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Search for Islamic Order: Yesterday and Today
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A Nuclear Iran: Islamic Principles or Strategic Need?

In early October, a spectacular explosion rocked the Parchin military base outside of Tehran. Israeli satellite imagery displayed “startling destruction”¹ of facilities responsible for the production of crucial elements of missiles and other munitions, facilities that Iran has repeatedly refused international inspectors from entering. While the blast remains “shrouded in mystery,”² it returns the intense controversy over Iran’s nuclear developments to the forefront of international consciousness. Why does a country that sits atop the world’s second-largest natural gas reserve so doggedly pursue nuclear development? Why does it act with such opaque non-compliance towards the International Atomic Energy Agency and foreign actors? Finally, why does a state structured on and devoted to Islamic principles ultimately desire a destructive capability inherently forbidden by its religion? While Iran stresses the survival of the Islamic State as the “ultimate service” to Islam, Iran’s staunch commitment to nuclear development appears more strategically and historically motivated rather than grounded in religion. Iran’s hypernationalistic belief in its rightful place as regional hegemon, its history’s pervasive sense of isolation and vulnerability, and its ingrained perceptions of the intentions of the United States and other nuclear powers all contribute to Iran’s fierce pursuit of nuclear capability.

¹ Paul Alster, "Mysterious Blast at Iran Nuke Plant Proves Weapons Program Alive," Fox News, last modified October 9, 2014, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com>

² Ibid.

The establishment of the world's first Islamic state became one of the defining moments of the 20th century. In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini succeeded in uniting Iranian society's "diverse currents of discontent"³ into a cohesive anti-Shah movement. By March of the same year, he held a countrywide referendum on the question "do you want the monarchy to be replaced by the Islamic Republic?" It passed with an astounding 98% of the vote⁴. Khomeini envisioned an Islamic state governed by a learned cleric and with no legislation but the word of God. Iran continues to operate according to Khomeini's unique politico-religious doctrine, which holds the regime as the embodiment of Shi'a Islam's authority on Earth. To abandon the principles and structure of the Islamic state would be to "abandon the will of God."⁵ Thus, the survival of the Islamic state is as much an "existential imperative"⁶ as it is an expression of Iranian nationalism and identity.

³ "Velayat-E Faqih," in *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Philip Mattar, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 4:2311, accessed October 15, 2014, http://0-go.galegroup.com.tiger.coloradocollege.edu/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=RELEVANCE&inPS=true&prodId=GURL&userGroupName=colorado&tabID=T003&searchId=R1&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=1&contentSet=GALE%7CCX3424602823&&docId=GALE|CX3424602823&docType=GALE.

⁴ Frederick Kagan, "Velayat-e Faqih," Iran Tracker, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.irantracker.org/basics/velayat-e-faqih>.

⁵ Jennifer Knepper, "Nuclear Weapons and Iranian Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 27, no. 5 (2004): accessed October 17, 2014, <http://aj5ll6he4v.search.serialssolutions.com/?genre=article&issn=01495933&title=Comparative%20Strategy&volume=27&issue=5&date=20081001&atitle=Nuclear%20Weapons%20and%20Iranian%20Strategic%20Culture.&spage=451&pages=451-468&sid=EBSCO:Academic%20Search%20Complete&aulast=Knepper,%20Jennifer>.

⁶ Ibid.

Iran's quest for increased nuclear capability aims ultimately to protect its statehood, a statehood that happens to be inherently religious. Besides the need for survival, Iran's specific reasons for acquiring nuclear capability—and eventually weapons—do not seem religiously oriented at all. In fact, many Islamic traditions and scholars assert that weapons of mass destruction are inherently un-Islamic and prohibited by eternal law for they are “unique suitability”⁷ to kill indiscriminately, an action explicitly forbidden by the Qur'an. There exists a general presumption in Islamic moral tradition that certain protected groups should not be “deliberately targeted for death”⁸ in the course of waging even a just war. The Qur'an directs jihadists to only “fight in the way of God those who fight you,” (2:190-191) thus excluding non-combatants. Certain hadiths are even more explicit, forbidding the killing of children, women, and the elderly⁹. For some Islamic jurists, “military necessity”¹⁰ can trump actions for which there normally exists a strong moral presumption. It remains, however, difficult and highly subjective to distinguish between “necessity” and simple utility. Weapons of mass destruction are all too likely to be used in ways considered morally reprehensible; Ayatollah Khomeini himself issued a fatwa outlining the un-Islamic qualities of weapons of mass destruction and forbade their production and use “in any form.”¹¹ Following the devastation of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war, however, Khomeini

⁷ Frances V. Harbour, "Islamic Principles and the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 23, no. 1 (1995): 74-75, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://0-www.jstor.org.tiger.coloradocollege.edu>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji, "Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy," last modified September 2011, PDF.

made a quick reversal of his original fatwa, thus elevating the supremacy of “raison d’etat”¹² over tenets of Islam as core principles of Iran’s foreign policy decision-making. Khomeini invoked the principle of maslaha, which literally means “well-being” but also signifies “public interest and government expediency.”¹³ According to Khomeini, weapons of mass destruction were the sole way to secure the “very essence of the Islamic revolution from the schemes of its enemies.”¹⁴ Therefore, since the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranian nuclear policymaking has not been guided by religious principles but by a “more complex mix of considerations.”¹⁵

