

Iran: What is the Nuclear Crisis?

Written by Caren Navas

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CAREN NAVAS, AUG 5 2011

An extensive amount of debate, analysis, and criticism has been invested in reaching a comprehensive understanding of the Iran nuclear crisis from a political perspective. Political theories and concepts have been avidly used to explain the underlying factors that contribute to the Islamic Republic of Iran's quest to strengthen its political power in the Middle-East through acquiring nuclear capabilities. In order to understand the complex motives that set in motion the nuclear energy interests of Iran it is necessary to understand an important segment of its national evolution. Since its revolution in 1979, Iran has pursued the ideal of popular sovereignty. This ideal served as the major catalyst in the revolt of the nation attempting to free itself from monarchy. "The 1979 constitution acknowledges this critical factor by stating that the popular vote was the cornerstone of the move to establish the new order" (Akbarzadeh, 2005). However, the notion of popular sovereignty stands in glaring contrast with the country's religious lineage which is firmly embedded in Islamic Law. This contrasting dichotomy makes it extremely difficult for the state to materialize its coveted goals in a diplomatic fashion which only serves to isolate it from the international system. This sense of isolation perhaps further fuels the need to expand its nuclear program in an effort to ensure national security. It is virtually impossible for Iran to forge successful international relations when it suffers from the national clashing principles of Islamic rule and popular sovereignty.

From a Western political perspective, situations must be assessed and analyzed in an effort to grasp with full understanding the potential for emerging threats. Critical theory is an important aspect of this task and it is solely based on power. "Despite their historical inability to understand or predict Iranian behavior, two dominant approaches to the Islamic Republic prevail in Western, and particularly American, discourse: neo-conservatism and neorealism" (Britton, 2008). These approaches have been applied to Iran's foreign policy in order to dissect their international interests and define potential threats. Neo-conservatists regard Iran's ambitions to expand their nuclear program as a global security threat. They assert that Iran must be approached with military force. On the contrary neorealists contend that Iran is susceptible to the same containment measures used with North Korea and can be handled with system-level analysis which takes into consideration the entire international system and its influence on behavior.

Neorealists continue to assert that anarchy in the international system is the constant cause of conflict among states. Iran, North Korea, and Syria pose a major concern in nuclear proliferation because they are considered volatile nations within the anarchical system due to their negligence to comply with the status quo. North Korea has blatantly publicized its intent to continue to pursue nuclear weapons for national security. The idea that these nations can leverage global power from the possession of nuclear weapons is one that alarms the world because of the compounding force regional extremist ideology and nuclear power can have in the international arena. Britain, Canada, and the United States view Iran's claim of developing a peaceful nuclear program as an attempt to protect their ulterior motives while gaining increased nuclear technology capable of creating an atomic bomb. The ultimate goal of Iran is considered to be aimed at gaining control of the Middle-East in order to instill Islamic rule and eventually infiltrate the international system to further spread Islamic thought by creating an alliance with China and Russia thus shifting the polar power.

Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on numerous occasions has confirmed that their nuclear program is a peaceful one. He has stated that their nuclear research is aimed at the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has not found concrete evidence of illicit nuclear activity in Iran.

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According to IEAE Information Circular 817, dated 24 May 2011, Iran states that Agency inspectors have confirmed non-diversion of declared nuclear material (IAEA online, 2011). Iran also states that it has met the obligations of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and its Safeguards Agreement and that it will not conform to external demands from outside the Agency. According to the IAEA's latest report it continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material at the nuclear facilities declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement. Consequently, if Iran claims to have a peaceful nuclear program and the IAEA has confirmed non-diversion of nuclear material in the state, why the big concern? Well it appears that suspicion of a clandestine nuclear program in Iran is the very product of their increase in Uranium enrichment. Iran's support of terrorists groups such as Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and Hamas further ignite the stigma of their underlining clandestine motives

"Israel is said to be the sole possessor of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. With a declared policy of deliberate ambiguity, it has prevented the international community from investigating its arsenals, and the global organizations such as the UNSC in turn have shown little interest in focusing on Israel's dossier" (Ziabari, 2011). This is the hypocrisy that angers Iran and confirms their belief that they are being treated unfairly by being targeted by the United Nations, neighboring states, and international states. Iran believes that Israel is treated different solely because it is a U.S. ally.

