

# **Global Powers and Iran's Nuclear Issue: The Case For Empire Building**

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## Introduction

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran experienced a constitutional revolution, the coup d'état of Mohammed Mossadegh assisted by the United States and United Kingdom. Nearly thirty years later the Iranian Revolution of 1979 displaced the autocratic, pro-Western Shah and installed a theocratic Islamic Republic. It occurred as a result of an autocratic leader who mismanaged the economy while being under an American imperialist agenda. Iran is a reactionary theocracy with an indigenous nuclear program that openly challenges the status quo in the Middle East and acts as a counterforce to Israel – its greatest competitor in the region. Current discourses fail to accommodate the role of American imperialism in understanding Iran's nuclear program. This paper goes beyond the realist discussion and investigates the imperialistic factors for Western relations to Iran. This paper will argue that Iran and its nuclear program symbolize defiance towards American imperialism, and that symbol has become problematic, as it has caused negative, irrevocable implications for an isolated Iran. This is to say that while Iran has been attempting to spread its influence in the world, the West has reacted via its nuclear program to weaken the Islamic Republic. The central difficulty for state actors in the Middle East that are aligned with the West is the challenge posed by Iran's growing influence in the region. Militant groups that challenge Israel and are anti-imperialist are covertly funded by the Islamic Republic. Iran's influence is also seen in countries like Lebanon and Syria through formal state support, and the funding of Islamic groups that aim towards challenging Zionism and Western presence in the region. This paper will be divided into several sections that explore the contentious relationship between great and regional powers and Iran. It will additionally explore the causes, reasons, and motives for state belligerency and bellicosity on both sides using the theme of imperialism. The first section offers a brief précis of the causes and motives for regime change

during the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi and the subsequent radical shift in policy towards the West following the ascension of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini under an anti-imperial approach. Additionally, there has been no evidence of any belligerency in Iran's nuclear program, and that its development as a nuclear state has generated national pride and exerted considerable regional influence. The second section deals with Israel's fear of Iran and its nuclear program as a regional competitor, threatening Israel's role vis-à-vis U.S. imperialism. This section notably deals with the threat the nuclear program and Iran has on imperial holdings of the West in the region. The third section analyzes the new developments that have been undertaken by the United States and International organizations, which propagate American imperialism towards Iran. This suggests that waning American power has induced the Obama administration to abandon Bush's post 9/11 new Middle East agenda and use diplomacy to engage in rapprochement with Iran.

#### Iran Before and After 1979

Historically, Iran during the post-World War II era can be characterized in three phases. The first phase was the nationalization attempts by the government of Mohammad Mossadegh and the subsequent coup d'état that was orchestrated by the West. Mossadegh came to power after the first Shah's deposition and instituted a series of state-led models of development. He sought modernization and creation of national identity be constructed through shaking off their colonial past (Gelvin 2011: 295). The theme of constant external influence has created precedent in Iran's current anti-imperial behaviour. Mossadegh engaged in economic development through seizing foreign assets and using the revenues to foster growth at the expense of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The Churchill and Eisenhower administrations decided to overthrow Iran's government through MI6 and the CIA, installing Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi as absolute monarch. This solidified Iran as a Western imperial holding and against the perceived threat of communist forces in the region (Kressin, 1991: 135-7). Under the Shah, Iran experienced considerable socioeconomic development made possible by oil revenues. Abrahamian (1980) notes that in 1953, oil revenues totalled less than \$34 million and by 1977 totalled almost \$20 billion. However, these massive revenues at the time were lavishly spent to increase the influence of the Shah and not on the population (Abrahamian 1980: 21-2). Similarly, while economic development coincided with modernization, it was the "capitalist method of

modernization” that benefitted the upper class rather than the rest of society (Abhramanian 1980: 23). Gilbert Achcar (2013) in his recently published book, *The People Want*, explores the underlying causes for the Arab Spring. His contributions on the peculiar modalities of capitalism where fettered development can be utilized using the Iranian example. He states that:

The peculiar modality of the capitalist mode of production – a mix of patrimonialism, nepotism, and crony capitalism, pillaging of public property, swollen bureaucracies, and generalized corruption, against a background of great sociopolitical instability ...it is the modality that is fettering the region’s development (Achcar 2013: 74).

