

Iran's Nuclear Aspirations: A Threat to Regional Stability

by  
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This thesis examines the multi-faceted threat Iran poses to the stability of the Middle Eastern region, to U.S. geopolitical interests and to the furthering of democratic principles from a realist perspective. Iran's failure to negotiate a nuclear accord in good faith coupled with its continued militant role in regional affairs are indicators of future escalating tensions. I weigh the viewpoints of both proponents and skeptics regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and examine controversies surrounding this accord. My approach is informed by an interview with Lily Ranjbar, an Iranian nuclear scientist currently residing in the United States, and the insights of political scientists Paasha Mahdavi and Michael Ross on the relationship between oil wealth and the adverse effects this has on civil liberties and democracy. I further support my hypothesis through the application of theories developed by economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson who have studied the dynamics of extractive institutions in certain regions, including the Middle East. As this thesis demonstrates, the divisiveness promoted by Iran in order to establish itself as a regional power offers an illustration of the *Thucydides* theory. As elaborated by Graham Allison, this theory predicts armed conflict when rising states challenge existing superpowers.

Key Words: multi-faceted threat, realist perspective, escalation of tensions, oil wealth, *Thucydides* theory, extractive institutions, geopolitical dilemma

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Ronni Naggar, Author

# Chapter I

## Introduction

Iran's role in maintaining the stability of the Middle East is significant. With a population of nearly eighty million and an area of 640,000 square miles (*Freedom House*, 2018) it ranks second largest regionally in population, and in size it is exceeded only by Egypt and Saudi Arabia respectively. Its cultural wealth, relative political stability and success in avoiding internal ethnic conflicts distinguish it from other developing nations. The delicate balance in the Middle East currently pivots on the success of the international community's ability to thwart Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program. The development of a nuclear program in a country that openly expresses hostile intentions towards its neighbors is far from conducive to promoting peace and stability in the region. Diplomatic endeavors leading to the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) were initiated in the early period of Obama's second term in office. By November 2013, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany (P5+1) reached a preliminary agreement with Iran. By July 2015 a comprehensive accord (JCPOA) was ratified wherein Iran agreed to report on its nuclear facilities and allow access to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. In return, international sanctions on Iran were lifted. The P5+1 viewed a reintegration of Iran into the world economy as an incentive for foreign direct investment, and as a result expected a process of democratization and reforms. The long-term effectiveness of the nuclear accord was questioned by President Trump, however, and a decision was reached to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA. The perspectives of other nation states that are impacted

by the JCPOA such as Israel and Saudi Arabia have been crucial in the decision-making process of the U.S. withdrawal. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in particular has campaigned resolutely for the nullification of the accord, with the support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In September 2018 Netanyahu addressed the UN General Assembly, revealing the existence of recently confirmed (11th of November, 2019) undisclosed Iranian nuclear sites.

Historical influences on the political ambitions of modern-day Iran reveal underlying motivations that drive this country in its quest to become a significant geopolitical participant. Relevant theories such as the *resource curse*, *Thucydides* and *Institutions* theories serve as reference points (Chapter III) from which to examine Iran's transition from Western ally to a perceived regional threat, plagued by sanctions from the international community. Iran's political transition in 1979, discussed in Chapter II, is more than an expression of one elitist governmental system being replaced by another. It represents a radical ideological shift that threatens fundamental democratic principles and Western geopolitical interests. A realistic analysis is pivotal in developing a viable responsive strategy to the looming threat of Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons program. The consequences of such a proposed scenario would be detrimental to the stability and peace of the region. Iran's effort of directing attention away from popular domestic grievances to external enemies, as well as its pride in its imperial history, should be viewed as a motivation for its contemporary geopolitical ambitions. Regarding Iran as a developing nation with the overambitious aim of shifting the regional balance of power in its favor provides a pragmatic perspective of the problems inherent in its attaining its nuclear goals. Such an outcome would inevitably

strengthen theocracy, repress popular calls for democracy throughout the region, and inadvertently exacerbate the risk of a nuclear war.

## **Chapter II**

### Historical Context and Social Factors

In order to gain a deeper comprehension of the resurgence of the Islamic Republic of today, Iran's imperial history and the post-WWI period leading up to the pre-1979 Shah rule are crucial in understanding what shaped the country's foreign policy. The pride Iranians take in their rich and diverse history was exemplified in 2010, when the British Museum agreed to lend the archaeologically important Cyrus Cylinder to Iran for an exhibition at the National Museum in Tehran. This good-will gesture served as a precursor to the diplomatic talks that resulted in the 2015 comprehensive nuclear accord. The historic clay object from 600 BC, recovered in Persia by British archaeologists in 1879, sparked an unprecedented interest among Iranians. Up to a million people made the journey to view the object within only a few months, attesting to the importance placed on Persian identity and heritage (MacGregor 16:09). As articulated by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1967, the Cylinder is "the first declaration of human rights," emphasizing its long-held cultural relevance. While the Cylinder's temporary display in Tehran represented a diplomatic act of good faith and a British acknowledgement of Iran's pre-Islamic Achaemenid heritage, it became an opportunity for then President Ahmadinejad to propagate Iran's past grandeur and the current regime's respect for cultural diversity in a country with no tolerance for divergent faiths.