The Iranian nuclear crisis has been a constant concern around the world primarily in part due to the threat factor that neighboring and international states associate it with. This common reaction extends far beyond just global security, it stems from a culminating distrust of Iran's perceived clandestine motives and covert interests in the Middle-East and Islamic involvement in numerous terrorists attacks. The International system currently recognizes five countries as nuclear weapon states (NWS). These nations have publicly declared possession of nuclear weapons of mass destruction and yet the concern for global disarmament of these states is minimal at best, essentially these states much like Iran are potential threats to global security when viewed purely from a safety standpoint as seen by Iran. The second pillar of the NPT addresses disarmament and persuades all signatories to endorse movement towards disarmament. However, to this date only the US and Russia has made attempts at negotiations on reduction of arms which briefly touch on the prospect of disarmament in the near future. The lack of commitment by the five NWS states to move towards disarmament contributes to desire of NNWS to build their own arsenals. The U.S., China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom are the five current members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that are recognized as NWS. The treaty is aimed at limiting the spread of nuclear weapons by providing a framework of parameters and restrictions for member states to follow.

The treaty sets specific standards and obligations to member states in the form of Safeguards which must be adhered to in an effort to ensure global peace. "The Treaty establishes a safeguards system under the responsibility of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Safeguards are used to verify compliance with the Treaty through inspections conducted by the IAEA. The Treaty promotes cooperation in the field of peaceful nuclear technology and equal access to this technology for all States parties, while safeguards prevent the diversion of fissile material for weapons use" (UNODA, 2011). Iran considers the idea that some countries can pursue nuclear power without extreme suspicion, and impositions as highly unfair. Israel for example, is the only state in the region that has nuclear capabilities but it is not a member of the NPT and therefore seems to elude scrutiny of its nuclear program. "The Western media constantly repeats that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is a threat to the region, and that its nuclear program risks sparking a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Israel's nuclear weapons, for some inexplicable reason, do not threaten to spark a nuclear arms race" (Ziabari, 2011). Perhaps the long standing Israel and Palestinian conflict justifies the need for Israel's acquisition of nuclear protection. It is evident that Israel's interests in defending itself against potential aggressors is well justified. Therefore, it could also be argued that it is well justified for Iran to seek the same avenue of protection from potential aggressors as Israel has. Iran is a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) member of the NPT and as such it must adhere to the obligations imposed by the treaty which dictate nuclear power be used only for peaceful purposes. Unfortunately, the peaceful claims made by Iran hold little weight in the international arena due to Islamic involvement in terrorist groups.

In an effort to reach a long term solution China, Russia, the U.S., and the European Union (EU) developed a proposal. This proposal includes recognizing the right of Iran to produce nuclear energy and pursue nuclear research for peace and in accordance with NPT requirements. The proposal is contingent upon Iran's suspension of

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its enrichment activities in Qom, and meeting its obligations to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the IAEA by adhering to what Iran views as demands outside the realm of its safeguard agreement. For example, the IAEA accuses Iran of failure to implement its Additional Protocol which allows the Agency complimentary inspection authority but the Agency fails to recognize that this liberty is left to state discretion and it is not mandatory by the safeguard agreement. Also, the NPT does not prevent Uranium enrichment it just sets the acceptable levels of enrichment for its members. Therefore, Iran does not view its actions as non-compliant. The state has made a conscious decision not to be treated unfairly. The international arena views Iran's neglect to comply with UNSC and IAEA perceived obligations as defiant. The UN, China, the U.S., Russia, the EU, and IAEA are in accordance in declaring sanctions and the EU also opposes nuclear aid to Iran. At first glance China and Russia resisted the proposed sanctions but for benefits in different national interests each decided to join in and support the embargos. Speculation that Iran, China, and Russia have contemplated the possibility of forming an alliance against the US seems to be negated by China and Russia agreeing to support sanctions against Iran. The economic sanctions to establish coercive diplomacy in Iran are intended to deter the growth of their nuclear program. The sanctions have hampered Iran's gas, oil, and aviation industries to name a few and as a result the Iranian population has suffered economically.