One of these considerations is the Iranian belief in its right to regional hegemony and leadership of the globe’s entire Muslim population. “You only have one option,” declared President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in one negotiation with the United States. “That [option] is recognizing the right and greatness of the Iranian nation.” The right to develop nuclear power has been an issue of national pride. Iran’s attachment to nuclear development is “rooted in its own tumultuous history,”¹⁶ the history of a great civilization deprived of its “rightful status as a regional superpower”¹⁷ by foreign intervention. Iran exercised 2500 years of dominant power in southwest Asia, with a brief 600-year interruption during the Islamic and Mongol conquests. Iran considers any major event, dispute, or crisis in

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 59.

¹⁵ Eisenstadt and Khalaji, "Religion and Politics in Iran's."

¹⁶ Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 2006): 323, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://0-www.jstor.org.tiger.coloradocollege.edu>

¹⁷ Ibid.

the Middle East as Iran's concern. It has continued to interfere in the Arab-Israeli confrontation, Lebanese politics, the Yemeni civil war, and even events in the Balkans and South Africa¹⁸. Greater nuclear capability would provide Iran a strong voice to determine events in its region, and nuclear capability represents a "hallmark of modernization"¹⁹ that Iran believes would seal its status as the Islamic world's preeminent power. Nuclear weapons would also legitimize hopes of establishing an "Iran[ian]-led, pan-Islamic collective security arrangement"²⁰ that would become the sole authority for preserving regional peace and stability without foreign influence. Iran's "hypernationalistic belief"²¹ in its deserved position as regional hegemon and leader of Islamic civilization, as well as its nuclear program that serves as a "symbol of national pride,"²² both indicate that nationalist tendencies have transcended some religious doctrine in formulating Iranian foreign policy. Scholars widely regard Islam to inherently forbid the use of weapons of mass destruction, yet the Iranian public—which is overwhelmingly Muslim—stands "largely united behind the regime"²³ in its pursuit of nuclear capability.

Iran's sense of pervasive isolation and vulnerability has made deterrence, preparedness, and self-reliance fundamental in foreign policy decisions and long-

¹⁸ Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb*, 10.

¹⁹ Knepper, "Nuclear Weapons and Iranian,"

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Good for the Shah, Banned for the Mullahs: The West and Iran's Quest for Nuclear Power," *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 2 (2006): 222, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://0-www.jstor.org.tiger.coloradocollege.edu/>.

²³ *Ibid.*, 323.

term security goals. Iran seems “married to a sense of insecurity”²⁴ derived from its history of “persistent invasion by hostile forces.”²⁵ Iran was first subjected to the conquests of various Arab powers and Mongol hordes from the 7th through the 13th centuries; in the 19th and 20th centuries, Great Britain and Russia wrestled over Iran as part of their “Great Game,” and by the turn of the 20th century, these European powers dominated many of the country’s key governmental and economic institutions. During World War I, the fighting of British, Russian, and Turkish armies devastated Iran, whose soil was turned into a strategic battleground; in World War II, Iran was invaded and occupied by both Soviet and British armies, who then began to administer many of the country’s affairs. The Mossadeq incident in 1952 and reinstallation of the Shah marked further coercive and humiliating foreign intervention. This history of manipulation and subjugation by foreign powers resulted in “stridency and suspicion”²⁶ of the international community.

Iraq provided the greatest incentive for Iran’s acquirement of nuclear capability. There existed a heated historic rivalry between the two nations over regional dominance; a culmination of territorial disputes, ethnic divisions, and conflicting ideological and foreign policy orientations finally erupted into the 20th century’s longest conventional war²⁷. The larger and more populous Iran initially had the advantage, but soon Iraq closed the “geographic and demographic gap”²⁸ by

²⁴ Knepper, "Nuclear Weapons and Iranian,"

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic," 314.

²⁸ Ibid.

use of chemical warfare. Iran perceived the international community as “notably indifferent,” doing “little to condemn Iraq” for its employment of massive numbers of chemical warfare munitions²⁹. Such indifference reinforced Iran’s determination to acquire “any and all weapons”³⁰ to defend itself and offer deterrence, for Iran felt it could not rely on foreign intervention. In order for deterrence to operate, the threatening state “must be confronted with the certainty of an equivalent response;”³¹ thus Khomeini rescinded his previous fatwa rejecting nuclear weapons and threw his country into full pursuit of increased nuclear capabilities. Khomeini viewed increased nuclear capability as a “deterrent in the hands of God’s soldiers.”³² The Iraqi offensive proved that modern military technology, especially weapons of mass destruction, could make a decisive difference in warfare; perhaps the use of such technology could have deterred Iraq’s initial aggression and prevented the suffering of many Iranian civilians.

