

# DOMESTIC POLITICS SURROUNDING THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

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The Iranian nuclear programme in itself was not of much significance in the domestic political discourses of Iran until it was caught up in the continuing factional fighting among the clerical elite. The nuclear issue first appeared in the Iranian public domain after the revelations<sup>1</sup> of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)<sup>2</sup> on August 14, 2002, and subsequent disclosures<sup>3</sup> to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) by the Islamic Republic of Iran in October 2003. However, during this time, the intensity of this discourse was not much. It was only after the victory of the current President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in 2005, that the Iranian nuclear programme became central to its domestic political discourses and foreign policy approaches. This was essentially a quest of Ahmadinejad to discredit his domestic political rivals and win the internal political battle. Therefore,

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1. Remarks by Alireza Jafarzadeh, US Representative Office, National Council of Resistance of Iran, "New Information on Top Secret Projects of the Iranian Regime's Nuclear Program," August 14, 2002, *Iran Watch*, Website, URL: <http://www.iranwatch.org/privateviews/NCRI/perspex-ncri-topsecretprojects-081402.htm>. Accessed on September 4, 2010, 10:04:03 PM.
2. NCRI is the political wing of the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, which was exiled from the country after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.
3. Yonah Alexander and Milton Hoenig, *The New Iranian Leadership: Ahmadinejad, Terrorism, Nuclear Ambition, and the Middle East* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2008), p. 113.

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for a proper understanding of Iran's domestic politics surrounding its nuclear programme, we first need to understand this factional fighting, because no matter how important the Iranian nuclear issue may be for the outside world, for the clerical elite, this issue has been reduced to a primary tool to hold onto power – at any cost.

To a naïve observer of Iranian affairs, it may seem surprising that Iran does not bow down to international pressure even after so many sanctions. It may be recalled that until July 2010, the United Nations Security Council had sanctioned Iran four times. These sanctions which were imposed on December 23, 2006<sup>4</sup>, March 24, 2007<sup>5</sup>, March 3, 2008<sup>6</sup> and June 9, 2010<sup>7</sup> respectively, have further isolated Iran from the international community. Not surprisingly, even those familiar with the art of politics, fail to find a convincing answer to the Iranian conundrum. This is so particularly because their perspectives are largely based on the Western tradition of analysing the West Asian regimes under the scanner of the twin concepts of 'liberalism' and 'authoritarianism.' The Islamic Republic of Iran doesn't properly fit into either category. And those in haste to find a conclusion – branding Iran as an 'irrational actor' or a 'rogue state' – either fall prey to the propaganda machinery of the 'great powers' or the internal contradictions of the Iranian polity itself.

The answer to the Iranian nuclear question lies in the prevalent domestic politics of Iran, especially from the last years of Khatami's Presidency

4. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1737, S/RES/1737 (2006) (\*Reissued), Dated: December 27, 2006, URL: <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/2448771.74496651.html>. Accessed on August 30, 2010, 6:56:43 PM.
5. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1747, S/RES/1747 (2007), Dated: March 24, 2007, URL: <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/5809192.06142426.html>. Accessed on August 30, 2010, 7:02:08 PM.
6. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1803, S/RES/1803 (2008), Dated: March 3, 2008, URL: <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/142237.6.html>. Accessed on August 30, 2010, 7:08:09 PM.
7. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, S/RES/1929 (2010) (Reissued), Dated: June 9, 2010, URL: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N10/396/79/PDF/N1039679.pdf?OpenElement>. Accessed on September 4, 2010, 9:39:53 PM.

and running through the years of the current President up to the present time. This paper intends to chronicle the domestic political developments surrounding the Iranian nuclear programme during this era, analyse them and find out the linkages among Iran's domestic politics, its nuclear programme, the international posture and the related controversies.

While the Iranian nuclear issue has become a problem of dangerous proportions on the international platform, its cause lies in the domestic political strife. An understanding of the cause of this factional strife, in turn, requires an appreciation of the inherent contradiction of the Iranian political system, which is essentially the reason for such political infighting. Especially important in the political system is the role of the Iranian Supreme Leader and the President. The next important factor for the comprehension of Iranian nuclear politics is the identification of the nuclear decision-makers – institutions as well as individuals.

As we shall see, the main contradiction of the Islamic Republic of Iran lies in the name itself. While the post-revolutionary Iran was sought to be made a republic – where legitimacy lies with the people – it was also left to the guardianship of the Islamic clerics. This predicates an assessment of the role of the Supreme Leader (*Velayet-e Faqih*), who is the centre of all authority, at one end, and the masses (or public opinion) from which the clerical authority derives legitimacy, at the other. Finally, we shall see how President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – a hardliner – has capitalised on the nuclear issue to wrest power from his reformist rivals, and shall assess the role of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in maintaining the clerical regime despite recurring popular protests from the masses.

### **THE ROOT CAUSE: LEGITIMACY PROBLEM**

Much of what is happening today on the Iranian soil is related to the nervousness of the clerical regime regarding the slipping of power from their hands. How is the regime facing this threat, and why doesn't the opposition prove so substantial as to ultimately uproot the stronghold of clerical control over power? The answer to this question lies in the

“contradiction”<sup>8</sup> inherent in the Islamic Republic’s political system, which has been simultaneously made “both an *Islamic* state run by clerics and a republic ruled by popular consent.”<sup>9</sup>

The Iranian political system is largely based<sup>10</sup> on the thoughts and beliefs of Ayatollah Khomeini, the grandfather of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It is noteworthy that the combined forces that brought out the revolution had never imagined<sup>11</sup> the resultant state to be an Islamic one. However, Khomeini went ahead in implementing his grand scheme and systematically consolidated his power<sup>12</sup> over all branches of the government, silencing all opposition. Nevertheless, disagreements did exist, only they could not surface during the time of Khomeini who commanded a charismatic character and acted as the “final arbiter”<sup>13</sup> to the dissenting voices. The political system thus devised<sup>14</sup> was an Islamic theocracy with some traces of republicanism, which proved to be the main cause of political infighting in the later stages.