While Achcar writes on the causes of the Arab Uprising in 2013, the same rhetoric can be applied to Iran before the 1979 Revolution. The disenfranchisement of the general population was due to the peculiar modalities where the state is characterised as rentier and patrimonial. In a rentier state, like pre-Revolution Iran, the state procured revenue from oil through rents on land and not through labour (Achcar 2013: 54-5). Additionally, a patrimonial state is the “absolute heredity type of autocratic power,” appropriating power for the armed forces and not the state itself. This is enabled by massive rents through oil wealth, shared mainly between the bureaucracy and upper class (Achcar 2013: 58). The correlation between Achcar’s contributions can be found within Gelvin’s description of Iran under the Shah. Many Iranians were angered by the fact that the Shah’s family benefited most from the oil revenues with their personal wealth ranging from \$5 to \$20 billion dollars (Gelvin 2011: 297). The Iranian nuclear program was a product of the enormous spending by the Shah and was initiated with help and encouragement of the United States. Using the vast amounts of wealth appropriated from the oil revenues, Iran, with the help of the United States, developed its nuclear infrastructure and strengthened American strategic interests (Kamrava, 2012: 227). The Ford administration initiated plans that were subsequently cancelled and then revived by the Carter administration to assist the Shah in building 23 nuclear reactors to gain the capacity to generate 23,000 megawatts of electricity through nuclear power (Wright 2010: 243, Katouzian 2008: 159). Correspondingly, Israel’s pro-Iran policy before 1979 was, according to Donald Neff (1991), extensive and close. Israel scheduled surface-to-surface missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead to be delivered in 1979 as well as provided assistance in dealings with the United States in return for oil (Neff,

1991: 24). With the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran's nuclear program was put on hold, protracted, and seclusion occurred. This shows that external assistance was a large factor in the development of Iran's nuclear capability.

Post-Revolutionary Iran sought to revive its nuclear program with the assistance of Germany, France, and other European countries. However, this support was blocked by American pressure (Kamrava 2012: 229). Subsequently, Iran sought assistance from Russia and China, but met with hindrance by the United States. Iran's policy on nuclear power is centred around the need for a new energy policy aimed at improving energy efficiency; that is, making that energy more dependable, safe, and reducing reliance on environmentally damaging sources of energy like oil (Katouzian 2008: 163). Therese Delpech states that Iran has several goals in mind with respect to its nuclear program: civilian purposes; bargaining tools against the United States and Europe; and, creating a deterrence which would neither imply developing a weapon nor using it (Delpech 2007: 9-15). Delpech's work does not go to the lengths Kamrava's does, as the latter provides a more in-depth investigation on the economic, technological, political, ideological and cooperation prospects for the program. Iranian nuclear ambitions are predicated on the need to reduce consumption of fossil fuels; harness indigenous mastery of the nuclear program while aiming for advancement; strength and scientific progress, bolstering Iranian pride, which is buttressed on a long, proud history; challenging Western imperialism, and, growing cooperation with international organizations aimed at creating transparency and avoiding confrontation (Kamrava 2008: 231-4). While there is no proof that Iran has developed weapons-grade nuclear enrichment, nor any desired intention to build one, there remains a high degree of tension with Western powers, Russia, China, and international organizations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, it must be noted that the majority of the countries that are members of the Non-Aligned Movement have supported Iran's independent nuclear program. Many socialists also critique the Western imperial encroachment in Iran's sovereign right to attain civilian nuclear capabilities under the NPT section (Katouzian 2008: 164).