Much like Cyrus the Great, who established a vast multiethnic empire, so too would Ahmadinejad claim to be the champion of a diverse and tolerant reign under the Ayatollah Khamenei, its overwhelming Shiite Muslim majority notwithstanding.

The Westernization of Iran began in the years 1905-1911 as the Constitutional Revolution uprooted the country's status quo, creating a constitutional monarchy (Cleveland et al. 134). European governmental institutions served as models in the creation of the upper (Senate) and lower (Majlis) houses of Parliament. In the time leading up to and following WWI the British Empire enjoyed a sphere of influence in Persia developed by industrialist William D'Arcy, who established a lucrative partnership in an oil company with the Qajar Shah who would be awarded a mere 16% royalty of the enterprise (Axworthy 34). This deal was arguably among the most significant commercial achievements for the British Empire. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company would eventually become heavily contested, as the Majlis called for a nationalization in 1951, leading to the Abadan Crisis in which British allies began a boycott of the Iranian oil trade. These events led to a coup in 1953, instigated by a British/American alliance, ostensibly based on the conviction that the growing Soviet sphere of influence in Iran would result in communist control of its vast oil fields (Abrahamian 24). The CIA's *Operation Ajax*, which led to the coup, allowed the Shah to regain power from the democratically elected Mossadeq, eventually reaffirming British control over the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which later would become British Petroleum. The following decades of pro-West Shah rule, particularly during the White Revolution in the early 1960s, ushered in an era of socioeconomic modernization in the image of the West. Women were granted suffrage and land was redistributed to 2.5 million families (Angrist 257). These reforms provided an opportunity for Shiite clerics

to mobilize rural religious demographic groups, disgruntled with the apparent moral decline of the Americanized urban youths, under the Islamic banner. It was during the reforms of the White Revolution that Khomeini became a leading opposition voice. He would later describe these reform acts as an “American conspiracy,” setting a precedent for the type of anti-American rhetoric to which the leadership still exposes its citizens. As recently as April 2018, in accord with Khomeini, current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated that the United States’ “feet must be cut off” in the Middle East (*CNN*, par. 2).

By January 1979, following popular protests and calls for regime change, the Shah fled the country. Ayatollah Khomeini returned from his exile in France, from where he had been able to communicate his political agenda to his following. Crucially, the military announced a position of neutrality among popular protests and claims to power by interim Prime Minister Bakhtiar. The lack of support for Bakhtiar by the armed forces paved the way for the charismatic Khomeini to establish an Islamic republic through a majority vote. The 290-seat Majlis, which now oversees budgetary issues and debates legislation, is the only extant institutional remnant in government from the Shah rule, while the Supreme Leader holds absolute political power as a divinely guided ruler. Although it has reinstated universal suffrage, the clergy enforces women’s use of hijab. Iran is governed through Sharia law with a state apparatus controlled by Islamic clerics who are directly appointed by the Ayatollah. The absolute control of the Ayatollah over the government has been rendered more palatable to the international community through minor concessions designed to portray a moderate and tolerant democracy. However, careful analysis indicates that despite its attempts to

convey democracy, it remains an autocracy seeking power over its neighbors through nuclear intimidation.

Even though Iran has a semi-presidential democratic system, it is contradictorily a Sharia-based theocracy with one Supreme Leader: The Ayatollah. An unquestionable authority, he serves for life and unilaterally controls the government apparatus, including the armed forces. The distribution of power further extends to the Assembly of Experts, a company of eighty-eight men adept in interpreting Islamic law who serve eight-year terms, and to the Chief Justice whose responsibilities during his five-year term include the management of judicial institutions and the upholding of the Sharia law. The Guardian Council, a body constituting twelve members, plays an important role in the government structure in its vetting of prospective parliamentary and presidential candidates. Once approved by the Council and elected by the people, the president serves a maximum of two four-year terms, yet he may be dismissed at any given time at the behest of the Ayatollah. Given his legislative limitations, the president may be classified as head of government, rather than head of state. In this model of governance the average Iranian has little influence on political matters, except when granted voting rights in the election of pre-approved presidential candidates. Popular concerns over gender inequality, such as the forced use of hijab on women, have no political platform upon which to facilitate policy change. In February 2018, Iranian women unveiled themselves in protest, waving their scarves on sticks through the streets of Tehran. Although consolidated efforts have been made to promote civil change, the authorities have hitherto been successful in thwarting any large-scale uprising à la Arab Spring. The powerful hold of an absolute anti-West leader, who is answerable to no-one and is believed to be divinely guided, is fraught with peril. That such a dictatorship seeks to

elevate Iran's political dominance in the region through nuclear supremacy is even more disconcerting.