At the top of the Iranian power structure<sup>15</sup> is the Supreme Leader<sup>16</sup> (*Velayat-e Faqih*) who is vested with wide powers, including the appointment

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8. Ray Takeyh, “Iran at a Crossroads,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 57, no. 1, Winter 2003, pp. 42-56, p. 43.
  9. Geneive Abdo, “Re-Thinking the Islamic Republic: A ‘Conversation’ with Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1, Winter 2001, pp. 9-24, p. 9.
  10. For an understanding of how the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (and the resultant political system) is based on the “ideological vision” of Ayatollah Khomeini, see Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 159.
  11. For further insight into this argument, see Homa Omid, *Islam and the Post-Revolutionary State in Iran* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), p. 89.
  12. For an insight into Khomeini’s approach to power consolidation through the institutionalisation of a “ministate,” see Mohsen M. Milani, “Political Participation in Revolutionary Iran,” in John L. Esposito, ed., *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), pp. 77-93; p. 84. For an appreciation of the progress of this “consolidation of regime power,” see Shahrough Akhavi, “Elite Factionalism in the Islamic Republic,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2, Spring 1987, pp. 181-201, p. 182.
  13. See Milani, *Ibid.*, p. 87.
  14. For more on, this “peculiar political formula”, see Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 225.
  15. For an insight into the formal and informal power structures in Iran, see Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2000), pp. 6-10.
  16. The duties and powers of the Supreme Leader are enshrined in Article 110 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

and dismissal of heads of the armed forces and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. He can also dismiss the President on the basis of the Supreme Court's ruling or the request of the Iranian Parliament (*Majlis*). Although the democratically elected President formally "represents the second strongest power center"<sup>17</sup> in Iran, in reality, his power is eclipsed by other overlapping power centres, most notably of the Guardian Council. This was clearly evidenced by Khatami's failed efforts to introduce political reforms through his "twin Bills"<sup>18</sup> when the Guardian Council proved to be his primary hurdle.

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The Guardian Council, a 12-member body of extremely conservative clerics, is entrusted with the responsibility of interpreting<sup>19</sup> the Constitution and supervising<sup>20</sup> the elections. However, the term "supervision," from which the Guardian Council derives its power of vetting the candidates in elections, is highly debatable<sup>21</sup>. It is this power of vetting elections which makes the Guardian Council the most resisting force towards any attempt at development of democracy in Iran<sup>22</sup>.

In the present context, two more constitutional bodies are of great prominence – the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council. The Assembly of Experts is a body of 86 clerics, entrusted with the responsibility of appointing<sup>23</sup> the Supreme Leader. The Expediency Council was founded<sup>24</sup> by Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1988 for the purpose of breaking the

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17. Buchta, n. 15, p. 2.

18. For a detailed analysis of how Khatami failed in his attempts at introducing his 'twin bills,' see A. William Samii, "Dissent in Iranian Elections: Reasons and Implications", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 3, Summer 2004, pp. 403-423, pp. 415-418.

19. Article 98 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

20. Article 99 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

21. A. William Samii, "Iran's Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 4, Autumn 2001, pp. 643-662, p. 645.

22. For more on this argument, see *Ibid*.

23. Article 107 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

24. Buchta, n. 15, p. 61.

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deadlock between the Guardian Council and Iranian Parliament. It is ironic that in the Iranian political system, the directly elected President does not enjoy as much power as his unelected counterparts. A study of the history of successive Presidents shows that the extent of real power of the President is directly proportional to the extent of goodwill he enjoys with the Supreme Leader.

Nevertheless, the election of the President becomes important in as much as its result gives the much-needed political input to the clerical regime. The election of the President and its outcome works as the barometer for the clerical regime and they adjust their stance accordingly to strengthen their hold over power. "Since August 1989 and the constitutional reforms of that year, a 'presidential center' has been created at the heart of the executive power structure of the republic."<sup>25</sup> Started by President Hashemi Rafsanjani, this legacy was carried forward by his successors Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Thus, when Khatami won his second term, riding on the wave of his political reforms, this alarmed the clerical regime and they clubbed all their resources together to defeat this force. The result was the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and it is mainly because of this reason that Ahmadinejad has to satisfy his hardline supporters by continuing his radical stance and discrediting his main political opponents – the reformists. Since the government lacks political legitimacy<sup>26</sup>, it becomes essential for Ahmadinejad to create an artificial wave of popular support by portraying the nuclear issue as a nationalist one and playing with the sentiments of the people.

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25. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Competing Powerbrokers of the Middle East: Iran and Saudi Arabia*, The Emirates Occasional Papers – 67 (Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2008), p. 20.

26. For more on the legitimacy crisis, see Olivier Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 53, no. 2, Spring 1999, pp. 201-216.

**KEY NUCLEAR DECISION-MAKERS**

In terms of all internal and foreign policy matters, the Supreme Leader has the final say. Nevertheless, the Supreme Leader doesn't always act to assert his power and places his hat in the ring only when it is absolutely necessary. This was the strategy of Ayatollah Khomeini and the same has been emulated by his successor Ali Khamenei. In the realm of Iran's nuclear decision-making process too this stance of Khamenei is reflected.

The information on Iran's key nuclear players and nuclear decision-making process was revealed by Dr. Hassan Rowhani, the former chief nuclear negotiator, in an interview with a leading conservative newspaper, *Kayhan*<sup>27</sup>. This revelation<sup>28</sup> was ostensibly made by Rowhani – a reformist – in reaction to the rise of hardliners and militant nationalists associated with the Revolutionary Guards. According to this information<sup>29</sup>, Iran's nuclear policy is made by a 'Council of Heads', which includes the Supreme Leader, Expediency Council President, the Defence Minister, the President and the National Security Council Secretary. All major decisions related to the nuclear issue, including the suspension of enrichment activities, are made by this body. At a time of growing criticism by the hardliners, this revelation was made by Rowhani to make his stand clear on the issue and warn the firebrand hardliners that they "should not discard the negotiating strategy lightly."<sup>30</sup>

Effectively, the decisions on the nuclear issue are made in consonance with various constitutional functionaries, including the President. However, the President is not the only actor or the final decision-maker in this regard. By

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27. Published in its July 23, 2005 issue, p. 12; Cited in George Perkovich, "Iran's Nuclear Program after the 2005 Elections," in Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, ed., *Iran's Nuclear Program: Realities and Repercussions* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2006), pp. 37-61, p. 43.

28. Ibid., p. 43.

29. Ibid., p. 44.

30. Ibid.

manipulating the nuclear issue and clubbing it with the national sentiment, Ahmadinejad has positioned himself in such a way that it is difficult to bypass him in the nuclear decisions.<sup>31</sup> He has “inserted himself into the debate far more than Iran’s previous President, Mohammed Khatami.”<sup>32</sup> Apart from the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the “principal players”<sup>33</sup> include chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani and former President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Former President Khatami and former chief nuclear negotiator Hasan Rowhani, who were among the key nuclear players before the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, are now reduced to a defensive position due to the apportioning of blame on them by their hardline rivals for ‘failing’ in their national duty.

