarantee a nations safety is to acquire nuclear weapons, as it's the only way to protect oneself from the United States. This has been shown by North Korea's achievement of becoming a nuclear weapons state. As before North Korea achieved this status, the United States was threatening them and trying to stop them becoming a nuclear power.[21] Yet once they had succeeded in creating a nuclear weapon, there was nothing the United States could do and it secured them from invasion. So in this respect, Iran is very rational to pursue nuclear capability; it would even seem foolish not to, especially looking at the Iraq case.

The deterrence and security reasoning behind nations getting nuclear weapons is even more prominent when one looks at Iranian history. The classic arguments for nuclear weapons of insecurity, prestige, and strength are arguably more valid for nations like Iran, who are still developing and have a long history of colonial and semi-colonial rule and dominance. Nuclear weapons would guarantee their long term independence.[22] Iran's more recent history further highlights how they feel threatened by the West. This helps to understand why Iran mistrusts the West and some of its neighbours. As in the Iraq-Iran War, Iraq received financial and military aid from the 'United States, France, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, and several other global and regional powers'[23], as well as ignoring Saddam Hussein's use of chemical and biological weapons. Therefore it is no wonder that Iran seeks nuclear capability and has no faith in the United States, EU, or UN. Iran knows that international support is very fickle as fifteen years after that war ended the United States invaded Iraq and killed Saddam Hussein. Therefore the pursuit of this nuclear capability is highly rational when one looks back at the reasons for it. Nuclear weapons would be their one guarantee of safety.

The logical outcome of Iran gaining nuclear capability is a stand-off between Israel and Iran, much like there was in the Cold War between the United States and the USSR. This is the theory of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). This is where if one attacks the other, they know that they will be attacked and both states will suffer the effect of nuclear weapons; therefore they will be much less likely to resort to using these weapons. Israel and the West have a fear that this principle will not apply to Iran, as many of them do not see Iran as a rational international actor. Not once has an Iranian leader said that they will attack Israel out of the blue without provocation, but that if attacked they would retaliate, and what world leader would not do the same?[24] So again it would be a rational response to a threat from Israel. It is Israel who are the ones talking and thinking about attacking Iran for no other reason than building nuclear capability. Israel has a vastly superior military thanks to the United States and is making provocative

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statements about invading Iran. Therefore the logical rational response to this threat is to continue building their nuclear capability and to be more secretive about their progress. If Israel and the United States knew how far down the line Iran is and where all the sites are located, it would practically guarantee an Israeli and United States attack. So secrecy is key to maintaining their security. Until they have developed this, nuclear capability to provide their own safety. To take any different step would be irrational on Iran's part.

Some people would argue that there is no need for nuclear weapons in this current day an age with the Global Zero movement and in wider context the call for general disarmament. These claims have been backed up with the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996 and the START I, II and III treaties[25] and calls for reduction in nuclear weapons by President Obama. However, if these claims are believable and if Obama and other world leader's rhetoric can be taken at face value, then there is a chance. But this will never happen, as the nuclear capable countries will not give up the power, symbolism, and credibility that the bomb provides them with. Also a world without nuclear weapons would be a much more dangerous world where America will have near complete military hegemony over the whole world. Thus it is rational for Iran and all the other nuclear power countries to want to keep nuclear weapons, as it is still the only control on American military power and ambition.

The Israeli and United States Threat

The threat of Israel and the United States is one that increases the likelihood and reasoning for Iran to obtain nuclear weapons capability. Iran does not know the true intentions that the United States and Israel has towards it. Is the talk of invasion an attempt to scare Iran into stopping their pursuit of nuclear capability or a real threat? Whatever it is meant to be the effect will only spur Iran on in the acquisition of the technology. The one drawback from Iran's rational search for nuclear capability due to this threat posed by the United States and Israel, is that the search for nuclear capability is one that could very likely result in a pre-emptive attack by the Israel or the United States on Iran. Therefore in the short term it can be seen as an irrational act, but the long term rationale behind the search for nuclear capability is sound. As once Iran has achieved nuclear status, as we have seen in North Korea, America will not act as they do not want to risk escalation that could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. This fits into the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) principle—that these nations who have this nuclear capability through MAD will not attack each other, so it leads to a tense peace. Iran and Israel will not attack each other due to the catastrophic events that could occur and arguably Iran having nuclear weapons could lead to a more stable relationship between the two, as both nations will have to treat each other with cautious respect.

The rhetoric over the last decade from the United States only persuades Iran that they are in danger of being attacked. In 2004 the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution giving George W. Bush all appropriate means to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.[26] Not only do they have this political freedom to take "all necessary measures", the United States has given countless sophisticated weaponry to Israel under Bush, such as thirty long-range F-15s, which cost \$48 million each, 5000 GBU-27 and GBU-28 weapons known as "bunk busters", and five submarines with missiles that could reach Iranian targets.[27] This United States assistance to Israel and rhetoric, especially under Bush, evidence that Iran is the biggest foreign policy threat to them, as recent United States policy has shown with the previous foreign threats of Iraq who did not have nuclear weapons were invaded and North Korea who obtained nuclear weapons were left alone once they acquired them. Therefore the logical and rational Iranian foreign policy would be to follow North Korea's lead and try to achieve nuclear weapons capability.

