



**BACKGROUND ANALYSIS 03/05/2007**

## **WHY IRAN WILL HAVE THE BOMB**

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With its 70 million inhabitants, considerable petroleum resources, significant regular Army and paramilitary structures, strong national sentiment (indeed, even nationalist feelings), Iran constitutes a strong regional power that has behind it an imperial calling that goes back nearly three millennia. But it is an isolated and worried power.

Though Iran was well accepted by the West up to the Islamic revolution of 1978 so long as it respected the economic and strategic interests of the Atlantic Alliance, this regional power has for nearly 30 years had the feeling it is threatened by its regional and international surroundings. Like the USSR in the 1960s-70s, Iran today believes it is encircled by hostile powers. Indeed, all the countries close to Iran have entered into systems of more or less close and formal military alliance with the United States (Turkey, the ex-Soviet republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates) or they are even under direct military occupation by the Americans (Afghanistan, Iraq). Iran's only nearby friend in the external world remains Armenia: this is so for reasons that are not always selfless. Armenia is to Iran what Luxembourg is to France, and Armenia itself is an enclave cut off from the world. For a country like Iran, this is not much.

Faced with this encirclement and with the attempt to stifle it (ever since the '90s, Iran has been subjected to a tight embargo as part of the American policy of 'double containment,' followed by the UN policy of non-proliferation), the Iranian regime, like any other entity under threat, has developed with regard to its regional and international surroundings various forms of pre-emptive aggressiveness and tries by all means to prevent the international community from taking decisions that could be unfavourable to it.

Besides this paranoia on the part of the Iranians, whatever missions they themselves establish, the West and the United States in particular have been unable to build credible international and regional security systems, so that they have pushed Tehran to follow its logic to the end and provide itself with the means of ensuring its defence and its regional status on its own.

## **An isolated and worried imperial power**

In the 1980s, Iran underwent a bloody war that resulted in thousands of deaths, many millions of invalids, orphans and war widows, and which left a profound mark on its collective memory. The Iraqi offensive against Iran, which was strongly supported by the West and the Arab world, not only legitimised the Islamic regime, whose future was at the very least uncertain in 1980, but created a strong feeling of solidarity in the country around its former combatants and victims of the war. They constitute a unified and powerful pressure group which has succeeded in dictating its law in the country. They are essentially political conservatives who reject any political evolution that might make it possible to forget about their existence. They are anchored in the past and the “duty of remembrance,” exalting the nationalist patriotic and military values that underpin their ‘rights.’

These ‘former combatants’ were in their twenties during the 1980s and now are reaching their fifties. Given their weight in society, they occupy the principal posts of political, economic and social responsibility. President Ahmadinejad and most of the ministers in the present-day Iranian Government have come from this milieu. Like officials in the Kremlin during the 1960s-70s, who largely came from military ranks from the “Great Patriotic War” against Nazi Germany, these are people who are afraid of their surroundings and are obsessed by the idea that their country should never again be exposed to a major war. But these are also people who, due to the long state of war and isolation they have undergone, have not had a chance to mix with the rest of the world, to have a knowledge of the world, to develop a diplomacy that conforms to the rules of that genre, or to perceive what is foreign as anything other than a mortal threat.

Iran is a country that is split into many different ethnic groups and communities. The Persians make up somewhat less than half the population. The other half consists of Azeris and Turkmen (together, the Turks), Kurds and Armenians (Indo-Europeans), Beluchis (part of the Pakistani people), Arabs, etc.

On the economic and social levels, Iran is no less divided. Apart from those whose status comes from the Iran-Iraq conflict and whose interests are clearly indicated, Iranian society is strongly divided into socio-economic groups with hardly reconcilable objectives. You will find here a structured clergy of different ranks numbering nearly three hundred thousand individuals and constituting the main land and property owner of the country. The clergy was pushed to take the lead in the revolution of 1978 not so much out of religious considerations as due to its concern and anxiety over the ‘white revolution’ initiated by the Shah and the forced transition towards an industrial society that threatened agricultural and real estate income. That is how the revolution became ‘Islamic’ – under the leadership of the clergy. In fact, this was a conservative ‘counter-revolution.’