### **Chapter III**

#### Political Analysis

The conclusions drawn from the application of the various perspectives of political, demographic and economic theories reveal a broader and more precise representation of the volatility of Iran's current political situation, validating alarmist warnings. The theories discussed in this chapter are the *Thucydides*, *Institutions*, *Resource Curse* and *Youth Bulge* theories. Where *Thucydides* confirms the historical dangers in Iran's continual challenging of the United States, *Institutions* exposes the regime's inherently extractive and elitist design. *Resource Curse* establishes Iran's propensity to corruption originating from its geological circumstances, while *Youth Bulge* uncovers the existence of a latent social unrest from a sizable demographic group.

#### The *Thucydides* Theory

The danger of Iran's challenging existing global powers through the acquisition of nuclear capabilities lies not only in its destructive potential vis-à-vis its neighbors and the United States but in the misinterpretation of its actions that could arise due to the *Thucydides Trap*. The peril inherent in the critical time when a developing nation attempts to disrupt the balance of power was first identified by the political philosopher

Thucydides during the conflict between Sparta and Athens. This political dilemma that arises as the existing balance of power is challenged and the communication between two opposing nations breaks down refers to the heightened possibility of misinterpreting the actions of rivaling nations during this critical period. His theory has been tested by 500 years of history, during which time there have been sixteen cases when a rising power has threatened to displace a ruling one. Twelve of these instances ended in war (Allison par. 4). In the case of a confrontation with Iran it could lead the global community into a nuclear conflict should its nuclear aspirations be permitted to come to fruition. Thucydides was an Athenian historian and general. His *History of the Peloponnesian War* recounts the fifth-century BC war between Sparta and Athens. It was his objective observations of the breakdown of meaningful communication between these two opponents, and the consequential escalation of animosities into open warfare during this conflict, upon which his theory was founded. He observed the following dynamics taking place: “The *real* cause I consider to be the one that was formally kept the most out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and *the alarm this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable*” (Eckstein 760). The term *Thucydides Trap* was coined by the Harvard professor Graham Tillet Allison to describe the idea that when one state challenges an established power, “war is almost always the result” (Allison par. 1). Allison made significant analytical contributions in the 1970s to U.S. policy makers, particularly during times of crisis. His book *Remaking Foreign Policy: The Organizational Connection* was published in 1976 and influenced the foreign policy of the administration of President Carter, who took office in 1977. Although his later work mainly explores the subject matter of power-transitions in a multipolar geopolitical

landscape, the dynamics of the *Thucydides Trap* are very much applicable at a regional level to the current crisis with Iran.

### The *Institutions Theory*

During the pro-West Shah rule, Iran had relatively little bureaucratic infrastructure and no incentive to implement social institutions to serve its populace. The lavish spending of the monarch and his disdain for dissidents propounded the notion that the elites had no vested interest in the people. This lack of regard for the citizenry, coupled with the growing Western influence resulting in a perceived moral decline of the urban youths, provided an opportunity for Khomeini to lead a popular uprising from his exile in Iraq and France. In 1979, once the revolution was a reality, Ayatollah Khomeini began solidifying the government's control through the creation of a burgeoning bureaucracy. Yet, these established institutions do not include a democratized participation of Iranian citizens but are instead methodically governed by an all-encompassing government that may intervene in all matters of human existence as ordained by Islamic law. As stated in *Why Nations Fail*: "... even when extractive institutions lead to the collapse of the state ... this doesn't put a conclusive end to the rule of these institutions. We have already seen that civil wars and revolutions, while they may occur during critical junctures, do not necessarily lead to institutional change" (Acemoglu and Robinson 34). Modern-day Iran is no longer under Western influence, yet the power structure remains in the hands of an elite few with no accountability in the form of checks and balances. Although the manifestation and nature of oppression may have changed since the Iranian revolution, Acemoglu and Robinson's theory on extractive institutions applies based on a multitude of parameters.

## The *Youth Bulge* Theory

Iran is known for its ethnic diversity, deriving from its history of conquest and migratory movements. Within this diversity a greater Persian identity exists to unite the many different cultures, which include Kurds, Armenians, Turks and Lurs. Iran's main religion is Shia Islam, accounting for 99.4% of the total population, while Jewish, Zoroastrian and Christian faiths represent only 0.3% (O'Neil et al. 541). However, this religious homogeneity the country appears to be experiencing may only be a superficial phenomenon. In recent years, youths and females have protested against corruption and undelivered promises of reforms. In 2009 the killing by government forces of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who happened to be near a street protest against the alleged manipulation of a presidential referendum, caused international outrage. Iran's youth (under thirty years of age) is estimated to account for sixty-four percent of the population (Leahy et al. 18) and have been the instigators of most political demonstrations in recent years. These vociferations range from demands for gender equality and civil liberties to improved trade relations with the international community as well as to more economic opportunity. In December 2017 the government killed and arrested several protesters, resulting in a government decree of public communication restrictions as an attempt to suppress future protests (*Freedom House*, 2018). Such draconian measures speak to the degree of insecurity the regime harbors vis-à-vis the sustainability of its own future in the current form. A study by *Population Action International* reveals that an imbalance in fertility rates may correlate with civil unrest: "Between 1970 and 1999, eighty percent of all new outbreaks of civil conflicts occurred in countries in which sixty percent or more of the population was under age thirty" (Leahy et al. 22). This so-called *youth bulge*, a term invented in the mid-1990s by social