In spite of these sanctions Iran continues to develop its nuclear program. Currently Israel, India, and Pakistan are not members of the NPT with nuclear weapons in their arsenals but they are not being bombarded by sanctions in order to halt their programs. Iran's decision to continue expanding its program is fair when viewed in comparison to what Israel, India, and Pakistan have acquired in terms of nuclear power for national security under covert operations. Iran's position can also be argued from the standpoint of state sovereignty. A sovereign state has supreme lawmaking authority within its territory in order to protect the interests of its citizens. International law was created to protect state sovereignty but instead it has generated conflicts due to the interference with state sovereignty. An "example of the struggle between state sovereignty and international law can be seen with Iran nuclear testing. In analyzing the Iran nuclear testing issue, it becomes clear that there are obvious limitations to what a state can and cannot do, thus limiting the state's sovereignty" (Riegert 2010).

It is difficult for Iran to endure the pressures of being singled out by the international system and its organizations. U.S. relations with Iran have been severely strained since the 1950's when the U.S. intervened in a British and Iranian conflict involving a change in regime over the control of oil in 1953 (Biedzinsky, 2009). In recent years the labeling of Iran as part of the axis of evil by the former President George Bush further severed the potential for amicable relations. The idea that the U.S. continues to support sanctions in Iran over their nuclear program is a hard pill to swallow for Iran since the U.S. is the only nation in the world to ever put to use their nuclear arsenal against Japan during World War II.

The invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan under the pretext of harboring weapons of mass destruction which proved to be untrue and stopping terror compound to substantiate Iran's belief that the U.S. is a self serving nation whose interests it will protect at all costs and will do whatever it deems necessary to ensure continued global success. This universal vision of the U.S. as a world power ignites the desire of other nations to shift the balance of power to exert their own interests. It is interesting to condemn and criticize the U.S. for being a world leader while attempting to dethrone the hegemonic power in order to take its place. China's rise as the next superpower becomes more evident with time. It is currently the second largest economy holding the largest amount of Treasury debt in the U.S. It is projected that in the next decade China's military will grow to match that of the U.S. which leaves scholars wondering if their rise as superpower will be a peaceful one as they claim. The growing possibility of China rising as a superpower inevitably increases the chances of the U.S. being replaced as the world leader. The assembly and growth of their military force is an indication that it is time to take China's growing military power seriously (Rourke, 2010). A number of nations to include Iran would rejoice in a new world order and a change in international climate. U.S. attempts to propagate democracy to every corner of the world are highly resented by Muslim nations. It is difficult to accept the resentment felt by the Muslim states considering that the probability of spreading Islamic thought throughout the world is extremely high should an Islamic nation rise as a superpower. It does not require a scholarly mind to assert that any world leader will spread their preferred philosophy and method of governing throughout the world if given the opportunity.

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Strategies to deal with Iran's ambition in pursuing nuclear weapon capabilities have been addressed from various perspectives in international politics. Currently the U.S. and its allies in conjunction with the UN have opted for tolerant diplomacy and economic sanctions instead of military strikes, or regime change. "A nuclear armed Iran will certainly pose a number of challenges for the U.S. Those challenges, however, can be met through an active policy of deterrence, containment, engagement, and the reassurance of American allies in the region" (Rourke, 2010).

Nuclear weapons in Iran threaten the strategic interests of the U.S. and its allies in the Middle-East. These major interests are to contain terrorism, protect the circulation of oil to world markets, and prevent a hostile takeover by a dominating state, such as Iran if it were to develop capabilities for manufacturing nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the benefits of patient diplomacy and economic sanctions protects the disruption of oversea contingency operations by preventing added hostility to a region that is being rebuilt in order to become part of the global economy. Iraq and Afghanistan benefit from a patient diplomatic approach in Iran because the hostile climate in the region would not withstand more military action. The U.S. does not benefit from imposing any more military pressure in the Middle-East due to having a military force that is spread thinly across other overseas contingency operations throughout the world at this time.