Alongside this clergy, and often acting in complicity with it is the merchant class of the bazaars, historically a vivid part of Persia, a land between the West and the Far East, which makes its money in import and export and which has a dim view of the emergence of modern production capacity within Iran. These demands of the bazaar are obviously irreconcilable with the objectives of the new entrepreneurial class that has been stimulated by hydrocarbon wealth and that has indeed taken up the torch of modernisation initiated by the imperial regime.

Finally, more than half the Iranian population is under age 25 and is thus composed of young people who know neither the Revolution nor the constraints of the war. These young people are open to the world thanks to modern communications and are weary of isolation, of the rigors of a Puritanism that is often hypocritical, and of the absence of prospects and of hope in a society dominated by clerics and small shop owners. They react by seeking refuge in drugs, despite the risks, and also by permanently making provocations and violating the established order. They clearly hope the country will open up to modernity.

The clashes between these various interest groups can regularly be detected in mass demonstrations – in particular by the ‘students’ – that are put down more or less well, and in the rivalry between those who are incorrectly labelled ‘reformists’ and ‘conservatives,’ as well as in the incessant conflicts between the ‘Office of the Guide’ (those serving the Ayatollah Khamenei) which represent the interests of the clergy, the ‘Discernment Council’ (a sort of supreme council of wise men) dominated by the bazaar merchants, the Government, which was recently in the hands of the entrepreneurs and is today the guarantor of the interests of the old veterans whom it has nonetheless not managed to protect to the full extent of their hopes.

The only cement binding together these very diverse groups is the sentiment to defend a ‘fatherland in danger’ and their common adherence to Shiite Islam, a religion founded on exaltation of the sacrifice of its founders – all of whom died violent deaths – and horror of Sunni Islam, in particular the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia. These feelings of haughty and aggressive nationalism and of allegiance to an exalted and unifying religion are evidently cultivated by the political authorities, who see in it a practical means of ensuring their hold on society, national cohesion and protection of the regime.

The Shah, who gave himself the title of ‘*Shah-in-Shah Arya Mehr*’ (*King of Kings, Father of the Aryans*), did not do otherwise when he exalted the several thousand year history of Persia and tried to rebuild Persepolis as it was at the time of King Darius, who dominated the Middle East up to the shores of the Aegean Sea.

It should be mentioned that Iranian political power is assisted in its propaganda task both by the Arabs and by the Occidentals. For several months now the Saudi press, followed by the newspapers of other Arab countries, has exclusively used the term ‘*Safawi*’ for the Iranians. This makes clear reference to the Safavid dynasty, a Sunni family of Turkmen origin which reigned over Persia in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, converted to Shiism in order to better consolidate its power and made Shia Islam the state religion. In Sunni Islam, apostasy is a crime worse than being a non-believer or a pagan, and conversion to Shiism (*tasha’iyya*) constitutes the worst form of apostasy, which can only be combated by destruction and death. The message is clear, if not for the West then at least for those to whom it was intended.

The Westerners are not to be outdone. In its June 2006 issue, the American *Armed Forces Journal* (A.F.J.) published an article entitled *Blood borders* by Ralph Peters which was illustrated with precise maps recommending re-dividing the Middle East along ethnic community boundaries ([www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/06/1833899](http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/06/1833899)). Though this was not widely noticed in the West, the article was examined under a magnifying glass in the countries concerned and in particular in Iran, where it attracted attention for two major reasons.

