

# NUCLEAR DEAL: AN OUTCOME OF IRAN'S SECURITY CALCULUS

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## Introduction

Iraq's armed aggression against Iran, close at the heels of the Islamic Revolution and the ensuing war for eight years, had a profound impact on the strategic calculus of the new Iranian leadership. The war was initiated by Iraq on the assumption that the internal turmoil within Iran would ensure a quick victory.<sup>1</sup> However, the initial Iraqi incursion into Iran was repulsed and, by mid 1982, Iraq was on the defensive against Iranian human-wave attacks. By the summer of 1983, Iran started reporting Iraqi use of Chemical Weapons (CW). This was a well founded claim the US intelligence at this time had already confirmed the Iraqi use of CW against Iranian forces and the Kurdish Insurgents.<sup>2</sup> Iran's repeated requests for the UN to stop Iraq from using CW did not yield the desired results. While Iraq was supported in this war by the US and also had financial support from the Arab States, Iran found itself isolated. The isolation of Iran and the slow response of the UN, in particular the US, against Iraqi use of CW shaped Tehran's concern for building a deterrence of its own.

Iran has perceived a sense of insecurity in its neighbourhood for the past three-and-a-half decades. The break in US-Iran diplomatic relations post the Islamic Revolution followed a relationship of open animosity between the two countries, which lasts to date. The increased presence of US forces in the Middle East, in particular Iraq and Afghanistan, over the last decade had exacerbated Iran's feeling of insecurity. Saudi Arabia, its traditional Sunni rival, has long dominated the region both in terms of economy and ideology. The creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 was spearheaded by Saudi Arabia as a "bulwark against Iran and the threat of the Islamic Revolution being exported to the Arabian Peninsula."<sup>3</sup> The pursuit of nuclear weapons by Iran can be ascribed to this legacy of being isolated by the world during its formative years, while

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<sup>1</sup>Joyce Battle, ed., *Shaking Hands with Saddam Hussein: The US Tilts towards Iraq, 1980-84* (The National Security Archive: Electronic Briefing Book No.82, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Lars Erslev Andersen, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and International Relations in the Gulf," accessed 01 Apr 2014, [http://www.journal-iostudies.org/sites/journal-iostudies.org/files/JIOSfinal\\_12.pdf/](http://www.journal-iostudies.org/sites/journal-iostudies.org/files/JIOSfinal_12.pdf/).

engaged in a debilitating eight-year war with Iraq, and thereafter a continued sense of insecurity in its neighbourhood.

Iran's present willingness to negotiate the nuclear deal with the permanent five of the Security Council and Germany (P5+1) has been ascribed to the effects of economic sanctions imposed against it. These sanctions have been imposed on Iran since 2006 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for pursuing a nuclear enrichment and weapons program.<sup>4</sup> The sanctions have had a crippling impact on the country's economy.<sup>5</sup> By late 2013, oil exports funding nearly half the government expenditure had reduced to 1 million barrels per day (bpd) from 2.5 million bpd exported in 2011. Loss of oil revenue and isolation from the international banking system caused a drop in the value of currency and inflation rose to over 50%.<sup>6</sup> Due to the economic hardships, the population, while still in favour of Iran's right to pursue peaceful nuclear development for energy, has been critical of the government policy on nuclear weapons. The Iranian public strongly favours the pursuit of nuclear energy (81%) and nuclear weapons support has found a slimmer majority (51%).<sup>7</sup> During the run up to the 2012 presidential elections in Iran, the world witnessed a public debate in the country regarding increased economic growth versus continued pursuit of the nuclear weapons agenda. President Rouhani was elected on an agenda to bring the country back on the path of economic growth.<sup>8</sup> Rouhani's election assumes greater significance since all presidential candidates are approved by Iran's Supreme Religious Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Accordingly, there is perhaps a tacit approval for the economic agenda by the Supreme Religious Leader. Considering the above facts, it is but natural that western opinion has been coloured by the perception that economic sanctions have been the reason for Iran's willingness to negotiate the nuclear deal.<sup>9</sup> While it may seem that the people of Iran have forced their

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<sup>4</sup>Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, "Sanctions against Iran", accessed 11 Jan 2014, <http://www.international.gc.ca/sanctions/iran.aspx?lang+eng/>.