### **FACTIONAL FIGHTING AND THE NUCLEAR ISSUE**

Due to the contradiction of the Iranian political system, a scope has been created for factional fighting<sup>34</sup>, which although intense, never goes out of the overall clerical spectrum. The factionalism and division of opinion that was witnessed in the elite circles during the course of the revolution has continued since then. During the time of Ayatollah Khomeini, the primary conflict was between the hardliners and conservatives. Similarly, during the two tenures of the Presidencies of Rafsanjani, the conflict was mainly between the conservatives and pragmatists. During the Khatami era, this conflict was between the reformists and conservatives and during the Ahmadinejad era, this intra-elite conflict is between the reformists and the hardliners.

Such conflicts are witnessed in the social and political life of Iran. Consequently, the “factionalism and institutional competition”<sup>35</sup> – a hallmark of the post-revolution Iranian political system – is witnessed in all its grandeur in the nuclear decision-making process of Iran. Since the factional fighting over the nuclear issue is largely based on the respective faction’s claims over the programme, it is important to first look into the

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31. Karim Sadjadpour, “The Nuclear Players,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, Spring/Summer 2007, pp. 125-134, p. 126.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. For an insight into the genesis of such conflicts, see Akhavi, n. 12.

35. Ehteshami, n. 25, p. 20.



genesis of the Iranian nuclear programme to assess the substance of such claims.

### GENESIS OF THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

Iran's nuclear ambition dates back to the era of Mohammad Reza Shah when he signed the "Atoms for Peace Agreement"<sup>36</sup> with the United States in 1957 during the Eisenhower Administration. His successive efforts in this regard in the 1960s and 1970s, including nuclear deals<sup>37</sup> with the US and Europe, "laid the foundation"<sup>38</sup> of Iran's nuclear programme. This was made possible because during that time, Iran under the Shah was considered an "island of stability"<sup>39</sup> in the Persian Gulf and a dependable ally of the US.

In this context, it is imperative to note that much of the current debate about Iran's real need of nuclear energy, despite its huge oil and gas reserves, becomes redundant. It is so because in terms of its oil and gas riches, Iran of that time was largely the same when these deals were being worked out. Nevertheless, a look at the Iranian officials' rationale for the need of a nuclear programme is essential in order to understand how such claims are sold by the regime and how well they are bought by the Iranian people; since it is from them that the clerical regime seeks legitimacy.

### THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

Effectively, contrary to the claims of the current Administration, the real credit of the Iranian nuclear programme goes to the Shah. In fact, the

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36. US Department of State, "Atoms for Peace Agreement with Iran," *Department of State Bulletin* 36, (Washington DC: April 15, 1957), p. 629; Cited in Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Tackling the Iran-US Crisis: The Need for a Paradigm Shift," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, Spring/Summer 2007, pp. 73-94; See pp. 80 and 91 (n. 42). Also see Alidab Mafinezam and Aria Mehrabi, *Iran and its Place among Nations* (Westport, Connecticut, USA: Praeger, 2008), p. 45.

37. For the details of these deals see Zarif, *Ibid.*, p. 80.

38. Mafinezam, *Ibid.*, p. 45.

39. Famous saying by the US President Jimmy Carter, quoted in James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of US-Iran Relations* (London: Yale, 1989), p. 233.

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Islamic regime did not give much significance to the nuclear programme after the revolution and stopped it. It was much later that the Islamic regime revived the programme, which progressed well during Khatami's Administration. Contrary to the projected image, the Iranian nuclear programme is not the brainchild of Ahmadinejad. In fact, much of the controversies that now surround the domestic elite circle of Iran regarding its nuclear programme are not related to its substance but to the method of such pursuit.

The consistent official argument in support of Iran's right to its nuclear programme includes "both economic and strategic aspects."<sup>40</sup> Iran claims that it needs to diversify its oil-based energy so that with the nuclear energy in progress, it can export the surplus oil and gas in the future. The strategic imperative includes the nature of nuclear technology, which has the potential of providing any country the scientific edge and national prestige. Indeed, an assessment of Iran's international behaviour makes it "likely that considerations of 'prestige' play a much more important part in formulating high-level policy decisions"<sup>41</sup> in the country than is widely realised. When it comes to Iran's commitment to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it contends that it has not flouted any norm and it has all the rights to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes as a signatory of the treaty.

However, it would not be far-fetched to say that this talk of diversification of oil-based energy via the development of nuclear technology has "fronted as a code"<sup>42</sup> to cover Iran's aspirations for regional power status which it hopes to achieve through the acquisition of nuclear weapons. It appears that Iran has "decided to develop the infrastructure to build the bomb but

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40. Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), p. 24.

41. Roger Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 152.

42. Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litwak, "Debating Iran's Nuclear Aspirations," *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2003, pp. 99-114, p. 105.

not yet the bomb itself.”<sup>43</sup> This fact is substantiated by the claim of former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani who said in 2005, “We possess nuclear technology that is not operationalized yet. Any time we decide to weaponize it, we can do so rather quickly.”<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the Iranian regime has often contradicted the international claim that it is pursuing a nuclear weapons programme.

On the domestic front, the “principal motive”<sup>45</sup> of the regime behind its adherence to the costly nuclear programme is essentially the legitimisation of the regime. It is argued that the resultant confrontation due to Iran’s nuclear stand-off with the West helps the failing regime in garnering popular domestic support and, therefore, works as “political salvation.”<sup>46</sup>

## **PUBLIC OPINION ON THE NUCLEAR ISSUE**

While at one end, the Iranian nuclear programme finds broad consensus among the ruling elites, among the masses, it was not very prominent before the NCRI revelations. The Iranian nuclear programme “was never the subject of debate outside elite circles, and then only in general terms.”<sup>47</sup> After the revelations, the issue found its place in the public domain, though without much intensity. For want of legitimacy and in order to discredit his opponents, immediately after winning the election in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad politicised the Iranian nuclear issue by “appropriating an inherited program, claiming it as his own.”<sup>48</sup>

Ahmadinejad has made intense efforts to prove that there is a consensus among the masses to follow the nuclear programme. However, under the current state of unemployment and inflation “it is questionable whether they would seek the nuclear fuel cycle at the cost of confrontation with

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43. Mohsen M. Milani, “Tehran’s Take: Understanding Iran’s U.S. Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009, pp. 46-62, p. 51.

44. Ibid.

45. Chubin, n. 40, p. 28.

46. Bennett Ramburg, “Dealing with Iran,” *International Herald Tribune*, March 24, 2005, p. 11; Quoted in Chubin, n. 40, p. 28.

47. Shahram Chubin, “The Domestic Politics of the Nuclear Question in Iran,” *The Strategic Implications of the Iranian Nuclear Program*, URL: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/static/npp/pdf/chubin-aspen.pdf>, Accessed on January 2, 2011, 1:39:09 PM, p. 76.