First of all, it repeats almost in entirety what was said in an article written in 1980 by Oded Yinon, a journalist and former high official in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that was published in February 1982 in issue number 14 of the review *Kivunim* (literally ‘Orientations’, a review of the World Zionist Organisation). The strategy recommended by Yinon consisted in using Israeli and Western political and military intervention to cause the countries of the region to explode into quasi-state religious and ethnic communities that would be more or less rivals. This would have had the advantage of legitimising the existence of the State of Israel as an ethnic community, while also rendering the region ‘manageable’ through the creation of many micro-States of limited means and in a situation of permanent low-intensity conflict. Whereas Yinon’s articles can be seen as an expression of an aggressive but minority fringe of Israeli opinion, the same cannot be said of the A.F.J., which is neither a science fiction magazine nor the mouthpiece of some militant caucus or lobby. In the view of Iranian officials, this journal reflects the main options of the Pentagon and consequently of the White House.

Next, even if this is just a ‘trial balloon,’ the article is disturbing for Tehran. Peters’ reasoning is based on the creation of a ‘Shiite Arab State’ centered in Basra which would include all of the South of Iraq as well as the oil-producing Saudi provinces and the Iranian shores of the Persian Gulf (see Peters’ article and the attached maps). In this plan, Saudi

Arabia is dismantled for the benefit of its Arab neighbors and of an internationalised 'Territory of the Holy Places.' Apart from the oil-bearing zones of the South, Iran would lose its Western provinces with Kurd, Arab and Azeri populations and would receive as compensation, on its Eastern border, the Persian speaking zone of Afghanistan around the city of Herat, in other words, nothing other than problems in terms of resources. The Iranian leaders understand very well that such a plan, which anticipates the break-up of the United States' most faithful Arab ally in the region and the concentration of 80% of the hydrocarbon potential of the zone in the single 'Shiite Arab State,' makes no sense unless this state is totally under Western control and if Iran, cradle of Shiism, which could exercise an influence there, is totally reduced to political and economic, as well as military impotence.

Finally, whatever the intensity of the ethnic and social cleavages of the country, the Iranian authorities know they can count on the reflexes of national pride, even arrogance, across the entire population, on its distrust, even hatred of the surrounding Sunni Arabs, on the accumulated frustration with regard to the United States, a country which every Iranian secretly dreams of and whose aggressiveness as well as its complicity with the Sunni enemies of Iran, Arabia and Pakistan, is resented with all the more bitterness. Thus the *Mujahidin-e-Khalq* (Mujahidin of the People), the principal leftist organisation opposed to the regime of the Mullahs, which still had considerable numbers of partisans in the country up to the end of the '80s despite their repeated terrorist murders, lost all credit and following when they took refuge in Iraq under the protection of Saddam Hussein at the beginning of the 90s.

Whatever their deeply held feelings may be, and however hostile they may be towards the Islamic regime, the immense majority of Iranians form a real consensus around the development of the civilian and military nuclear programme as an instrument of national pride, independence and strategic power.

### **From terrorism to nuclear programmes, strategies of survival rather than strategies of power**

It is in this context and as a consequence of its pronouncements that the Iranian regime was suspected by some Western observers in the 1980s of having a sort of Trotskyist intent to change the fate of the world by installing an Islamic Republic everywhere. This was followed by an important semantic confusion in the matter of the anti-terrorist fight, because some experts thought they could see in Iran's actions the Shiite branch of worldwide Islamic political violence. There is nothing to that.

Iran, whether directly, or, above all, via its imitators in the region (Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad), has effectively used the weapon of the weak against the strong that constitutes State terrorism in an extensive fashion and with undeniable success. Whether this happened in Iran itself (seizure of the staff of the American Embassy), in Lebanon (attacks on Drakkar, on the Marines centre, kidnapping of Westerners, in particular, French), or in the rest of the world (assassinations of opponents, strikes against Israeli or Western interests), Tehran has practiced all forms of targeted terrorism and always did so as an extension of its own action and its political and national diplomatic disputes.