<sup>5</sup>Uri Berliner, "Crippled by Sanctions, Iran's Economy Key in Nuclear Deal", NPR.org, 25 Nov 2013, accessed 11 Jan 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2013/11/25/247077050/crippled-by-sanctions-irans-economy-key-in-nuclear-deal/>.

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth Katzman, *Iran Sanctions*, Congressional Research Service Report (Mar 2014), accessed 24 Apr 2014, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>Alvin Richman, "Iranian Public Opinion on Governance, Nuclear Weapons and Relations with the United States", WPO.org, 27 Aug 2008, accessed 11 Jan 2014, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafrica/527.php/>.

<sup>8</sup>Zahra Hosseinian, "Iran's New President Hails victory of moderation", Reuters, 15 Jun 2013, accessed 14 Jan 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/15/us-iran-election-idUSBRE95C1E120130615/>.

<sup>9</sup>Uri Berliner, "Crippled by Sanctions, Iran's Economy Key in Nuclear Deal", NPR.org, 25 Nov 2013, accessed 11 Jan 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2013/11/25/247077050/crippled-by-sanctions-irans-economy-key-in-nuclear-deal/>.

government to negotiate the nuclear deal, it may, in fact, not be the only compelling factor in doing so.

Tehran's competing arguments for and against the nuclear weapons program are regional security and economic growth respectively. Clearly, Iran's calculus of its regional security, for which it embarked on the nuclear weapons programme in the first place, has to be favourable before it is likely to give up its nuclear option. The present willingness of Iran to pursue a nuclear deal with P5+1 is perhaps indicative that the security concerns of the Iranian leadership have been addressed. Behind closed doors, the Supreme Religious Leader and the government have possibly made a careful assessment of the security environment in the neighbourhood including the Middle East and come to a favourable conclusion regarding its security interests.

Iran's newfound interest in negotiating a nuclear deal may have to do, in equal measure if not more, with the present favourable security environment in the region than the negative impact of economic sanctions. The succeeding paragraphs bring out the various factors which impinge on Iran's sense of security and how there has been a positive change in them, thereby contributing towards Iran's willingness to negotiate a nuclear deal.

### **Iran's Neighbourhood**

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has found itself surrounded by hostile neighbours. Some of its neighbours though ambivalent to the Iranian regime have at times come under the influence of the US or its regional competitor Saudi Arabia. The enhanced involvement of US in the Middle East, especially in Iran's neighbourhood, had also contributed to its sense of regional insecurity.

Until the Islamic Revolution, both Iran and Pakistan were members of Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) with the common aim of countering the threat of Soviet expansion into the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> The relations between the two neighbours were good as both were US allies. However, consequent to the Revolution that was soon followed by the Iran-Iraq war, the relationship stagnated because of Pakistan's guarded neutrality in the war.<sup>11</sup> During the 1980s, while Iran

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<sup>10</sup>Embassy of Islamic Republic of Iran website, "Pak-Iran relations since 1947", accessed 12 Jan 2014, <http://www.iranembassy.pk/en/political-section/591-pak-iran-relation-since-1947.html>.

<sup>11</sup>Jay Friedel, "Iran-Pak relations", The Jay Friedel Blog, 11 Sep 2013, accessed 12 Jan 2014, <http://www.jafriedel.wordpress.com/2013/09/11/iran-pakistan-relations/>.

was openly hostile to the US, Pakistan was increasingly getting closer to the US in its role as a frontline state opposing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Another adversarial factor was the importation of the Saudi Arabia style Sunni Islam (Wahhabism) into Pakistan by Gen Zia-ul-Haq and the consequent fostering of Shiite activism by Iran in Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, during the 1980s and the 1990s, there was a sense of distrust between the Iranian and Pakistani establishment.

The withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan and the end of the Cold War, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, saw a change in the outlook of Pakistan vis-à-vis US policies. The US administration which had been overlooking Pakistan's clandestine nuclear weapon program was no longer willing to give the yearly Presidential certifications that Pakistan did not possess nuclear weapons, as required by the 1985 Pressler Amendments. This led to a number of sanctions against Pakistan including an embargo on arms sales.<sup>13</sup> The hitherto warm relations between US and Pakistan saw a downturn. This estranged relationship, favourable to Tehran, was however short-lived. The events of 9/11 once again brought US and Pakistan together. Pakistan became a frontline state in its action against Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan. There was once again presence of US troops in the neighbourhood, much to the dismay of the Iranian establishment. However, the relationship deteriorated as the Pakistani ISI started providing covert support to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, the discovery of Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad further strained relations between the two countries.<sup>15</sup> Also, in the same year, the Pakistan government halted NATO supplies to Afghanistan, in retaliation to 24 Pakistani soldiers being killed in an air strike by the US Army. The anti-American sentiment in the masses of Pakistan has also been on the rise due to unilateral US operations such as drone strikes, which on occasions have killed civilians, and an increase in Islamic radicalisation of the country.<sup>16</sup> The present divergence in US-Pakistan relations has probably been a soothing factor for Iranian fears on its eastern border. While the Sunni-Shiite tensions continue, Pakistan is no longer perceived as a steadfast ally of the US and therefore a lesser threat than before.

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Leonard S Spector, "Status of US Sanctions Imposed on India and Pakistan", 11 Aug 2001, accessed 24 Apr 2104, <http://www.cns.miis.edu/archive/wtc01/pakind.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire", Brookings Institute, 24 Aug 2013, accessed 24 Apr 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/08/26-pakistan-influence-over-afghan-taliban-reidel/>.

<sup>15</sup> Aleem Maqbool, "2011: New low for US-Pak relations", BBC News, 31 Dec 2011, accessed 24 Apr 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-16369301/>.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

The Iran-Afghan border became unstable with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, as the timing of the invasion coincided with the Islamic Revolution, anti-Americanism triumphed over the Soviet presence next door. Whilst Iran condemned the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and demanded its withdrawal, it saw the Soviets as a counterweight to the American influence in the region.<sup>17</sup> Post Soviet withdrawal and the ensuing power struggle in Afghanistan, Iran united several minority Shiite groups into Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami and supported them during the civil war as a measure to increase its influence in the predominantly Sunni country.<sup>18</sup> The rise of Taliban in 1994 and the seizure of Kabul in 1996 caused concern in Iran, as the Sunni-fundamentalist Pashtun state was considered a serious security, ideological and economic threat. Iran's support for the anti-Taliban the Northern Alliance led to severing of diplomatic relations between Tehran and the Taliban in 1997. The capture of Mazar-e Sharif, the interim capital of Northern Alliance, by the Taliban in 1998 and the kidnapping and killing of eight Iranian diplomats brought Iran and Afghanistan close to war, with Tehran massing 200,000 troops on its eastern border.<sup>19</sup>

Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks resulted in an unintended strategic gift to Iran. In the war against Al Qaeda, the western coalition forces aided by Iran overthrew the Taliban, which was providing a sanctuary to the terrorist organization. Iran influenced the Tajik minority to share power with Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun, to form the government.<sup>20</sup> Another factor which has brought the Karzai government closer to Iran is Pakistan's covert support to the Taliban. Due to a sense of distrust, the Afghan government does not consider its trade access through the Pakistani ports reliable. As a point of leverage, Iran has opened a road link to Afghanistan from its port of Chabahar.<sup>21</sup> The present Afghan government's disposition towards Iran has led to a favourable balance of power for Iran on its eastern borders. Notwithstanding, Iran has also reached out to the Taliban by allowing it to open an

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<sup>17</sup> Mohsen Milani, "Iran and Afghanistan", *The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace*, accessed 24 Apr 2014, <http://www.iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-afghanistan/>.

<sup>18</sup> Institute for the Study of War, "Iran and Afghanistan", accessed 13 Jan 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/iran-and-afghanistan/>.