scientist Gunnar Heinsohn, may account for current and future instabilities in Iran. Such disproportionality will, according to this theory, result in larger unemployment and widespread frustration among this demographic group, creating a high susceptibility to paramilitary recruitment. There is a growing acceptance among political and social scientists that the situation of a numerous, and increasingly disgruntled youth, elevates the probability of popular uprisings, as violence may be seen as the only means of channeling such frustration (Hvistendahl 552).

### The *Resource Curse* Theory

Data from the World Bank, *Freedom House*, and political scientists Michael L. Ross and Paasha Mahdavi, as well as the analysis of Thomas Friedman, is available to interpret the intricacies inherent in the political dynamics within resource-wealthy countries. The methodology used by the aforementioned researchers and institutions applies a number of criteria to establish the level of receptiveness of a society to democratic principles. For instance, the degree to which the press is allowed to criticize political leaders is one indicator of a society's willingness to accept democratic tenets. Another is through analyzing the distribution of votes among incumbents. A disproportionately high number of votes given to one politician is a sign of election manipulation. When these and other measures have been studied, a generic marker is given. In the case of *Freedom House*, a country is categorized as either *Free*, *Partly Free*, or *Not Free*.

The study of voting patterns among incumbents has been beneficial in assessing the democratic culture of an area. The political scientist Paasha Mahdavi has collected data from different regions within Iran, developing the *resource incumbency* theory. He

notes that a correlation exists between the natural wealth of a political district and its electorate's propensity to reelect incumbents. Interestingly, Mahdavi calculates that a 1% increase in regional resource wealth increases an incumbent's probability of reelection by 3.5% (Mahdavi 1). A macro scale expression of Mahdavi's theory can be found in the globally applied *rentier* theory developed by Michael Ross. Commonly known as the *oil curse*, or the *resource curse*, it has been widely acknowledged among political scientists and internationalists alike as having validity. It establishes that nation states in possession of abundant natural resources, such as minerals and crude oil, have a higher susceptibility to corruption and dictatorship at the expense of democracy and civil rights. The determining factor that establishes whether nation states with abundant natural wealth will succumb to its corrupting influence or not can be gauged by how much diversification exists within the national economy — the broader the production and service output, the higher the likelihood of developing a democratic culture. Iran has focused on diversifying its economy in recent years, and the following was proclaimed by its minister of economy Ali Tayyebnia in 2017: "Iran's non-oil trade balance has become positive for the first time in 50 years, which means the value of our exports, even without the oil income, outweighs the import value" (*Financial Tribune* par. 2). Despite these efforts, it remains heavily reliant upon its oil and gas production which accounts for around eighty percent of its export earnings (Sokolski 238) and it ranks third on the list of largest oil producers among the OPEC countries.

Supported by Ross' research, the *rentier* theory maintains that commodity price fluctuations directly impact the social structure of any given non-diversified resource-wealthy nation. Ross' extensive study transpired from 1971 to 1997 with data gathered

from 113 countries, designing his research around a model in which he includes five causal variables that have been identified as the most significant determinants of democracy. He then introduces variables that include a state's oil and mineral wealth. Applying over 2,000 country and year observations, he finds that the anti-democratic properties of the oil and mineral variable are substantial; one standard deviation rise in oil, causes a 0.49 drop in the 1-10 scale that measures democracy (Ross 342).

Another prominent figure who recognizes the *resource curse* theory, is the investigative journalist Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*. He too has iterated the consequences of crude oil price fluctuations and the direct effect these have on the domestic policies of oil-exporting countries, referred to by him as *petrolist states*. He has argued that as the global oil price goes up, it comes at the expense of free speech, rule of law and fair elections. When the price goes down petrolist states move toward more transparency and tend to promote legal and educational institutions. Friedman notes that this dynamic occurs regardless of a country's size and geography. A common denominator of these countries is their use of payoffs to silence social demands for government accountability and transparency. Iran is no exception. Its seeming social stability is a facade maintained through coercion and bribery. As the data indicates, Iran falls into this category of states that resort to such corrupt practices. It is currently deemed as "Not Free" by *Freedom House*, scoring seventeen out of one hundred possible points ([freedomhouse.org](http://freedomhouse.org)).