Iran has unquestionably profited from this calculated practice of political violence that has been set up as a permanent strategic message to force its regional and international partners to recognise its existence, its importance and its interests, as well as to admit it as an unavoidable interlocutor and engage in dialogue with it. Once these 'war aims' have been attained, Iran has temporarily renounced the use of political violence at the international level for the sake of negotiated readmission into the assembly of respectable nations. But the support which it continues to provide to violent activities of a certain number of Lebanese and Palestinian movements in the narrow framework of their confrontation with Israel shows that for Tehran the tool of the strategic terrorist message and the exercise of its ability to be a nuisance in this domain remain essential instruments of its drive for national existence and international power.

This is clearly why the Iranian leaders were profoundly appalled when, immediately after the September 11th attacks and the Western campaign in Afghanistan, the international community did not show more respect for the 'moderation and restraint' that Iran demonstrated in this affair. A certain number of Al-Qaida officials fled the combat zones and crossed over the Iranian border. The Iranians believe that they could have seized the opportunity to dramatise relations between the West and the Sunni world somewhat more to their advantage by targeted actions and by using these refugees from the violence. They held back and do not understand why they are not acknowledged for this. This form of reasoning may appear strange to those educated in Cartesian logic, but it constitutes an important paradigm of the manner in which Tehran conducts its relations with the rest of the world.

This 'ingratitude' comforted them in their belief that 'he who does not harm does not exist' and, at present, Iran has transposed the problem, following the same outlines, to the field of strategic debate over the nuclear issue, which, for its part, also amounts to a form of 'diplomatic terrorism.'

Iran rejects the idea generally accepted in the West that its accession to nuclear status would amount to support for the spread of sectarian and aggressive Islam. The Iranian leaders believe that the 'Islamic bomb' already exists, namely in Pakistan, and that the West, headed by the United States, has not found much to say about that. These same leaders, who feel directly threatened, like Israel, by their Arab and Sunni Moslem surroundings, do not understand why the West admits the accession of Israel to the ranks of those with nuclear dissuasion but denies it to Iran.

Therefore, whether we are talking about Pakistan or Israel, Tehran sees the application of double standards in Western behaviour towards itself with the intent of weakening, even destroying the country. Iran would like to be able to place its relations with Pakistan, whom it perceives as a United States ally and lackey of Saudi Arabia, in the context of nuclear dissuasion. With respect to the neighbouring Arab States, Iran would like to have the ultimate weapon, which would spare it the need to undergo once again a conflict such as it experienced with Iraq.

The Iranian leaders also reject the concept that is smugly peddled in the Western chancelleries whereby Iran's acquiring military nuclear technology would set off the nuclearisation of all the other States in the region by way of reaction. Except for the special case of Israel, which benefited at the time by the decisive support of many Western countries in the nuclear club, the acquisition of nuclear military capability requires significant and durable financial resources, a high technological potential supported by a large population and good mastery of the means of delivering a weapon to the intended target. No other country in the region except for Iraq, now out of play, has all three elements.

Arabia has the financial power but neither the technological potential nor the mastery of delivery vectors. It could if necessary obtain bombs and delivery means on a 'turnkey basis' but from whom? for what application? with which staff? and in what time period? Nuclear bombs have a limited 'shelf-life.' The stockpile has to be permanently renewed and recycled and, given the international obligations of all parties, both possible suppliers and refurbishers would have to be clandestine, hence of uncertain value. Egypt has the technological potential and, no doubt, the possibility of putting in place the delivery means, but it lacks the necessary financial resources. Its great political and economic dependence on the United States prohibits it from engaging in any adventures in this domain, where even Algeria, which has both the technological resources and petroleum revenues, and which undertook an enrichment programme with the assistance of China in the 1980s, seems to have renounced playing for reasons of cost. As for the other countries of the region, none of them has the necessary elements.

In these conditions, the will of the Iranian leaders to equip their country with nuclear arms, though basic but made credible by their acquisition of medium range delivery means, cannot be doubted. They will put in play all their tactical skills to overcome international prohibitions in the realm of proliferation. Skilled in bargaining, they

straightaway raise their objectives as high as possible and adopt an aggressive posture in all areas, knowing cheekily that they will have to come down to achieve their ends. The incendiary declarations of President Ahmadinejad against Israel and the Europeans have no other goal. Threats made directly against the United States would lack all credibility given their inability to carry them out. For Tehran, the only way to attract attention and to force America to engage in dialogue is to go after Israel, counting on the resonance effect that always surrounds the fate of the Jewish state in America. And if, as a byproduct, it can glean a bit of prestige among the Sunni Moslem states whom it holds in contempt, that only can be an extra advantage.