<sup>19</sup> Mohsen Milani, "Iran and Afghanistan", *The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace*, accessed 24 Apr 2014, <http://www.iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-afghanistan/>.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Wagner, Giorgio Cafiero, "The Paradoxical Afghan/Iran Alliance", *The World Post*, 15 Nov 2013, accessed 13 Jan 2104, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/Daniel-wagner/the-paradoxical-afghanira\\_b\\_4277936/](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/Daniel-wagner/the-paradoxical-afghanira_b_4277936/).

<sup>21</sup> Michael Tanchum, "Iran's Chabahar Port Transforms its position", *The Jerusalem Post*, 05 Jan 2014, accessed 18 Jan 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-ed-contributors/Iran-Chabahar-port-transforms-its-position/>.

office in the eastern Iranian city of Zahedan.<sup>22</sup> This could be to keep channels open in case the Taliban comes back to power consequent to US troops withdrawing from Afghanistan.

Under the Baathist Party of Saddam Hussein, relations between the two countries had been strained and coloured with distrust. However, the US occupation of Iraq followed by the disarming of the predominantly Sunni armed forces of Iraq created a vacuum which has been filled, both at the political and military level, by Shiite groups more closely aligned to Iran. Consequent to the complete withdrawal of the US forces, Iran has become a key player in Iraq and its internal affairs.<sup>23</sup> The Sunni-led insurgency in Iraq has aligned the Iraqi government more closely to the Iranian leadership.

Iran, while forging deep and strategic relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan, has cultivated amenable relations with Pakistan. Therefore, the present security environment with respect to its neighbours is unlike any time in the past when a majority of them were considered hostile. Three-and-a-half decades since the Islamic Revolution, Iran for the first time finds itself in a secure neighbourhood.

### **Regional Influence**

The Iranian government under the Shah of Iran recognized the state of Israel and relations between the two countries remained cordial until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The 1982 Israel invasion of Lebanon, to destroy the PLO, saw the IRGC in eastern Lebanon supporting the Shiite faction. Iran trained and equipped a small Shiite splinter group that evolved into the highly capable Hezbollah militia. The 2006 Lebanon War is an example of the effectiveness of Hezbollah wherein the group was successful in repelling the Israeli advance into southern Lebanon.<sup>24</sup> Hezbollah has become a proxy for Iran giving it greater influence in the Levant. Iran is accused by Israel of waging a proxy war by arming both the Hezbollah and the Hamas. The Israel-Palestine issue is being used successfully by Iran to have greater regional influence, especially since the other

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<sup>22</sup>Ben Farmer, "Taliban opens office in Iran", *The Telegraph*, 01 Aug 2012, accessed 24 Apr 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9444402/Taliban-opens-office-in-iran.html>.

<sup>23</sup>Bilgay Duman, "Where are Iran-Iraq relations heading", *Al Monitor*, 30 Apr 2013, accessed 14 Jan 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/04/iran-iraq-relations-possible-alliance.html>.

<sup>24</sup>Andrew Chadwick, "The 2006 Lebanon War: A Short History", *Small Wars Journal*, 11 Sep 2012, accessed 25 Apr 2014, <http://www.smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-2006-lebanon-war-a-short-history/>.

major countries in the region like Saudi Arabia and Egypt have toned down their rhetoric and support for the Palestinian cause, under the influence of the US.<sup>25</sup>

Iran is placing considerable resources and effort to support the Assad regime and at the same time cultivating assets for use in case the Assad regime falls.<sup>26</sup> The efforts to support Assad include an expeditionary training mission using the IRGC ground forces, Quds Force, intelligence services and law enforcement forces.<sup>27</sup> Syria denotes Iran's willingness and ability to deploy military forces in its area of interest. Iran has also been providing pro regime Shiite militia support and has directed Hezbollah to take direct action in the conflict in support of Assad. Iraqi Shiite militia is also fighting against the rebels in Syria.<sup>28</sup> Iran considers Syria a foothold in the Levant, and is therefore willing to provide all support necessary to maintain its influence. Countering the influence of Saudi Arabia, funding the extreme Sunni Syrian opposition is also an important factor in this calculus of regional influence. The Syrian conflict now represents a war by proxy between the Shiite factions supported by Iran and the radical Sunni factions supported by Saudi Arabia.