48. Ibid.

the international community, referral to the UN Security Council, and sanctions.”<sup>49</sup> This effort of Ahmadinejad is essentially directed towards deriving legitimacy from the public. Ahmadinejad has played around this issue so much that now it appears anti-national for any Iranian to suggest that the country should not have a nuclear programme at such a heavy economic and diplomatic cost.

Indeed, Iran of today witnesses a suffocating environment due to the lack of basic liberties and a pathetic economic condition due to the political mismanagement and flawed foreign policy of the clerical regime. In essence, the real casualty of this political mismanagement and factional infighting around the nuclear programme is neither the US-West alliance nor the clerical regime, but the Iranian people, who find every effort of theirs to come out of the clerical shackles failing.

### **FIRST PHASE OF POLITICISATION OF THE NUCLEAR ISSUE**

Although Iran’s nuclear programme was discussed in the West prior to Khatami’s revelations of October 2003, the “inter-elite discussions about Iran’s nuclear options entered the public arena”<sup>50</sup> only during Iran’s negotiations with the IAEA after such revelations. It was due to the difficult choice posed to Khatami and his reformist allies that the conservatives came in with full force to capitalise on the issue. At a time when Khatami was battling with the international embarrassment due to the NCRI disclosures of August 2002 and successive revelations of October 2003, he saw a new front opening up in the already chaotic domestic political environment. Khatami’s decision to negotiate positively with the international community due to the imperatives of his foreign policy and the international situation of that time put him in direct confrontation with his conservative rivals on the nuclear issue.

### **REVELATIONS OF NCRI AND KHATAMI’S DISCLOSURES**

Although the Iranian nuclear programme in itself was in the knowledge

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49. Chubin, n. 40, p. 27.

50. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran’s Silent Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 125.

of the international community, its clandestine<sup>51</sup> nature was revealed for the first time on August 14, 2002, by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) – an Iranian dissident group living in exile. This revelation compounded by the “axis of evil” speech of George W. Bush in 2002, put Khatami and his reform efforts on a difficult test. While Khatami’s rapprochement with the West under his policy of “Dialogue among Civilisations” came under the international scanner, he was criticised on his home turf for being refuted by the United States. In addition, “the mounting international crisis in Iraq, and gentle encouragement from the Europeans, convinced the Iranians that it would be better to be as transparent as possible about their nuclear program.”<sup>52</sup>

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Therefore, after the IAEA came out with its report demanding clarification from Iran, Khatami decided to agree by fully revealing the Iranian nuclear programme and this way “the developments in Natanz and Arak were publicly affirmed by Khatami.”<sup>53</sup> In addition, Khatami bowed down to the IAEA demand of stopping the uranium enrichment. This cooled down the stand-off to some extent. However, the US, Iran’s arch-enemy saw in this a political opportunity to fix Iran in the “legal quagmire”<sup>54</sup> of the NPT. Khatami’s problem at home and abroad was now compounded further.

### **EU-3 NEGOTIATION AND SIGNING OF ADDITIONAL PROTOCOL**

By now, seeing a “diplomatic opportunity”<sup>55</sup>, the European Union had become a peace-maker with the popular EU-3 negotiations and it was at their behest<sup>56</sup> that Khatami had agreed to sign the Additional Protocol, but not without

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51. n. 1.

52. Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), p. 202.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

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intense debate on the domestic platform. It was at this point that the Iranian nuclear issue had become a dominant one in the internal political fighting. Although Iran signed the Additional Protocol on December 18, 2003<sup>57</sup>, Khatami faced further problems from the IAEA since it had to be ratified and the conservatives now dominated the new Majlis (Iranian Parliament).

The Additional Protocol is an augmenting element in the overall structure of IAEA safeguards to ensure the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Since its introduction in the 1990s, it has been in much debate because, as applied to a non-nuclear weapon state, it “gives the IAEA access to both declared and possible undeclared nuclear activities and to all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle. It grants expanded rights of access to information and sites, including unannounced inspections,”<sup>58</sup> thus, providing the IAEA such rights which may impinge on the national sovereignty of the subjected state.

The conservatives fully capitalised on the issue of signing the Additional Protocol and blamed Khatami and his reformist allies for turning weak against the international community and falling for bad bargains. The Additional Protocol in essence “sought to add an element of compulsion to what was a voluntary agreement. Many hardliners in Iran were arguing that Iran should withdraw from the NPT rather than subject itself to humiliating inspections. After all, Iran, unlike Iraq, had not invaded anyone, nor had it been defeated in war.”<sup>59</sup>

The Majlis during this time was dominated by the conservatives, which happened as a reaction to the reformist wave, “Khamenei and his

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57. Alexander, n. 3, p. 174.

58. Ibid.

59. Ansari, n. 52, p. 203.

inner circle"<sup>60</sup> had "initiated their move to consolidate power"<sup>61</sup> by vetting reformist candidates in the Majlis election of 2004. The issue of the Additional Protocol was debated intensely in the new Majlis and the conservative dominated Majlis declined to ratify the treaty. This opened the whole new course of political infighting and locked the reformists and hardliners into an intense political battle against each other.

The hardliners, in association with the conservatives-dominated Majlis, now started discrediting their reformist rivals by propagating the arguments that the reformists had been too meek before the West's demands and had got a bad bargain in nuclear negotiations, and thus, had compromised with Iran's national interest. The hardliners' "primary criticism of the Khatami Administration's nuclear negotiating teams and chief nuclear negotiator Hassan Rowhani was that they had been far too soft on the West, indeed, that they were more than happy, cynically or naively, to sell Iran's interests in return for Western favour."<sup>62</sup>

By now, the reformists under Khatami had lost much of their sheen due to the uncooperative international stance and stiff opposition of the Guardian Council and other clerical establishments. Further, Khatami's second term was about to end in 2005 and he could not contest the third time due to the restriction of the Iranian Constitution, which allows only two successive tenures in the President's post. In the new Presidential election, there was a lack of credible reformist candidates and the conservative establishment was hell-bent on uprooting the dangerous wave of reforms.

At such a time, Ahmadinejad won the election, backed by the hardliners, especially the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Falling short of political legitimacy, the new hardline victors needed to shore up domestic support and like always, the anti-West campaign appealed most and the nuclear issue came in handy. This heralded a new era in which the nuclear issue

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60. Alireza Jafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 189.

61. Ibid.

62. Ali M. Ansari, *Iran Under Ahmadinejad: The Politics of Confrontation*, Adelphi Paper 393 (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007), p. 47.