## Chapter IV

### Iran's Foreign Policy and Regional Hostilities

Disputes with foreign powers over petroleum have ostensibly led the Iranian regime to pursue alternative sources of energy. Iran insists that its nuclear quest is based solely on meeting growing civilian energy demands. While Iran's nuclear program began under the Shah with the full support of the U.S. and Europe (Axworthy 380), its continuation under the Ayatollah is broadly perceived to be a disruption of the regional balance of power and a peril to world peace. Among the threats posed by Iran's potential acquisition of a nuclear weapons option, three in particular loom ominously. 1) Increasing nuclear proliferation by Iran would serve as the impetus for neighboring Middle Eastern countries to follow suit. The blatant loopholes in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty have become conspicuous since being exploited by Iran (CRS Report, 2017). As an example, countries are allowed to develop nuclear energy for alleged peaceful ends. Once a threshold has been reached, they are able to leave the treaty and initiate a nuclear weapons program, while no penal measures are imposed on a country that violates the treaty. Unless challenged, Iran will continue to provide other aspiring countries opportunities to do likewise. 2) Escalating terrorism aimed at undermining global American interests and alliances would be strengthened if Iran were to become the dominant power in the Middle East. To achieve its goals to seize power and challenge the continued U.S. military presence in the region, Iran has capitalized on the changing political climate in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the fall of Saddam Hussein, the de facto failed states of Syria, Yemen, and Libya have created a vacuum for

terrorist organizations to exploit — as exemplified by ISIS, Hezbollah, and Al-Nusra. This disintegration of political infrastructures in the region has provided new opportunities for Iran and the terrorist groups it supports. The establishment of a land bridge to Israel has brought concern to the Netanyahu administration as Iran's proxy presence in Syria and Lebanon brings it within striking distance of Tel Aviv. In a counter-move, "Israel has hit almost the entire Iranian infrastructure in Syria" (A. Lieberman, Israeli Defense Minister, 2018). Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the U.S. has designated Iran a "state sponsor of terrorism" (state.gov) and Iran's support of terrorist networks has continued, undeterred by international sanctions. 3)

Emboldened by the leveraging ability a nuclear Iran would wield over its neighbors in the Gulf, it could through coercion, sabotage or force, manipulate oil prices. By forcing oil prices higher, Iran's oil profitability would increase while the economies of other countries would be hugely disadvantaged (Sokolski 121). Higher oil prices heighten inflation and reduce economic growth. Raising the cost of oil directly impacts the prices of goods made with petroleum products and indirectly affects the price of all consumer products by increasing the cost of transportation, manufacturing and heating.

Furthermore, in line with the *rentier* theory, nation states with non-diversified economies, heavily reliant upon natural resources for income, become particularly susceptible to institutional corruption. As previously noted, the greater the dependency on revenue from oil and mineral exports, the less democratic a state becomes.

Issues seen to be threatening to a nation's survival and a disruption of the status quo have typically evoked an emotionally charged and reactive response as evidenced by the irrational perspectives that drove foreign policy during the Cold War. Is the fear of proliferation and of nuclear capability, becoming contagious in regard to the Middle

East? Conversely, is the concern that it may fall into the hands of terrorist organizations a valid one? Those who believe it is have been called alarmists, even though they regard themselves as realists. Their convictions echo Scott Sagan's argument suggesting that human frailty is likely to increase the probability of a premeditated or accidental launch. Ehud Barak, former Prime Minister of Israel, has previously stated that Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt would soon follow Iran's example, increasing exponentially the danger of a nuclear weapon falling into the hands of terrorist groups. General Isaac Ben-Israel has been generally accepted as one of the most qualified Israelis to give a measured response in the heated debate surrounding the issue of a nuclear Iran. He has made the point that a nuclear Iran will result in a volatile multipolar system that will include fanatic actors and terror organizations. A look at the JCPOA shows Iran has committed itself to cooperate with observers from the IAEA for only a relatively short time span, freeing it from any limitations in approximately twenty years. A detailed outline specifies that by 2020 Iranian arms export and import bans will lift, rendering it free to build up its military. In 2023, the UN ban relating to its ballistic missile program will end, enabling long range precision targeting. During this time, advanced centrifuge bans will begin to expire, resulting in the ability to reduce breakout time. By 2031, all nuclear-related sanctions will lift and Iran will be able to pursue and stockpile enriched uranium. Between 2036-2041, IAEA access to nuclear facilities may be denied by Tehran.