Iran is more clearly akin to Pakistan in terms of culture and traditions than the Arab countries. Sufi Islam originated in Iran and thereafter spread to Indo-Pakistan and Turkey.<sup>29</sup> This has moderated the Sunni Islam followed in Pakistan. Urdu language spoken in Pakistan was born in the military barracks when the Hindi speaking soldiers came in contact with the Persian and Arabic speaking ones. Persian occupies a higher position in the culture and literature of the Islamic world and therefore the Persian influence on Urdu is also significant.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, whilst the Shiite-Sunni divide is present between Iran and Pakistan, the similarity in culture has mitigated its role in relations between the two countries. Consequent to recent US drawdown from its neighbourhood, the relationship between Iran and Pakistan has shifted from the US-Pak lens to a Saudi- Pak lens. The reported Saudi purchase of Chinese arms from Pakistan for the Syrian opposition would

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<sup>25</sup> Steven Simon, "Iran and Israel", *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, accessed 08 Jan 2104, <http://www.iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-israel/>.

<sup>26</sup> Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, Sam Weyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria", *Institute for the Study of War*, May 2013, accessed 15 Jan 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-startegy-syria/>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Abduikadir Karahan, "An outline of the cultural relations existing between Turkey, Iran and Pakistan", *Allamaiqbal*, accessed 30 Jan 2014, <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr75/5.html>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

place a strain on the relationship between the two countries.<sup>31</sup> Iran is concerned about the increasing closeness between Pakistan and its arch rival in the region, Saudi Arabia. Iran finds itself cooperating with Pakistan in the economic and energy fields, but also finds itself competing with its neighbour on policy issues such as Afghanistan and Syria. Whilst Pakistan may be drawn into the Middle East Shiite-Sunni conflict, Iran sees this as unlikely considering Pakistan's own internal security issues, its increased involvement in Afghanistan and the constant fear of its eastern neighbour, India. Therefore, Pakistan the other big player apart from Saudi Arabia, is perhaps discounted as a counterweight to Iranian influence in the region.

The phrase 'Shia Crescent' coined by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004 is now coming to fruition.<sup>32</sup> The past couple of years have seen an increase of Shiite influence in the Middle East from Iran all the way up to Syria through Iraq. The new Shiite preponderance across Iraq and the consequent influence Iran wields all the way up to Syria and Lebanon give it the necessary strategic depth in the Middle East. The Crescent is likely to evolve into a political axis over the next few years. This would give Iran, as the leader of the Shiite faith, a geo-strategic advantage with an ability to counter Saudi influence in the Middle East. It is for the first time that Iran finds itself controlling events in the Shiite Crescent and therefore an increased regional influence through proxy.

### **US Drawdown**

The Islamic Revolution in Iran saw the overthrow of the Shah and subsequent hostage taking of 60 Americans at the US Embassy in Tehran by Islamic students. In the absence of diplomatic relations, relations went downhill with the US actively supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the downing of the Iranian commercial jet liner with 290 passengers onboard in 1988 and the sharp rhetoric originating from either side at frequent intervals.

The US feels threatened by the prospect of Iran as a nuclear weapons state for two reasons. The first being its open animosity exhibited towards Israel, which may have the potential of a nuclear exchange between the two countries. Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been vocal in his anti-Israel and

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<sup>31</sup>Zachary Keck, "Iran and Pakistan's Coming Clash", *The Diplomat*, 13 Mar 2014, accessed 25 Apr 2014, <http://www.thediplomat.com/2014/03/iran-and-pakistan-coming-clash/>.

<sup>32</sup>Ian Black, "Fear of a Shia Full Moon", *The Guardian*, 26 Jan 2007, accessed 25 Apr 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/26/worlddispatch.ianblack/>.



anti western rhetoric. His denial of the Holocaust has enraged the Jews worldwide. Secondly, the US believes that Iran's links with Islamist fundamentalists like the Sunni group Hamas in Gaza and some Taliban factions has the potential for these weapons to inadvertently fall in the hands of anti-American groups like the Al-Qaida.