**“The most obvious potential agent of change within Iran emanates from its own population and the post-revolutionary demographics that make this a disproportionately young society.”**

was portrayed as a national issue where anyone expressing opposition would not be tolerated and anyone appearing weak in a bargain with the West – in this case clearly the reformists – would be considered as anti-national.

## **SECOND PHASE OF POLITICISATION OF THE NUCLEAR ISSUE**

Khatami could have never imagined that his successes in establishing grassroots democracy<sup>63</sup> would be instrumental one day in uprooting his whole effort of democracy and political reforms.

When Ahmadinejad fought the election for the post of President in 2005, he was a little known Mayor of Tehran. It was the reformists’ infighting within the Tehran Municipality, popularised by the conservative-controlled state television, that made the people disillusioned with the political process, brought Ahmadinejad into the limelight and ultimately led to his elevation to the post of President<sup>64</sup>.

Ahmadinejad’s assumption of office marked the symbolic demise of Khatami’s reform movement that had alarmed the clerical rulers. The eight years<sup>65</sup> of Khatami had witnessed many such events, which had the potential of collapsing the clerical regime. The six-day riots on the streets of Tehran on the eve<sup>66</sup> of the closing of the *Salam* newspaper, the

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63. It was due to the reform efforts of Khatami that the first nationwide municipal council elections were held in February 1999. This was the first such election since the revolution and in this election, the reformist camp had achieved a landslide victory. The second municipal council elections, held in February 2003, were marked by low voter turnout due to the disillusionment of the people with the reformists. Consequently, in this election, the conservatives enjoyed a sweeping victory.

64. Ansari, n. 52, p. 202.

65. 1997 to 2005, the two successive tenures of Khatami as the President of the Islamic Republic. His successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected in June 2005.

66. This happened in July 1999 when the conservatives reacted to the municipal council victory of the reformists by closing a reformist newspaper, *Salam*, triggering six days of university protests and severe rioting.



reelection of Khatami<sup>67</sup> and his attempts to pass the “twin Bills”<sup>68</sup> were all seen as serious threats to the clerical rule. “The most obvious potential agent of change within Iran emanates from its own population and the post-revolutionary demographics that make this a disproportionately young society.”<sup>69</sup> It is notable that “today, two-thirds of Iranians are under the age of thirty – too young to harbor meaningful memories of the pre-revolutionary era – and 40 percent are under the age of eighteen.”<sup>70</sup>

“Through their omnipresent (though still officially illegal) satellite dishes and burgeoning connections to the internet, younger Iranians are intensely interconnected with the world beyond the Islamic Republic. ... Not surprisingly, they are correspondingly frustrated.”<sup>71</sup> In the absence of political parties and liberty of the press in Iran, the level of political participation in the reform era can be gauged by the rapidly growing rate of internet usage. “Between 2000 and 2006, internet usage in Iran grew by 2,900 percent, giving Iran 34 percent of the Middle East’s total web traffic, a figure that includes Israel and Turkey.”<sup>72</sup>

Commenting on the eight years (1997-2005) of the reform movement, Shirin Ebadi<sup>73</sup>, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, says: “The reform era, for all its political discontents, did much to relax our daily lives. The morality police were by no means retired, but they went from omnipresent invaders to a periodic nuisance. President Khatami deserves only a measure of credit for this shift. Really it was because my daughters’ [at that time 23 years of

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67. In June 2001.

68. The two Bills, named respectively as the ‘Elections Law Amendment Bill’ and the ‘Presidential Empowerment Bill,’ became popular as the ‘twin Bills.’ These Bills were presented in September 2002 and were later adopted by the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) in November 2002. However, due to the stiff resistance of the conservatives, particularly by the Guardian Council, these Bills could not be passed and were ultimately withdrawn in March 2004. For a detailed analysis of the ‘twin Bills’ see Samii, n. 18, pp. 415-418.

69. Suzanne Maloney, *Iran’s Long Reach: Iran as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008), p. 83.

70. UNICEF, “At a Glance: Iran (Islamic Republic of),” URL: [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran\\_statistics.html#47](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran_statistics.html#47), Accessed on April 17, 2008; Cited in Maloney, *Ibid.*, p. 84.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

72. Nathan Gonzalez, *Engaging Iran: The Rise of a Middle East Powerhouse and America’s Strategic Choice* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2007), p. 92.

73. Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian and a lawyer by profession, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her extraordinary service of defending the vulnerable people.

age] uncowed generation started fighting back and, through the force of their sheer numbers and boldness, made it unfeasible for the state to impose itself as before.”<sup>74</sup>

Under such ‘threatening’ political atmosphere, Ahmadinejad’s election gave the clerical regime the much needed respite and they were now not ready to let go the reins of power from their hands. While it was important to mobilise people under the nationalist banner against a common enemy to derive political legitimacy, it was equally important to discredit their main domestic political rivals – the reformists – for keeping a hold over power.

### AHMADINEJAD’S NUCLEAR POLITICS

Ahmadinejad now started implementing his strategy. On the eve of his inauguration, on August 6, 2005, the rejection of the EU-3 proposal was announced<sup>75</sup> and two days later, “the regime broke its November 2004 agreement with Europe and resumed uranium conversion activities at the Isfahan plant.”<sup>76</sup> Also, “Ahmadinejad incited things further that same day, August 8, 2005, by naming a new chief nuclear negotiator. Hassan Rowhani [a reformist and Khatami’s ally], the head of the team that had been negotiating with Europe throughout the crisis period after August 2002, was out, and Ali Larijani, a former senior commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and a prominent hardline conservative with close ties to Khamenei, was in.”<sup>77</sup>

“By handing over the reins to Larijani, Ahmadinejad declared that in the new order, Iran’s nuclear negotiations would reflect the most hardline

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74. Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: From Prison to Peace Prize – One Woman’s Struggle at the Crossroads of History* (London: Rider, 2006), p. 180.

75. Jafarzadeh, n. 60, p. 190.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

position of the regime."<sup>78</sup> It was at this juncture that the speech<sup>79</sup> of Hassan Rowhani, the former chief nuclear negotiator and Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council was leaked<sup>80</sup> in *Rahbord*<sup>81</sup>, in its September 30, 2005 issue, giving clear evidence of the internal fighting among the ruling elite on the nuclear issue.

Rowhani had given this speech to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council and from the content of the speech, it can be ascertained that it may have been made between October 15 and November 14, 2004<sup>82</sup>, during the Khatami Presidency. However, its publication shortly after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad clearly shows the attempts by the reformists to justify their stance on the nuclear issue. This speech gives an insight into "Iran's reasoning and strategies leading up to its October 21, 2003 declaration."<sup>83</sup> In this speech, Rowhani has clarified the reformists' rationale of nuclear declarations to the IAEA, signing of the Additional Protocol and subsequent suspension of uranium enrichment<sup>84</sup>.