Opponents to the alarmist perspective set forth by Sagan include Kenneth Waltz. He views the inevitable nuclear proliferation among other Middle Eastern nations as a way of balancing power in the region. He believes that the expectation of dire consequences from such an outcome is unsupported by facts. He draws from historical

data to validate his opinion, arguing that Iran would not be the first country to acquire sophisticated nuclear technology without developing a bomb and points to Japan as a country with a vast civilian nuclear infrastructure. Gil Merom shares this belief that a nuclear Iran would be less of a threat than proposed (Merom 88). In analyzing the foundational premise of those voices who are deemed as moderate, it appears that they regard the motivation of countries seeking advanced weapons systems as acting from self-preservation in the face of hostile neighbors and foreign intervention. They regard the antagonistic and threatening rhetoric as further evidence of deep national insecurities. The breakout capability of a civilian nuclear system may be sufficient to assuage the need for protection and security that Iran seeks, unless Israel "continues its risky efforts at subverting Iran's nuclear program through sabotage and assassination" (Waltz par. 6), in which case Iran may conclude that a breakout capability is an insufficient deterrent.

Iran's future transition from a theocracy to a liberal democracy will not occur by strengthening its economy through the lifting of sanctions, and it must be soberly assessed whether foreign direct investment will bring about modernization and political change. It can be argued that there is time for foreign powers to support democracy and influence internal political outcomes. There are estimates that validate the argument that by 2041 reformist voices in Iran will have gained traction, and support for the Islamic regime will have waned among the country's currently large youth demographics. Scrutiny of the developments in East Germany before the fall of communism points to similar trends as those facing modern-day Iran; in this comparative case, the prospect of a liberalized economy became an organic force that prompted the citizenry to successfully call for more freedom and democracy.

In appraising the two divergent points of view, it appears that there are certain incongruities within each. The argument that future choices and outcomes can be accurately predicted by either examining the past, or by comparing it to current political agreements of other countries, such as the uneasy peace between India and Pakistan, seems fatuous. How could the disastrous attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima have been foreseen based on past events? Who could have predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall? The future remains unpredictable and the motives and agendas of others, hidden. Assuming to know the motives of others can result in taking scare tactics at face value. Through such misinterpretation, wars are initiated. There is a prevailing inclination to call opponents irrational, zealous bigots — whether in the case of Islamic nations or North Korea. This could precipitate our underestimating their brinkmanship, or overreacting to their blustering bravado. What does speak louder than rhetorical exchanges in providing insights into actual motives is an analysis of deeds and actions: In its annual *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the State Department asserts that Iran is the planet's "foremost" state sponsor of terrorism (state.gov), as it has been for many years. The report further concludes that Iran remains resolute in its backing of anti-Israel groups as well as in destabilizing already devastating conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Iran continues to recruit Shiite militia members in Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in Syria and Iraq, and its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza remains undeterred. Yet another hostile confrontation occurred when Saudi Arabia accused Iran of war crimes after a ballistic missile reportedly fired by the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels from Yemen hit near Riyadh International Airport. In response, the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir made the following statement: "... the

Kingdom reserves the right to respond in a timely manner to the hostile actions of the Iranian regime" (Wahab par. 2).

## **Chapter V**

### Efforts to Thwart Iran's Nuclear Program

Having discovered a nuclear enrichment plant at Natanz, the U.S. and Israel jointly initiated a cyber-campaign designed to access and sabotage this particular facility. It was known as *Operation Olympic Games*. In spite of efforts to isolate Iran after the Islamic Revolution, clandestine blueprint and hardware transfers took place between Iran and Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan between 1986-1989 (Laufer par. 19). This allowed Iran to quietly develop an underground enrichment facility at Natanz, in the middle of the desert. During the early stages of its development, it was declared by Iranian officials as a desert irrigation complex, even though Israeli intelligence suggested otherwise. In response to this activity, the U.S. developed alternatives for dealing with such a perceived threat — one of which was a cyber option. Through an extensive multinational operation between the CIA, U.S. Cyber Command, NSA, Mossad, and the Israeli Unit 8200, the U.S. took cyber warfare to unprecedented levels. The *Olympic Games* virus, popularly known as *Stuxnet*, targets programmable logic controllers (Kesler 22) which are linked to physical equipment such as pumps, valves and motors. These often control power plants and other critical infrastructure such as air traffic control, telecommunications, financial services and health care facilities. The virus has the ability to autonomously probe which controllers to manipulate by checking

for specific operating systems to infect. Capable of shutting down critical infrastructure in entire countries, it was designed to specifically infiltrate the operating systems used in Natanz. Through tests on centrifuges collected from Libya, its capability of inducing measured destruction to the rotor tubes was confirmed. In the case of Natanz, Iranian manufactured frequency converters were targeted. Individual centrifuges were attacked, generating an uncontrollable spin that exceeded the safe operating speed of 63,000, to 80,000 rpm, which caused their metallic parts to shatter, rendering them useless (Ranjbar). IAEA inspectors have been documenting the breakdown of these centrifuges, and their periodic reports confirmed the malfunction. 984 centrifuges were believed to be neutralized throughout 2009, slowing down Tehran's enrichment program (Kesler 21). However, a modification in the malware caused it to be overly aggressive, exposing the introduction of a virus within its operating system. Instead of slowing down Iran's nuclear development, *Operation Olympic Games* inadvertently became a political weapon for Tehran to use against the United States during a time in which JCPOA negotiations were underway. Where the U.S. may previously have been able to leverage the failure in the Natanz systems, it now became accused of aggression, impairing its credibility in the P5+1 negotiations.