The US liberation of Kuwait following an Iraqi invasion, in the early 1990s, highlighted to the Iranians that their arch rival was overwhelmingly superior to any other country in terms of conventional military capability. Also, other countries were much more inclined to follow its directions in the absence of a counterweight consequent to the end of the cold war with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Therefore, an increased US presence in the region since Gulf War I has been a cause of concern for Iran. However, post 9/11 both sides cooperated during the US invasion of Afghanistan. This cooperation was short-lived as Iran along with Iraq and North Korea was labelled the "Axis of Evil" by the US.<sup>33</sup> The US invasion of Iraq on the charge of possession of WMD, later proven to be wrong, reinforced the perception that action could be taken against Iran on a similar pretext. Consequently, Iran has been deeply insecure of the presence of US forces on its borders. However, the complete withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in Dec 2011 has had a moderating influence on the security concerns of Iran. The US commitment of withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan by end 2014 has further reassured Iran and shaped the security environment in the region towards its interests.

### **Regional Competitor**

The Middle East is witnessing a Cold War between the two regional heavy weights, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Each country is trying to gain influence in the region based on its sectarian beliefs.<sup>34</sup> During the sixties and seventies, the two countries were in a strategic alliance with the US to deter Soviet influence in the region. However, after the Islamic Revolution Riyadh aligned itself more closely with the US thus pushing Tehran-Riyadh relations towards mistrust and hostility. Support for Iraq and encouragement to other Arab states to follow suit and creation of GCC in 1981 to deter Iran are some issues over which Iran feels

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<sup>33</sup>Deb Riechmann, "A brief history of US-Iran relations", *The Associated Press*, 23 Nov 2013, accessed 06 Jan 2014, <http://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/a-brief-history-of-u-s-iranian-relations-1.1557786/>.

<sup>34</sup>Christopher Boucek, Karim Sadjadpour, "Rivals – Iran vs Saudi Arabia", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 20 Sep 2013, accessed 08 Jan 2014, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2011/09/20/rivals-iran-vs-saudi-arabia/68jg#history/>.

threatened by Saudi Arabia.<sup>35</sup> A recent proposal to increase the strength of the Peninsula Shield Force, GCCs combined military force, from 40,000 to 1,00,000 is also viewed as a step taken to counter Iran.<sup>36</sup>

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran had always been surrounded by hostile regimes, ideologically and economically dependent on Saudi leadership. The US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, followed by a regime change, resulted in a geo-strategic shift for Iran as the incumbent governments do not profess extreme Sunni ideology. Therefore, the withdrawal of the US from Iraq and the impending withdrawal from Afghanistan are likely to result in independent governments not under the influence of Saudi Arabia, but more aligned to Iran. While the threats to Iran from its neighbours have decreased, Saudi Arabia finds itself in a more turbulent neighbourhood. After the Arab Spring, Bahrain a predominantly Shia state, is a security concern.<sup>37</sup> North Yemen is a security threat because of Shiite Houthis control, which is a branch of Shia Imamiya of Iran.<sup>38</sup> South Yemen is being wooed by Iran.<sup>39</sup> Iraq is no longer ideologically aligned to Saudi Arabia. The Arab Spring and its aftermath are a cause of concern for the monarchy in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, for the first time Iran finds itself in a commanding position with respect to its regional competitor Saudi Arabia.

### Weapons of Mass Destruction

In 1998, with Pakistan coming out as a nuclear weapon state, there were no regional fears in the Iranian establishment. To the contrary, the Iranian Foreign Minister declared in a BBC interview on 30 May 1998, "From all over the world Muslims are happy that Pakistan has this capability..., Now they feel more confident because it will help balance Israel's nuclear capability." Notwithstanding the above sentiment in the Muslim world, it has been an officially stated stance by successive Pakistani governments that they have no

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Shenaz Kermali, "The GCC is expanding its army, but for what", *Aljazeera*, 02 Jul 2011, accessed 25 Apr 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/06/2011626112649845386.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Qhelile Nyathi, "Away from Egypt, Bahraains own Arab Spring Uprising Heats up Again", *Time*, 14 Aug 2013, accessed 02 May 2014, <http://www.world.time.com/2013/08/14/away-from-egypt-bharains-own-arab-spring-uprising-heats-up-again/>.