Israel and Iran have a long history together. But it is only in recent decades that they have been pitted against each other for strategic control in the Middle East since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1991.[28] With no enemy to unite the two nations and to keep them in check, covert and overt cooperation evaporated. Since then there have been numerous proxy fights, with Iran supporting violent anti-Israeli groups and Israel with its ally of the United States trying to isolate Iran. This is still the case today with Israel having sophisticated weaponry and nuclear warheads provided by the United States. Therefore it is not too hard to envision an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.[29] It is easy to understand why Israel is so against Iran becoming a nuclear power in the Middle East. At the moment Israel is the only nuclear state (and believed to have over a hundred nuclear weapons),[30] which they see as vital to protect themselves from who they perceive to be hostile neighbours. Many Islamic groups have professed their desire to destroy Israel, namely Hamas and Hezbollah who

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are supported by Iran. Therefore Israel's defence doctrine is that 'no enemy should in time muster the capability to threaten Israel's existence'[31] which Iran achieving nuclear capability would do. This shows how Israel has a military hegemony in the Middle East, and understandably Iran and other Islamic states feel threatened by the use of Israeli force. So for many people in Iran achieving nuclear capability could create a counter balance to Israel's military superiority and create a less confrontational Middle East. Israel would be anxious, but if they acted rationally, then they would undoubtedly pursue a policy of deterrence with Iran.[32]

Israel has yet to sign the 1970 Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The reason for not becoming a signatory of the treaty is that the 'NPT and the requirement to relinquish a nuclear deterrent option were not consistent with vital national security requirements.'[33] Israel has still not declared itself a nuclear power. For them it is still a weapon of last resort and the only weapon of deterrence in a very hostile environment. This can be viewed as a rational policy for Israel considering their geopolitical climate. However Iran can then be viewed as undoubtedly rational in response to the threat of Israel and the bomb in producing their own. Especially since Israel has not opened up its nuclear facilities to inspection. The toleration of Israel as a nuclear power without inspection of their facilities,[34] yet Iran has undergone more inspection but is still treated with sanctions and talk of force when they have been much more willing to negotiate and allow UN inspectors in than Israel has ever been. Yet Israel is allowed these weapons when many Western nations are wholly against Iran gaining them. It is therefore understandable why Iran feels threatened and treated unfairly by the international community on this issue when Israel has acted in a much more aggressive manner and received little action or attention whereas Iran has been more transparent (not completely but more so than Israel) and been sanctioned, with many calling Iran dangerous to the world if they gain nuclear weapons. If Israel does not sign the NPT they have no legitimate leg to stand on when calling for Iran to abandon their attempts. Hence Iran is perfectly rational in obtaining nuclear weapons capability with the threat of Israel especially considering that Israel gets special treatment from the West and it has not signed the NPT and are willing to use nuclear weapons if they deem it necessary.

The threat from the United States and Israel is not a separate one. Israel is closely linked with the United States since its formation in 1948 and the United States in turn sees Israel as its counter balance and ally in the Middle East, they share a similar view of Islamic states. This view has only been enhanced after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre and seems to have validated a long time United States and Israeli assertion that they face a common threat of Islamic terrorism.[35] This is a dangerous viewpoint to hold and a very vague and general one, and it is leading them to conflict with Iran. The United States offers it military protection and guarantees of safety to Israel and other Arab states.[36] The United States is seemingly restraining Israel from attacking Iranian nuclear sites, as it could delay but not destroy Iran's nuclear program as the United States prefer a more diplomatic approach under Obama.

Damage Suffered as a Result of Obtaining Nuclear Capability

The only real rational argument against Iran obtaining nuclear capability is the economic sanctions that have already been put in place; sanctions on Iran began in 2006 from the Bush administration and its European allies. The sanctions initially were only targeted against Iran's nuclear activities.[37] However the sanctions have continued and increased. On the 28th of June 2012 the United States signed into law an act to prevent foreign banks from accessing pre-existing accounts or opening new accounts if they process oil related transactions with the Bank of Iran.[38] This is designed to reduce the global purchase of Iranian oil, in what the United States hope will be a detrimental move to the Iranian economy. Iran runs the risk of further sanctions in the near future if they continue with their nuclear program. In the rational actor model these are the costs of the decision by the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to continue in their efforts to gain nuclear capability in the production of nuclear weapons. The aims with these sanctions are twofold. One is to pressure the Iranian leaders to stop before sanctions increase. The other is that if the economic situation deteriorates then the Iranian people may revolt against the leaders due to poverty as a result of this pursuit of a nuclear capability. However the current regime in Iran can use the pursuit and acquisition of this nuclear capability as a means of strengthening their regime in Iran and its global recognition. The actions of the United States and Israel can strengthen the Iranian viewpoint that they are being targeted and this can unify the people behind a common enemy. The foreign policy rational behind this nuclear capability pursuit is straightforward and a reason why Iran wants nuclear weapons and Israel and the United States do not want them to

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have them. But also within Iran itself it can mean the survival of the regime, by strengthening their hold on power by increasing the security and status of Iran.

Conclusion

Iran is perfectly rational in its search for nuclear capability with the threat from Israel and the United States alone, not to mention the wider reasons behind obtaining a nuclear weapon for security, deterrence and symbolic purposes. Iran's recent history has shown that they have no power to deter other nations, as unlike the United States and Israel, they have no nuclear capability and no large and sophisticated military power. The United States has the largest military in the world and is the highest spender, with around 47% of the world's military expenditure alone. With Israel not being a member of the NPT and its rhetoric involving attacking Iranian nuclear targets, coupled with being labelled the greatest threat to the United States, and history shows what the United States do to their enemies, it is a highly rational move for Iran to seek nuclear capability to deter these existential threats from abroad. It is also a logical step to conceal their progress to further dampen any efforts to attack their nuclear bases if they want to maintain their nuclear current nuclear capability and gain nuclear weapons, as Iran knows that as soon as the level of progress they have made and the location of their nuclear sights are known, the likelihood of attack is extremely high. Therefore keeping their nuclear development secret is rational and so is their desire to have them to keep Iran safe, secure, internationally recognised, and respected.

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