### **‘Paper Tigers’**

In fact, the international situation has never been so favourable to Iranian ambitions and such an occasion is not likely to present itself again any time soon. For reasons of pure economic interest, Tehran can count on the Chinese veto and, without doubt, on a Russian veto in the Security Council if extreme measures counter to their interests were proposed in the United Nations. Divided and powerless, strongly aligned with American positions, at least so long as no military solution is envisaged, the Europeans, whatever the more or less well advised statements of certain political officials may be, represent for Tehran neither a threat nor an interest other than to dramatise the problem and to raise the stakes, the objective that has been precisely targeted by the Iranian executive branch of government.

The Iranian nuclear complex has nothing in common with the attempts of Saddam Hussein. It is not concentrated in a single place that has been uncovered such as was the case with Osirak (nuclear research and enrichment complex built in Iraq during the 1980s with Western, principally French assistance). Spread out among a large number of sites of which only the largest are known and protected by serious defences, often buried deep underground, they are only slightly vulnerable to conventional air attack. A repeat of Israel’s air expedition against the Iraqi complex – supposing that the Israeli Government is envisaging this, which is not clear – seems practically impossible to carry out. Israeli bombers do not have sufficient operational autonomy to effectively reach the designated targets and return to their bases. For that you would need to have a refueling stage at sites closer to the operational zone, that is to say, in the Sunni neighbours of Iran or in Iraq on an American base. You can appraise the probable consequences in the Moslem world that such an initiative by one or another would have for a practical result that would be highly risky. Furthermore, each time that the rumour of an Israeli raid spreads, Tehran loses no time reminding the world via Hezbollah about the painful Ron Arad affair. Arad was the Israeli pilot lost on a mission over Lebanon on 16/11/86 who fell into the hands of local Shiite movements. It is not known today whether he is alive or dead and the case is a matter of negotiations between Israel, Iran, Syria and Hizballah. The case has poisoned Israeli politics for 20 years and a repetition would no doubt be inevitable if there were to be massive raids on Iran.

Mired down in the Iraqi mess, the Americans can hardly envisage a second military engagement on the ground. It would certainly be challenged by Congress, definitely by public opinion. In any event it would be much more difficult and bloody than the Iraqi expedition. A naval based air attack supported by cruise missiles can be envisaged, but with practical results that undoubtedly would not be very significant in the long term. The Iranian programme might be delayed but certainly would not be stopped by this means. Of course, since 2003 a recurrent hypothesis has remained in ‘hard line’ Washington circles of using ‘mini-nukes’ (miniaturised nuclear bombs included in deep-penetrating missile warheads) capable of producing irreversible destruction even of deeply buried installations. But even if this type of weapon is definitely somewhat superior to very high power conventional bombs, it would constitute a violation of the nuclear ‘taboo’ reigning in international relations since 1945 and would open the door to a dramatic redefinition of relations between the United States and the rest of the world, including Europe and the Atlantic allies.

Even if the Sunni Moslem world has little sympathy for Iran, such an historic rupture would not fail to be felt as an iniquitous and unqualified aggression against Islamic soil, justifying in return all forms of violence, in particular terrorist violence against America and its Western supporters, notably Israel. Tehran obviously would not fail to spread the movement with the skill, experience and determination that it is known for in this type of exercise. And as Iranian military officials hinted to Western diplomats in the autumn of 2006, Tehran 'despite all its influence in Lebanon, would not have the means of opposing the legitimate indignation of Hezbollah and attacks such as on Drakkar or on the Marine headquarters, directed now against the international contingent posted in the South of the country.' The message has been well received...