<sup>38</sup> Mohamed Vall, "The Rise of Yemen's Houthis", *Aljazeera*, 12 Feb 2014, accessed 02 May 2104, <http://www.blogs.aljazeera.com/blog/middle-east/rise-yemens-houthis/>.

<sup>39</sup> Jamal Khashoggi, "The expanding Shiite Crescent", *Al Arabiya*, 16 Jun 2013, accessed 25 Apr 2014, <http://www.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2013/06/16/The-expanding-Shiite-Crescent-.html>.

pan-Islamic nuclear ambition.<sup>40</sup> While Pakistan has not declared a Nuclear Doctrine, it has often stated its openness to a ‘first use policy’ to deter Indian conventional superiority.<sup>41</sup> The Islamic Bomb fallacy has eroded over the years and Iran now firmly believes that the Pakistani nuclear bomb is a counter to India’s power and will not be used at the behest of Saudi Arabia against Israel or any other Middle Eastern country.

The WMD capability in the entire Middle East has been eroded with the Syrian CWs in the process of being dismantled. Unlike in the past where its potential enemies like Iraq had WMD capability, there is no direct threat to Iran from any hostile Arab country. The Israeli undeclared nuclear capability does not pose a threat to Iran as Israel has shown great restraint in the threat of use of nuclear weapons and therefore its use by Israel in a conventional war is highly unlikely. It is in Iran’s interest to pursue a war by proxy with Israel and Saudi Arabia for continued influence in the region. Iran realises that acquisition of nuclear capability may trigger a nuclear arms race in the region with Saudi Arabia and Egypt also acquiring the capability in the near term. This would nullify the present advantage it holds in the region.

### **Uncertain Future?**

The Middle East has always been prone to uncertainty. The regions and countries presently aligned with Iran have the potential to turn hostile. The sectarian violence between Shiite and Sunni Muslims is ever increasing in Pakistan, more so with the Pakistani faction of Taliban taking firm root in the country. Consequent to the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, there is a possibility that the Taliban may make a comeback, thereby not only raising a security concern on Iran’s eastern border but also losing the strategic advantage to Pakistan due to its ongoing covert support to Taliban. Iraq is already in turmoil with Sunni extremists holding on to parts of Anbar province.<sup>42</sup> The civil war from Syria has now spilled over to Iraq and Sunni fighters from all over the world are descending onto the battlefield. Were Syria to fall in the hands of extremist Sunni

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<sup>40</sup>Sohail H Hashmi, “Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives”, Cambridge University Press (2004), p 341.

<sup>41</sup>Michael Krepon, “Pakistan’s Nuclear Strategy and deterrence Stability”, *Stimson.org*, 09 May 2012, accessed 25 Apr 2014, [http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/Krepon\\_-\\_Pakistan\\_Nuclear\\_Strategy\\_and\\_Deterrence\\_Stability.pdf/](http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/Krepon_-_Pakistan_Nuclear_Strategy_and_Deterrence_Stability.pdf/).

<sup>42</sup>Alice Fordham, “Sunni Discontent Fuels Growing Violence In Iraq’s Anbar Province”, *NPR.org*, 18 Apr 2014, accessed 02 May 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/04/18/304187407/sunni-discontent-fuels-growing-violence-in-iraqs-anbars-province/>.

groups, parts of Iraq would also be difficult to hold. These extreme Sunni groups have already proclaimed an Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). While the US presence in the region is winding down, the presence of US Naval forces in the Arabian Gulf will continue. In case Afghanistan signs the Bilateral Security Agreement, the US troop presence will continue, albeit reduced. Therefore, the Middle East still holds an uncertain future for Iran to give up its nuclear program based on a favourable security assessment of its neighbourhood.