Christopher Hemmer, a professor of International Security Studies at the Air War College, proposes a four prong strategy for the effective approach to Iran's nuclear crisis. His strategic policy is comprised of deterrence, containment, engagement, and re-assurance (Rourke, 2010). First, in order to deter Iran from ever using nuclear weapons Hemmer proposes making Iranian leaders understand that any attempt to use nuclear weapons against the U.S. and its allies would result in a catastrophic response. Second, his containment strategy holds that nuclear capabilities have proven ineffective in coercive diplomacy and therefore the U.S. and its allies should continue to enforce containment tactics to prevent Iran from gaining regional power. Third, to develop international relations the U.S. would benefit more from engaging with Iran instead of attempting to isolate it with economic sanctions that fuel a stagnant economy in the republic and further infuriate it. Finally, Hemmer proposes re-assurance as part of the four stage strategic plan. A firm U.S. security commitment to re-assuring Iran's neighbor states that protecting their security remains of great importance which would ultimately decrease the probability of nuclear proliferation in the region. The UN, the U.S, its allies, and neighboring states in the Middle-East should remain well aware of the potential challenges a nuclear Iran would create. This awareness should serve as a constant tool of measure is building strategies that benefit the world as a whole and not only the west. Careful consideration and emphasis should be placed on the actions of states as leaders. A lack of respect and loss of integrity can quickly accumulate when ideological beliefs stand in contrast to a nation's actions and interests.

Conclusion

Independence, industrialization, technology, and economy have produced several superpowers in the last centuries. Changes in international climate have contributed to struggles for power which have ultimately led to war. I agree with realists in that friction in the international system will never cease to exist because actors will always seek to protect their interests which will continue to generate conflicts. A perfect example of this is Iran's nuclear program. The nuclear program generates conflict because it inherently carries a global threat, as do the five current NWS. Foreign policy making must take into consideration analysis and critical thinking to succeed at implementing decisions that benefit the world as a whole without ostracizing nations for sharing mutual ambitions in regards to nuclear power.

Unfortunately, this is not an easy endeavor with all the fluctuating factors that must be managed simultaneously by all parties involved. Critical theories are a fundamental necessity for addressing emerging threats and can be beneficial when applied to the Iran nuclear crisis. However, critical thinking and assessment must be free of bias. It must take into consideration the political climate and how it influences decisions. Economic theories influence globalization, and the socioeconomic gap that afflicts the world today. These must also be taken into considerations when making collective decisions that impact a nation. The economic sanctions in Iran have had a negative impact in the population's economy. It seems highly unethical to disrupt the economic welfare of a population simply to accomplish coercive action. The concepts presented in these theories continue to shape world politics and will serve as frameworks for the development of future theories through their historical value and they must be developed

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logically and rationally.

As previously stated an extensive amount of debate, analysis, and criticism has been invested in reaching a comprehensive understanding of the Iran nuclear crisis from a political perspective. International political theory and speculation has been widely used to explain the underlying interests that drive Iran's goal to strengthen its political power in the Middle-East by acquiring nuclear capabilities. In order to understand Iran's motives it is imperative to analyze and understand their government structure. Iran is by definition a theocracy due to the republic's domination by Islamic rule. The nation believes it derives its governing authority from god and therefore popular sovereignty lies below that divine rule. Inevitably the notion of popular sovereignty stands in contrast with its religious lineage. A country with this kind of ruling duality is bound to suffer from systematic internal breakdowns and the constant clashing of beliefs. The lack of separation of powers prevents Iran from exerting its full potential in a diplomatic fashion. Extremist ideology combined with the idea of popular sovereignty makes this nation highly unpredictable and the acquisition of nuclear weapons will only compound and complicate the possibility for an all out war against potential aggressors.

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