### THE ROLE OF SUPREME LEADER ALI KHAMENEI

In this regard, Ali Khamenei's role needs some elaboration, since he, as the Supreme Leader, and not President Ahmadinejad, is the final arbiter of the political happenings in the domestic turf and foreign policy formulations.

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78. Ibid., p. 191.

79. Text of speech by Supreme National Security Council Secretary Hassan Rohani to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, "Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA Concerning the Nuclear Dossier," Place and date not given, edited by Musavi-Kho'iniha, published in *Rahbord* (in Persian), September 30, 2005, pp. 7-38, Original Persian text and its English translation are posted on the Web Site: Berlin Information-center for Transatlantic Security, URL: [www.bits.de/public/documents/iran/Rahbord.pdf](http://www.bits.de/public/documents/iran/Rahbord.pdf), Accessed on January 8, 2011, 3:22:38 PM.

80. Alexander and Hoenig, n. 3, p. 122.

81. *Rahbord* is an Iranian quarterly journal, published by the Centre for Strategic Research. This Centre – a research arm of the Expediency Council – is headed by Dr. Hassan Rowhani. See CentreforStrategicResearch, Website, URL: <http://www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=en&abtId=00>. Accessed on January 10, 2011, 6:08:43 PM.

82. See Dr. Chen Kane, "Nuclear Decision-Making in Iran: A Rare Glimpse", *Middle East Brief*, May 2006, No. 5, Published by Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Online Web, URL: [www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB5.pdf](http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB5.pdf). Accessed on 3:47:09 PM, Note 3, p. 7.

83. Alexander and Hoenig, n. 3, p. 122.

84. n. 79.

An assessment of the actions of Khamenei since his assumption of office of the Supreme Leader after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 depicts him as “a leader averse to both confrontation and accommodation with the West.”<sup>85</sup>

This is because he had been holding the office of President<sup>86</sup> for most of the period of the eight-year war with Iraq, and had seen from close quarters the ill effects of any protracted confrontation. Further, his scepticism regarding the West largely mirrors the ideals and worldview of his predecessor Khomeini and likewise he thinks “the relationship between the United States and Iran is similar to that between a wolf and a sheep.”<sup>87</sup>

On the domestic platform, Khamenei’s primary concern is to save the clerical regime at all costs. Thus, while he was silent in the case of Ahmadinejad’s severe criticism of the reformists – a common enemy – he did raise eyebrows when Ahmadinejad’s attitude of confrontation reached the critical limit. It is in this context that Rowhani’s revelations to *Kayhan* and *Rahbord* in 2005 can be seen. It is “difficult to imagine”<sup>88</sup> that Rowhani would have revealed so much about the Iranian nuclear policy and its decision-making process without the permission of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

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85. Sadjadpour, n. 31, p. 126.

86. Khamenei was elected as the third President of the Islamic Republic of Iran on October 2, 1981. He was again elected for his second term in 1985 and was succeeded by Rafsanjani, who was elected on July 28, 1989. Bani-Sadr and Muhammad Ali Rajaei were respectively the first and second Presidents of the Islamic Republic of Iran, both of whom could not complete their full term. While Bani-Sadr was dismissed, Muhammad Ali Rajaei was killed in a bomb blast. The Iran-Iraq War started on September 22, 1980 and ceasefire was enforced on August 20, 1988.

87. Sadjadpour, n. 31, p. 126.

88. Perkovich, n. 27, p. 43.

## AHMADINEJAD'S ANSWER TO KHATAMI'S "DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILISATIONS"<sup>89</sup>

These revelations notwithstanding, Ahmadinejad kept on pursuing his confrontational foreign policy stance, wishing to garner more domestic support. He did this by indulging in great rhetoric against the US, the West and Israel. He surprised everyone by giving a "vitriolic"<sup>90</sup> and "confrontational speech"<sup>91</sup> in September 2005 when he attended the World Summit in New York. Ahmadinejad has been particularly vocal in making rhetorical remarks<sup>92</sup> against Israel. In October, the same year, he went further in his hate-speech and reminded his audience about the statement of Ayatollah Khomeini in which he had said that "the occupying regime [Israel] must be wiped off the map."<sup>93</sup>

Such demonising speeches against the West were intended to portray them as those who were holding Iran back. The audience of such rhetoric, as also that against Israel, comprised the domestic masses.

While Ahmadinejad continued to adopt a policy of animosity with the West, little caring about the successive sanctions of the United Nations Security Council, he also made full efforts to portray the nuclear issue as a nationalist one. Ahmadinejad's government has sought to reap the benefit of the nuclear quagmire in the domestic turf by turning the situation upside down. "By insisting that its nuclear project is essential for the country's domestic energy

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89. Khatami had given the call for the "Dialogue among Civilisations" in a speech made to the United Nations annual Heads of State Summit in 1998. In this speech, he had proposed that the United Nations designate the year 2001 as the "Year of Dialogue among Civilisations." The United Nations General Assembly had unanimously endorsed this proposition on November 4, 1998 and the year 2001 was confirmed as the "Year of Dialogue among Civilisations." See Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, *Dialogue among Civilizations: A Prerequisite for Asian Unity*, Edited by Issa Rezazadeh (Cultural Counsellor at the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, New Delhi), (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2002), p. 21. Also see Seyed Mohammad Khatami, *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society*, (New Delhi: Centre for Persian and Central Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2003), pp. 1-5.

90. George Perkovich, "Iran's Nuclear Program after the 2005 Elections," in the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, ed., *Iran's Nuclear Program: Realities and Repercussions*, pp. 37-61, (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 2006), p. 46.

91. Perkovich, n. 27, p. 46.

92. Karim Sadjadpour, "How Relevant Is the Iranian Street?," *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2006-07, vol. 30, n. 1, pp. 151-162, p. 154.

93. Perkovich, n. 27, p. 46.

needs and scientific development, Tehran has effectively turned US opposition to its program into a nationalist cause, pointing to it as proof that Washington intends to hold Iran back."<sup>94</sup> The government has even printed the atom symbol on 50,000 Rial bills to "awaken the national pride"<sup>95</sup> of the Iranian people.

### THE GENESIS OF ANTI-US AND ANTI-WESTERN SENTIMENTS

Since Ahmadinejad's stance on the nuclear stand-off – largely based on the portrayal of Iran as a victim of the West's bias – evokes huge appeal among the Iranian public, it is imperative to go into the genesis of this phenomenon to understand such appeal.