Tehran is perhaps fully aware of the uncertain nature of the security environment in its neighbourhood. However, Iran finds itself fairly comfortable in the region and is going ahead with the nuclear deal to keep its domestic constituency appeased. Notwithstanding, the Iranian government will always keep the nuclear option open by insisting on a right to enrichment. Iran maintains that as per the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which it is a signatory, it has an “inalienable right” to peaceful nuclear development. It has a right to enrich uranium and build reactors. It does not agree with the US argument that some non-nuclear states use nuclear technology but do not enrich uranium and Iran should also do the same.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Iran is likely to cap the enrichment process between 3% and 5% as required by the NPT, but may not give it up altogether. This ensures that the enrichment capability is not taken away and any requirement of enhanced enrichment due to change in circumstances can be met. Any insistence by the P5+1 on dismantling the enrichment capability would probably kill the nuclear deal, reinforcing the point that the present deal is a direct offshoot of the security calculus of Iran.

## Conclusion

There has been great euphoria in the West that the economic sanctions imposed on Iran finally got the country to the negotiating table. Some in the US Congress believe that further sanctions or the threat of sanctions would have greater effect on Iran. The progress of the nuclear deal may be undermined if it is assumed that Iran has been solely brought to the negotiating table because of the economic sanctions and the consequent hardships imposed upon the general public. The public opinion in Iran which favours negotiations due to the impact of

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<sup>43</sup>Max Fisher, “9 questions about Iran's nuclear program you were too embarrassed to ask”, *The Washington Post*, 25 Nov 2013, accessed 25 Apr 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/11/25/9-questions-about-irans-nuclear-program-you-were-too-embarrassed-to-ask/>.

economic sanctions is a factor, but not the only one. The major reasons for Iran to negotiate the deal are the favourable security environment in its neighbourhood, the increase in its regional influence vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the decrease in US presence in the neighbourhood. Considering internal public opinion for economic prosperity and reduced external threat perception, the Supreme Religious Leader ensured the election of the moderate president and thereafter has given tacit approval to initiate nuclear talks with P5+1 countries. Since nuclear capability has already figured in Iran's security calculus, it will insist on enrichment capability, however capping enrichment at levels for use as nuclear fuel for peaceful energy development. This would ensure that enrichment capability is always resident in the country and in case it feels threatened, in the future, it can take measures for acquiring a nuclear deterrent. Insistence by the P5+1 on having zero enrichment capability would in all probability kill the deal.

A nuclear deal with capped enrichment capability also poses a challenge to the world community, as a nuclear weapons program can be developed by Iran in a short time. While Iran's security concerns may have been met for the moment, a change in its security environment may see a resurfacing of Iran's nuclear weapons program. Accordingly, stability in the Middle East is the only lasting solution to this nuclear dilemma. As a first step, Iran should be treated as a coequal of Saudi Arabia in the affairs of the Middle East. In fact, by giving a greater role to Iran in maintaining stability in its neighbourhood, its sense of security would be reinforced and at the same time would free the US from the ongoing quagmire which it has been involved in for the past decade. The US should take advantage of Iran's newly acquired regional influence and involve it more in the affairs of the region to find solutions to problems such as Syria, Iraq and the Arab Israel peace. This would make Iran a responsible country in the region and, together with Saudi Arabia, find a lasting solution for peace in the Middle East.

### **Recommendations**

The following is recommended for the P5+1 while dealing with Iran on the nuclear issue:-

- (a) The Iranian security calculus is a bigger factor than economic sanctions in its willingness to negotiate a nuclear deal and needs to be borne in mind.

(b) As part of the security calculus, Iran will insist on a reduced enrichment capability, as provided for by the NPT. A proposal of zero enrichment will kill the nuclear deal and should not be insisted on.

(c) A nuclear deal with reduced enrichment capability is only a short term solution. Iran may revert to its nuclear weapons program in case it feels threatened. For a long term solution, Iran needs to perceive a sense of security in its neighbourhood. This can be achieved by bringing Iran back into the international fold, recognising it as a major player in Middle Eastern affairs and making it a stakeholder in ensuring a peaceful Middle East.



### ***About the Author***



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