Incidentally, the clash between Hezbollah and Israel of the summer of 2006 was no doubt meticulously timed in concert with Tehran. It clearly demonstrated that in confrontations of this sort there is no such thing as a half-victory, a partial success or a limited objective. There is nothing standing in between total victory and a shameful defeat. An offensive which only aimed at destroying Iran's nuclear potential without definitively eradicating the existing regime might reach its objectives – though this remains to be seen – but would have to be judged as a defeat for the West and a victory for the Islamic regime, which would thereby survive nuclear fire and find legitimacy for generations to come both within its borders and throughout the Third World.

Finally, the Iranian leaders have known for a long time that the fallout of a tense situation or open conflict in the Gulf region on hydrocarbon markets is infinitely more harmful to the Westerners than to producing countries of the region. A sharp rise in the price of petroleum products, even if only for a limited time, on a market already subject to great tension, would be disastrous for the developed economies and would be insupportable for emerging countries. On the contrary, it would appreciably raise the income of the producing countries, of which Iran is a member. Already wealthy and secure from their comfortable 'mattress' of earnings following successive price rises over more than a year, these producing countries can withstand several weeks of reduced production without suffering noticeable damage.

Unless the West runs all these risks taken together, without having any guarantee of success, Iran will have the bomb. Back in the spring of 2000, Ephraim Halevy, at the time Director of Mossad, estimated on the basis of information gathered by his team, that Iran would arrive at military nuclear capability in 2010. This clear-headed evaluation appears to match reality. Though he was close to the right wing of the hardliners, he did not envisage, however, that Israel should directly or indirectly oppose this by force. He believed 'that it did not have the power to prevent water from flowing' and that the challenge seemed to be to find the means of pushing back the deadlines as far as possible in order to explore means of reaching an accord, even one that is tacit and informal, for coexistence with Iran in the face of the Sunni ocean which the two countries border and which constitutes the primary danger for each of them.

The problem is thus to know if the West will be capable of bringing this new member state of the 'nuclear club' into a system of collective security taking into account the new situation or if it will continue, in one way or another, to cover itself in anathemas. In this game of threats and verbal abuse, the West is certainly the loser. Either the threats of sanctions and intervention are not followed up and they reinforce the Iranian regime's prestige and determination in the face of what it considers to be a 'paper tiger.' Or they are followed up and they reinforce national cohesion around a regime that is at present much less popular than it claims to be or than it believes it is.

For those who know Iran, the door for negotiations is not closed, however. If it were, then the Iranian President would not be engaged each week in his provocative media exercises in oratory which are, in fact, also appeals for dialogue and which are all the more aggressive given that the author realises he is vulnerable on the domestic level and has poor control over those standing behind him. As with Hezbollah terrorism and with the French hostages in Lebanon in the 1980s or the British sailors recently intercepted in the Shatt el-Arab (the swampy delta of the Tigris and Euphrates in the extreme south of Iraq near Iran

and Kuwait) then released under the glare of the media, the nuclear issue is one more carpet to haggle over in the Bazaar of Tehran. It has a price. It is 'negotiable.' You have to find out how much and how. And in the merchant tradition of the souks, obviously the seller is not going to bind his hands when revealing the amount of his expectations.

The major economic and social indicators of Iran seem rather unfavourable in the medium to long term. However, Tehran is not presently hard pressed economically and will not be satisfied, like the North Korean 'King Ubu,' with alms in return for reforming its nuclear programme. Iran's first demand is to be reassured in the face of what it considers to be a plot between the West and the Sunni world to encircle and destroy it. That can hardly be achieved by an accumulation of bellicose manifestos and more or less maladroit pressure. It would undoubtedly seem advisable to change the tone and method if one has not firmly decided to go all the way and radically destroy not only the nuclear potential but also the political regime of this country and, *a fortiori* if one is not ready or not capable of assuming all the consequences of this new 'black hole' which would add to the disastrous joining of an anarchical Afghanistan with a ravaged Iraq.