

The Logic of an Iranian Bomb

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, APR 2 2012

Firstly let me apologise for this blog post being shamelessly self-congratulatory... but I do have good reason. I promise.

In August 2010 I wrote that attacking Iran over its pursuit of nuclear technology was completely nuts (borrowing a phrase used by former UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw). The major point of that piece was that despite Iran's character, it is a rational actor in global politics. The end goal of its nuclear quest was therefore geared towards deterrence/defensive purposes via a weapons programme (in the worst case) – or it was legitimately a nuclear energy programme (in the best case). I argued that America and Israel must find it within themselves to accept a nuclear Iran, and that Iran would never bargain or genuinely take a deal on its nuclear programme. The reason being that the sore double standards of two nuclear-armed powers discriminating against Iran was a boon for the domestic rhetoric that fuels the Regime's hard line rhetoric. Iran only enters into doomed rounds of negotiations at strategic moments to bid for time as it continues its dogged pursuit of the bomb.

This point was especially true in the wake of the 2009 Iranian elections when domestic discontent reached something of a pre-Arab Spring summit. Since then that domestic dissent has withered and the Regime has been able to capitalise on the fact that Iran is increasingly besieged by its two great enemies (Israel and the USA) and is being unfairly punished via crippling sanctions. All that is needed to ensure the Regime's survival for another 30 years is an attack. Instead, the West should stop perpetuating the backwards logic of adversary with Iran.

Moving forward to 2012, I recently co-authored a piece with Professor Jamsheed Choksy in Small Wars Journal. In that piece, we argued that Iran has been pursuing a nuclear weapons programme for almost 40 years, back to a time that pre-dated the Islamic Republic when Iran was run by the pro-West and pro-Israeli Shah. We demonstrated through the use of carefully assembled historical research that modern Iran is most likely pursuing a nuclear programme because of regional politics and for defensive reasons. The logic of that position becomes clear when the historical angle is considered: Iran is in a hostile region, surrounded by enemies. It is in a much worse position now that it was when the Shah felt driven to start developing the ultimate deterrent in the 1970s.

For those reasons, we must take the difficult course of viewing Iran as a rational actor whose national security is threatened. When that position is taken objectively, Iran's rational need for deterrence become clear. This is not to say that it is a good thing that Iran is developing nuclear weapons ... but it is a less dangerous thing to contemplate than any idea of attacking Iran. It would lead to less regional bloodshed and less tragedy for the Iranian people who have already had to endure enough over their modern history. Unfortunately international history has taught that nuclear weapons are excellent defensive bargaining tools. When the chips are down for a country – as they are for Iran, the logic of the bomb-in-the-back-pocket becomes seductive.

The Islamic Regime in Iran is one of the most belligerent and distasteful regimes currently in existence, for all manner of reasons... but that is no reason to attack it. And falling prey to repeated Israeli paranoia that Iran plans to use a nuclear weapon preventively, or smuggle it to Hezbollah is as 'nuts' as attacking Iran is. Only one nation has ever used nukes offensively, and I *highly* doubt Iran would be the second. The implications for the Clerical Regime would be nothing short of suicide. And no rational actor would contemplate that.

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Allowing Iran's nuclear programme to continue is not an easy conclusion. The only other choice is an extreme option involving regime change. Recent American simulations confirm that this is an option unlikely to be 'on the table.' As pressure in Washington mounts to back Israeli pleas to intervene in Iran and take out Iran's facilities by air strike, pausing and considering these points would be a wise course. Preventively attacking Iran's nuclear facilities will only embolden and strengthen the Regime, and reinforce further the existential need for Iran to continue its quest to harnessing a nuclear deterrent. Tough choices are never easy, but sometimes they are the smart choices.

Read more from Stephen, and others, in UWE Bristol's Politics in Action blog.

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or LinkedIn.