The genesis of anti-US and anti-Western sentiments in the minds of the Iranian people dates back to the era of Pahlavi dynasty, more particularly, the year 1953. In this year, the United States had "orchestrated"<sup>96</sup> a coup against the nationalist and democratically elected Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq who was instrumental<sup>97</sup> in the nationalisation of the oil industry of Iran. This memory of immense "betrayal"<sup>98</sup> is never out of the sight of the Iranians. The present clerical regime reminds them of this event whenever they tend to forget it and talk about opening up the present political system and installing democracy. Similarly, whenever there is a pressure from outside to democratise the system, the memory of Mosaddeq and his plight is revived by the clerical regime, emphasising the hypocrisy of the United States in its democratic rhetoric which serves as an excuse to ensure the hold of the authoritarian regime. Even during the course of the revolution, Khomeini had exploited this episode to mobilise the people of Iran under the nationalistic banner.

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94. Milani, n. 43, p. 51.

95. Ibid.

96. Ansari, n. 52, p. 27.

97. Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq had become Prime Minister in May 1951 by leading the campaign for the nationalisation of Iranian oil industry. It was due to this campaign that the National Assembly of Iran had enacted legislation in April 1951 for the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry. Mosaddeq was overthrown by Gen Zahedi in August 1953 and was "tried and sentenced to three years' solitary confinement for allegedly trying to overthrow the regime and illegally dissolving the Majlis-e-Shura (Consultative Assembly)." See Regional Surveys of the World, *The Middle East and North Africa-2003*, 49<sup>th</sup> Edition (London: Europa Publication, 2003), p. 352.

98. Ansari, n. 52, p. 27.

The second factor instilling chronic animosity was the affinity of Reza Shah to the United States and other Western countries and consequent Westernisation of Iran. The effort of the Shah to modernise Iran and more particularly, his much popularised “White Revolution”<sup>99</sup> has been described by Khomeini – adopted ultimately from the construct of Jalal Ale-Ahmad — as “Westoxication,”<sup>100</sup> which is a much hated word in the Iranian lexicon. It was in this context that the US hostage crisis<sup>101</sup> occurred immediately after the Islamic revolution of 1979. On the one hand, this crisis was the turning point in the history of the US-Iran relationship, which resulted in the snapping of all diplomatic ties with Iran. On the other, this event has been eulogised by the clerical regime which positions the new republic as US-centric now as it was during the era of the Shah. It is just that the basis of this relationship now is mistrust and not friendship as earlier.

These two factors, in addition to the war with Iraq<sup>102</sup> and consequent destruction of the newly founded Islamic Republic, bring sad memories to the minds of the Iranian people. Whenever the clerical rulers find their domestic legitimacy waning, they fall back upon the exploitation of such anti-US and anti-West sentiments to mobilise people under the nationalistic banner. It is in this context that Khomeini’s Rushdie affair may be seen where a life threatening *fatwa* was imposed on the writer in 1989 for his blasphemy against Islam through his book *The Satanic Verses*. At a time

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99. The ‘White Revolution,’ “formulated between 1958 and 1963” and continued until 1978, was essentially directed towards providing “a legitimating myth for the Pahlavi monarchy.” See Ali M. Ansari, “The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, ‘Modernization’ and the Consolidation of Power”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, July 2001, pp. 1-24, pp. 1-2.

100. Jalal Ale-Ahmad, along with Ali Shariati, has been considered as the most influential intellectual force behind the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. Jalal Ale-Ahmad’s concept of “Westoxication” gives a “powerful critique of hegemonic power of the West.” See Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 96-97.

101. The crisis began on November 4, 1979 and lasted for 444 days.

102. Iraq invaded Iran on September 22, 1980. On July 20, 1987, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted the Resolution 598, urging immediate ceasefire. Iran agreed to accept this resolution in July 1988, which finally came into force on August 20, 1988. See Regional Surveys of the World, n. 97, pp. 355-360. For Khomeini, the acceptance of this ceasefire “was worse than drinking poison.” See Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p. 71.

when the eight-year Iran-Iraq War had ended and the Iranian people were about to turn their attention towards their domestic ailments, the Rushdie affair was helpful to the regime in consolidating the Iranian people under one banner and distracting them from the domestic affairs.

The novel, *The Satanic Verses*, published in September 1988 by Salman Rushdie, an Indian-born British citizen, was considered by many Muslims as “a blasphemous insult to Islam.”<sup>103</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini issued a statement on February 14, 1989, which said that “the author of *The Satanic Verses*, which is against Islam, the Prophet, and the Koran, and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death.”<sup>104</sup> This statement “was soon referred to as a *fatwa*.”<sup>105</sup> “Fresh from failures in Iraq,” Ayatollah Khomeini was “trying to revive his role as the leader of militant Islam”<sup>106</sup> through this “decree.”<sup>107</sup>

Indeed, “the proclamation of Iran’s continuing role as leader of the oppressed across the world was important not just for external reasons, promoting the image and prestige of Iran, but also internally as a means of sustaining the morale of the population, distracting them from the domestic economic crisis, and preventing an emergence of ‘liberalism’, a spirit of compromise or accommodation with the outside world.”<sup>108</sup> This decree of Ayatollah Khomeini, therefore, served as “a means of meeting his two main policy goals – mobilization at home, confrontation internationally.”<sup>109</sup>

Similar is the context of the recent remarks<sup>110</sup> of the current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, urging “the Islamic Ummah to sympathize and provide

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103. Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 262.

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid.

107. Ibid.

108. Halliday, n. 102, p. 71.

109. Ibid.

110. “Imam Khamenei’s Message to Hajj Pilgrims (1431 A.H.),” Dated: November 8, 2010, Official Website of the Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Khamenei (English Version), Posted on November 15, 2010, URL: <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=contentShow&id=7577>. Accessed on January 14, 2011, 6:39:08 PM.



assistance to Kashmir.”<sup>111</sup> Addressing the Hajj pilgrims on November 8, 2010, Sayyid Ali Hassaini Khamenei said, “Today, the major duties of the elite of the Islamic Ummah are to provide help to the Palestinian nation and the besieged people of Gaza, to sympathize and provide assistance to the nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Kashmir, to engage in struggle and resistance against the aggressions of the United States and the Zionist regime, to safeguard the solidarity of Muslims and stop tainted hands and mercenary voices that try to damage this unity, to spread awakening and the sense of responsibility and commitment among Muslim youth throughout Islamic communities.”<sup>112</sup>

Khamenei also termed the United States as “the self-styled commandant of the Islamic region and the real sponsor of the Zionist regime.”<sup>113</sup> While such remarks against the United States are not new, the wrath against India is a new development, perhaps resulting as a consequence of India’s recent closeness to the United States at the cost of its relationship with Iran. Implicit in this message is Iran’s anger over India’s stance in the IAEA on the Iranian nuclear issue, where India’s three times voting against Iran is perceived by it as a consequence of the US pressure. These votes were cast in the IAEA resolutions on September 24, 2005<sup>114</sup>, February 4, 2006<sup>115</sup> and November 27, 2009<sup>116</sup> respectively. Nevertheless, such remarks place the Supreme Leader in the ranks of Ahmadinejad in rhetoric politics and are an indicator to Khamenei’s tacit support to Ahmadinejad’s current foreign policy.