According to the theories previously discussed, and as general developments in the Middle East seem to suggest, Iran may soon be reaching a critical point at which its populace will deem the government unable to provide the human rights they feel they deserve. Due to the United States' withdrawal from the accord and its reinstating of pre-JCPOA sanctions, Iran's economy has been adversely impacted. To disincentivize foreign investors, the U.S. has issued an ultimatum that it will no longer trade with countries that invest in Iran. In addition, because the regime continues to maintain its

espionage activities against international organizations conducting business within its borders, it provides little reason for potential investors to risk a venture. Those opposed to the lifting of sanctions against Iran suspect that an economically stronger Iran will be emboldened to escalate militant activities and expand its sphere of influence. Since the implementation of the JCPOA Iran's oil export has increased from 1.1 to 2.1 million barrels per day from 2014 to 2017 (*Statista*, 2018). The estimated release of \$100-150 billion in asset freeze, coupled with the increase in oil revenues, has allowed Iran to increase its funding to terrorist groups and continue its pursuit of perpetuating proxy wars in the region.

The 2011 wave of revolution throughout the Middle East and North Africa serves as a prognosis that domestic unrest is likely to precipitate regime change. Shifting focus away from proxy conflicts, rivalry with Saudi Arabia and hostilities towards Israel (Merom 89) and instead meeting the demands of its citizens and investing in its youth may prove to be a more prudent approach to secure its future. A reintegration into the world economy is possible only if Iran produces political reforms and ceases its destructive pursuit of nuclear capabilities. It is a multilayered problem when one country's actions threaten not only the many factions of its own citizenry, but the social safety and economic wellbeing of other nations.

## Chapter VI

### Comparative Approaches by U.S. Administrations

Governments apply differing strategies in their pursuit of diplomatic solutions. Likewise, the political theories on which these are based are varied. To assess which foreign policy would be the most expedient it is necessary to determine its desired outcome. It is reasonable to assume that the U.S. government has as its main concern the welfare and safety of its citizens and the safeguarding of the founding democratic principles upon which the United States has been established. Secondary considerations include maintaining the security of allied states. Past administrations have sought to actively discredit opposing ideologies. This was emphasized in the Cold War era when the United States engaged in open confrontation with threats of invading ideologies from the Soviet Union.

Another strategy that was utilized towards the end of the Cold War era, was the covert encouraging of countries towards desirable behavioral patterns. On a global institutional scale, one example of such incentivizing has been through measures taken by international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank against countries that do not live up to the behavioral standards of the prevailing international liberal order. Whether exerting any excessive influence on foreign states is indeed moral may be debatable. However, it is reasonable to surmise that most citizenries would prefer to live with a certain degree of freedom and dignity. If provided with the appropriate circumstances, they would likely embrace such a liberal model as the one the global community has come to adopt since Bretton-Woods.

The diplomatic approach of the Obama administration has ostensibly been one of dialogue and diplomacy, attempting to reach compromises in situations where it seems impossible to find a mutually acceptable solution. An example of this philosophy is found in the formulation of the JCPOA. Based on *rentier* theory data, revealing the relationship between oil prices and democracy, coupled with the *youth bulge* theory, steps were taken to ensure a strategy that would allow foreign direct investment in the Iranian market, theoretically leading to more openness and democracy, as has been solicited by Iranian youths. As part of the nuclear accord, the IAEA's approval of Iranian nuclear facilities granted it increasing incremental concessions — an outcome viewed by critics as undesirable. The main concern skeptics had of this ambiguous agreement is the lack of acknowledgement from the P5+1 of the continual global threat posed by Iran. Founded on an anti-Western Islamic ideology that has openly proclaimed its animosity towards the U.S. and its allies, Iran has continued to violate the JCPOA even before it became de facto nullified by the present administration. Given the weekly rhetorical attacks on the U.S. and Israel through both political and religious institutions, the allowance of Iran to pursue its stated goals by 2031 renders the JCPOA counterproductive to U.S. interests. As long as the regime continues to undermine these interests, it must be considered inimical.

A notable difference between the Obama administration's diplomatic approach to problematic political situations and that of the Trump administration, can be seen in Trump's firm position in dealing with Iran's blatant support of terrorism against the U.S. and its allies. There has been a conspicuous absence of Trump-instigated *détente* as a solution to pander to those segments of the international community promoting Islamic fundamentalism. The Trump administration has not only been staunchly

opposed to the Iranian nuclear deal but has additionally not hesitated to alienate U.S. allies with an aggressive stance against Iran (Mohseni et al. par. 1). On the 20th of June 2019, an attack by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard on a U.S. drone in international airspace occurred, marking another unprovoked act of aggression on the part of Tehran. As recently as the 11th of November 2019, the IAEA traced uranium particles at an undeclared site previously brought to the attention at the UN General Assembly by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (*BBC* par. 1). These attacks are indicative of its disregard for stability and cooperation in the region and such aggression and covert hostility are confirmation that the regime's main objective is its pursuit of ideological hegemony and regional instability.