Shi’ite history also supports Iran’s deep sense of isolation and victimization. Shi’ite minorities have traditionally born the brunt of relentless Sunni persecution, for Sunnis see Shi’ism as a form of apostasy. While the overarching purpose of Iran’s nuclear program may be to defend a Shi’ite regime, historic Shi’ite oppression and Iran’s insecurity as a minority exists as a more significant stimulus. For Iran, the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb*, 71.

³¹ Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic," 314.

³² Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb*, 59.

“past is always present.”³³ Pride in Iranian culture and civilization paired with a sense of historical victimization has created a “fierce sense of independence” and a “culture of resistance” to influence and suppression by a foreign power³⁴.

Iranian leadership is determined to make Iran strong, independent, and self-sufficient; there exists an inherent appreciation for autarky and a willingness to suffer to achieve it³⁵. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei even deemed the foreign sanctions a “blessing,” for they forced Iran to shed its dependence on foreigners³⁶. Iran’s quest for utter autonomy through the acquirement of nuclear weapons emerges from its ingrained perceptions of Western nuclear powerhouses and their attitudes and intentions towards Iran. Iran insists on an “inalienable right” to increase its nuclear capability and become self-reliant in its nuclear program; it sees Western powers as pursuing a policy of “selective discrimination” in their efforts to deny Iran an indigenous nuclear program³⁷. Former president Ahmadinejad declared his country the victim of a “nuclear apartheid”³⁸ that permits certain countries to enrich fuel while others are forbidden.

Geographic proximity to several nuclear powers—India, Pakistan, and Israel—only heightened Iran’s sense of vulnerability. Iran’s Islamic Revolution

³³ R.K. Ramazani, "Understanding Iranian Foreign Policy," Middle East Institute, last modified 2012, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.mei.edu/content/understanding-iranian-foreign-policy>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb*,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic," 323.

³⁸ Ibid.

resulted in international isolation; this absence of alliances stressed the importance of more aggressive defensive weapons. Iran views itself as a Persian state surrounded by non-Persian neighbors; it shares neither the ethnic background nor the communal ties to form alliances based off of “shared values” and a “common vision.”³⁹ Thus, there exists a strategic need for nuclear deterrent; Iran has turned most of its neighboring countries into enemies and has “demonized” the United States and Israel, both of whom have considerable nuclear strength⁴⁰. Iran also sees itself as “effectively encircled by the United States.”⁴¹ Iran is bordered to the East by a U.S.-aligned government in Afghanistan, to the west by a U.S.-aligned government in Iraq, and to the north by Turkey, a member of NATO who hosts a strong U.S. military presence.

Iranian contempt towards the United States has been consistent and enduring. Khomeini ideology pinned Iran and the United States in a “cosmic conflict between good and evil.”⁴² this perception is ingrained in Iranian society such that Iranian leadership needs anti-American sentiment to “maintain credibility and survive politically.”⁴³ Diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States were severed after the 1979 revolution, ushering in three decades of “mutual hostility and suspicion.”⁴⁴ Since 2000, the United States has frequently threatened to strike Iran’s nuclear sites and to execute a regime change in Tehran; these threats gained further

³⁹ Knepper, "Nuclear Weapons and Iranian,"

⁴⁰ Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb*, 59.

⁴¹ Shannon N. Kile, ed., *Europe and Iran: Perspectives on Non-Proliferation*, SIPRI Research Report 21 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 78.

⁴² Knepper, "Nuclear Weapons and Iranian,"

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic," 318.

plausibility with the deployment of American troops to Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries surrounding Iran. The War in Iraq proved the United States would not hesitate to use its military superiority to “contain an alleged threat of weapons of mass destruction” and to “topple a regime that harbored such aspirations.”⁴⁵ Iran sees the United States as determined to eliminate the Islamic Republic and install a submissive regime that would re-create the relationship the United States once had with the Shah⁴⁶. Iran maintains “xenophobic and conspiratorial”⁴⁷ fears of a soft war waged against them by the United States through propaganda, media power, cultural influence, political sway, and trade and investment. Acquiring nuclear capability means Iran would “never again have to fear American retaliation.”⁴⁸

Iraq is an Islamic state, and one would assume understanding the role of religion is fundamental to accessing the logic behind Iranian politics. Yet, religious principles seem not only absent but also violated in Iran’s foreign policy measures, particularly in the arena of nuclear capability. Khomeini’s adoption of the principle of *maslaha* was meant to aid the state in functioning in the modern world; in a letter to his disciple Muhammad Hassan Qadiri, Khomeini wrote that *sharia*, as it existed, was “not compatible with the requirements of modern social and political life.”⁴⁹ Iran’s pursuit of nuclear capability seems driven by *maslaha* rather than by religious

⁴⁵ Kibaroglu, "Good for the Shah," 318.

⁴⁶ Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb*, 23.

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 70.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 71.

⁴⁹ Eisenstadt and Khalaji, "Religion and Politics in Iran's."

tenets. Iran's ultimate aim remains to protect the goal of its revolution—an Islamic state—but in this modern age, Iran's strategic concerns usurp religious doctrine.

Religion is hardly mentioned in Iran's many reasons for increased nuclear development; rather, matters of supremacy, victimization, and deterrence rise to the forefront.