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111. “Khamenei Urges Muslims to ‘help’ Kashmir,” *The Times of India*, Online Web, November 16, 2010, URL: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/Khamenei-urges-Muslims-to-help-Kashmir/articleshow/6935375.cms>. Accessed on January 14, 2011, 6:50:17 PM.

112. n. 110.

113. Ibid.

114. IAEA Resolution, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” GOV/2005/77, Adopted on September 24, 2005, URL: [www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2005/gov2005-77.pdf](http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2005/gov2005-77.pdf). Accessed on August 31, 2010, 6:36:06 PM.

115. IAEA Resolution, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” GOV/2006/14, Adopted on February 4, 2006, URL: [www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2006/gov2006-14.pdf](http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2006/gov2006-14.pdf). Accessed on August 31, 2010, 6:54:37 PM.

116. Report of the Director General, IAEA, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1835 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” GOV/2009/74, November, 16, 2009, URL: <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2009/gov2009-74.pdf>. Accessed on July 19, 2010, 3:00:09 PM. This resolution was adopted on November 27, 2009.

**In essence, “Iran’s quest for a nuclear capability is the product of domestic politics and the demands of revolutionary legitimacy rather than a strategic imperative.”**

Indeed, Ahmadinejad and his hardline supporters have devised this kind of rhetorical strategy to mobilise the Iranian people in the domestic fight against their political rivals. They needed an enemy for mobilising the people and it was not difficult to project the US as one. The US’ policy of non-engagement proved quite handy.

#### **AN ASSESSMENT OF AHMADINEJAD’S POLICY AND FUTURE COURSE**

Under the impending US threat of invasion and collective opposition of the international community, it is tempting to dismiss Ahmadinejad’s vitriolic stance against the West as a case of political pathology. However, it would serve better to understand how well this stance is paying him and his supporters, particularly, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, in his domestic constituencies. His reelection in 2009 with the full support of the clerical establishment – which came all out to ensure his success by wide scale rigging – gives credence to this fact.

The ‘Green Revolution’, of which Mir Hussain Musavi became a leader of the time, gives a hint of the popular discontent among the masses due to the prevalent economic condition and lack of civil liberties. Similarly, its forceful suppression illustrates the victory of the hardliners and conservatives in retaining their tight grip over power and maintaining the clerical regime at all costs.

“Both factions [hardliners and reformists] believe nuclear weapons are the best deterrent against external threats, most notably the US and Israel. They know there is a cost associated with it and they are willing to pay, but they may disagree on the price. Hardliners put a lower value on international relations and are more eager to pursue the plan. ‘Reformists’ value these relations, particularly to the EU. But they both want to get as close to having the bomb or the ability to build it as possible.”<sup>117</sup> “Despite

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117. Reza Ghorashi, “US, Iran, the Nuclear Bomb and Negotiations,” August 12, 2003, Payvand Iran News, Website, URL: <http://www.payvand.com/news/03/aug/1072.html>. Accessed on: January 10, 2011, 5:27:43 PM.

their many differences, both factions are 'rational' enough to realize they have a common interest in the survival of the Islamic Republic."<sup>118</sup>

However, it is unfortunate that due to "Iran's weak economic structures, the country's foreign policy has come to be held hostage to its security priorities. In this process, economic necessities have influenced foreign policy, but, at the same time, have been unable to generate the appropriate policy responses because of the security and ideological imperatives of the state."<sup>119</sup>

Most evidently, "the contested election of June 2009 revealed a deeply divided society. Differences on the nuclear issue are the tip of the iceberg, reflecting in reality much deeper differences on what sort of state Iran should be, and how Iran should conduct itself internationally, and whether it should continue its revolutionary behavior or settle down."<sup>120</sup> In essence, "Iran's quest for a nuclear capability is the product of domestic politics and the demands of revolutionary legitimacy rather than a strategic imperative."<sup>121</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Iranian nuclear question is a symptom of deep division in the clerical order. Ahmadinejad has given the nuclear issue such a nationalist character that Iran's quest for nuclear capability now appears irreversible. The dynamics of international politics – the US' failure in managing the affairs of Iraq and Afghanistan – has provided Iran the opportunity to progress with its nuclear programme to the extent that it now cherishes the dream of emerging as a regional power. However, Ahmadinejad's uncompromising stance towards the international community is largely motivated by the need of domestic legitimacy for the maintenance of the clerical regime.

Indeed, Ahmadinejad's strategy of delaying the negotiations with the IAEA proved fruitful for Iran in terms of its progress towards nuclear

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118. Ibid.

119. Ehteshami, n. 25, p. 21.

120. Chubin, n. 47, p. 73.

121. Shahram Chubin, "Iran: Domestic Politics and Nuclear Choices," in Ashley J. Tellis and Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia 2007-08: Domestic Political Change and Grand Strategy* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, September 30, 2007), pp. 301-340, p. 301.

capability. Consequently, this issue has now taken the shape of national prestige where even the initially reluctant ranks have joined to see Iran as a regional power, in close league with India, which came to international prominence after acquiring nuclear weapons capability.

Ahmadinejad has been successful in defining the Iranian nuclear issue in his own preferred way by portraying Iran as a victim of the West's prejudices, which is depriving it of the necessary technology for the development of nuclear capabilities. Consequently, those people or political groups from the domestic quarters (i.e. reformists) who show any weakness in the nuclear negotiations with the West, are branded as the "agents of foreign powers."<sup>122</sup>

In this context, the words of Mohammad Javad Zarif<sup>123</sup> – an Iranian diplomat – appear quite appropriate, "The interests of Iran and the United States, as well as security and stability in the Persian Gulf region, have long been hostage to an outdated paradigm sustained by mutual mistrust and heavy historical baggage, and nurtured with fact or fiction generated by those benefiting from confrontation and war."<sup>124</sup>

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122. Chubin, n. 47, p. 78.

123. Mohammad Javad Zarif, a career diplomat, has served as the permanent representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations; See "Introduction of the Contributors," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, Spring/Summer 2007, p. xv.

124. Zarif, n. 36, p. 88.