## **Chapter VII**

### Conclusion

My realizations iterated in the *Commentary* section in developing foreign policy as pertaining to the Iranian regime consider the following: Firstly, the radical religion Tehran espouses and enforces is being used as a means to further its geopolitical ends. It provides the populace with the dignity of a theocratic identity and reduces others by condemning them as infidels. Given this polarizing stance propagated by the government and the Islamic ideology it embraces, the more direct and overt opposition is directed at Iran, the more it is strengthened in its disruptive and destructive resolve. Secondly, the polarizing and radical nature of the regime cannot easily be incentivized by concessions. The deliberately cultivated self-righteousness and the self-importance

bestowed by past grandeur instills a sense of entitlement that views concessions as its right, and diplomacy as a sign of weakness. The lack of transparency and the duplicity with which it has approached geopolitical negotiations may have succeeded to lull the international community into complacency, but the threat to the region as well as to world peace that Iran poses should not be underestimated. Decisive action from the global community to curb its growing aggression, is most definitely required.

### Commentary

The inevitability of misunderstandings, as suggested by the *Thucydides* theory, particularly piqued my interest. The question arose as to how such a breakdown of communication can be such a foregone conclusion. In examining the issue, I came to the realization that regardless of how objective a decision-making process in the midst of a conflict seeks to be, a margin of human error will always interfere with absolute certainty. Secondly, I find that human nature obscures the level of maturity from which an opponent operates, that the tendency exists to gauge the motives of another at the same developmental level as our own. For purposes of discussion, I shall call it the *Search for Uniformity* hypothesis. One definition of the term *superpower* as assigned to certain influential nations throughout history is: "... a country that has the capacity to project dominating power and influence anywhere in the world, and sometimes, in more than one region of the globe at a time, and so may plausibly attain the status of global hegemon" (Miller par. 4). Because a superpower nation should by definition be able to exert a global multi-faceted influence, a certain level of sophistication is needed. A

developing nation such as Iran, seeking dominance on the global stage still lacks the sophistication of such required maturity born of geopolitical experience. The inevitable misunderstanding that arises originates from the emerging nation *under*-estimating the superpower and the existing superpower *over*-estimating the motives and capabilities of the rising nation (the *Search for Uniformity* hypothesis). An example of such a volatile and potentially explosive situation occurring, can be found in the recent crises between North Korea and the United States. Given these factors, it is therefore reasonable to expect that a misunderstanding will arise during attempts to challenge an existing superpower. I am of the opinion that nation states can be regarded, for purposes of evaluation, as individuals. They are populated by human beings and therefore have the collective psyche of, and behave as, an individual human being. The basic emotions of fear, pain, self-preservation, aggression, and greed thus act as motivating forces for nations in the same way as they do for individuals. If opposing nations can be seen to be motivated by these primal forces, the origins of their actions can more easily be assessed. The braggadocio of Kim Jong-un, for instance, can then be regarded not as the tirade of a psychologically unstable tyrant, but as a voice for a damaged and fearful nation whose previous humiliating military defeat in the Korean War left it bereft of any national pride. The problematic aspirations of a despotic Iranian theocracy should likewise be considered from such a perspective. The disparity in the per capita income in nations where wealth is diversified vis-à-vis those resource-rich nations where wealth is hoarded by the elite, has the potential of creating civil unrest and open rebellion — particularly considering the *youth bulge* phenomenon. The dissatisfaction of a poverty-stricken and suppressed populace evokes self-preservation (one of the primal motivations of man) within the already highly socially controlling and domineering

theocracy. In order to direct a disgruntled nation's sense of injustice away from domestic affairs, it has proven expedient to channel the resentment into anti-Western sentiments through propaganda. The support that has been given to terrorist groups by Iran has most certainly antagonized the global community at large, but it has strengthened anti-Western attitudes and assisted the Ayatollah's attempt to direct attention away from internal inequity by cultivating extranational scapegoats. This diversionary ploy exploits the innate tendency of man to validate his own level of existence by the reduction of unattainable excellence in another. If the United States can be reduced through hostile disinformation campaigns, the poverty within this subjugated society would seem less conspicuous.

Political science needs to consider not only the tried and tested political theories it generally relies upon, but equally so the psychological motivations that drive demographic groups in search of dignity. The depth of this desire was demonstrated by the overwhelming interest shown by Iranians in the Cyrus Cylinder. If once great nations have to find their dignity in their past, they may be tempted to overstep and overreach their present realistic capacities. Devising foreign policy strategies on both behaviorist as well as political theories, provides a more comprehensive vantage point from which to gauge motives and predict possible future outcomes.

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