#### U.S. Imperialist Interests in the Region

Western imperial ambitions in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have used the state of Israel as an outpost of capitalism, and have been able to use Israel to protect their economic and strategic

interests. Iran seeks to become a dominant force in the Middle East through expanding its influence at the expense of Western imperialism and by extension, Israel. This suggests that the indigenous nuclear program of Iran, with all its commitments to international organizations, threatens American and Israel economic and security interests in the region. With the increasingly clear view that oil plays a major role in the development of the industrial foundation of modern capitalism, imperial national security coincides with energy needs. Therefore, Iran's position as being belligerent against an imperial agenda threatens the status quo; economic viability and security in the region. Imperial holdings of the West are threatened by independent states who aim for resistance in the region. The Bush administration's desire to establish a new Middle East policy culminated in the invasion of both Afghanistan and Iraq. Similar intentions are portrayed to outsiders of the American economic sphere in the Middle East. As Majidi explains, "[t]he imperialists' dream is what Condoleezza Rice recently termed the 'new Middle East' – a region where no independent state or popular resistance movement exists, and where key resources are all controlled by transitional corporations" (Majidi 2006). Iran has presented a significant threat to Israel and by extension American imperialism through venturing outside the bounds that imperialists deem permissible for oppressed nations (Majidi 2006). Iranian policy of resistance has become a significant source of influence and power in the region as well as against American-Israeli occupation and aggression. Israel as a capitalist outpost for the West into the Middle East has implicated Iran's hegemonic ambitions, and, by extension, its nuclear program. Therefore, no other state in the region should have more cause for concern. In what follows, this discussion describe the historical role of Israel in the region and Iran's role in the region post-Revolution.

The term imperialism is hotly contested across academia. William Tabb's contributions to understanding the definition of imperialism and the American example seem appropriate enough to entail. He states:

Imperialism is the system by which a dominant power is able to control the trade, investment, labor, and natural resources of other peoples, it takes different forms in different stages of capitalism development and has elements in common with the imperium of ancient empires (Tabb 2006).

According to Abu-Mannah Bashir (2006) imperialism helped the construction of Israel. Additionally, any discussion on Israeli relations with the rest of the Middle East cannot be understood without considering the role of Western powers (Bashir 2006: 3). Israel is unique in the Middle East because it is financed by Western imperialism without being economically exploited by it. Bashir makes the correlation that Israel is a Zionist colonial project that is directly aligned with Western interests, and that its state structure and colonial nature is furthered by the West while meeting Israel's own objectives and strategies in the region (Bashir 2006: 3). Western interests in the region pertain to the constant flow of oil from Arab countries with Israel acting as an outpost. As noted above, oil imperialism and the oil dependency of the West pressured the constant flow of oil from the Arab periphery to the core countries as industrialization required oil and formed the foundation of modern advanced capitalism (Lichtman 2002: 128). During the Cold War the United States used Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran under the Shah to preserve its economic interests and provide a bulwark for anti-communism. The Nixon administration used this tripartite of states to preserve Western interests and provide policing for imperialism in the region (Khanna 2008: 229, Logevall 2008: 26).

What American imperialism wants from Iran is described Hooshiyar's piece in *Socialist Project*. In his article entitled *Iran, Globalization, and the US imperialist Agenda in the Middle East*, Hooshiyar argues that American imperialist ambitions go beyond the scope of Iran's nuclear program or its staunch support for militant group. It is primarily a desire to have Iran become a neo-colonial possession, vis-à-vis regime change (Hooshiyar 2006: 34). He states it precisely in the following statement:

It is only under conditions of absolute compliance that you will be considered a friend of the USA ... The main quarrel with Iran is not just over Iran's attempt to build nuclear weapons or its support for Hamas, Hizbollah, Islamic Jihad, or resistance forces in Iraq. It is more than Iran's unwillingness to recognize the government of Israel. And it is definitely not Iran's total disrespect for human rights or its barbaric repression of the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people that lies at the source of the conflict. Even if Iran were to become a democracy tomorrow, recognize Israel, condemn terrorism, relinquish its drive for nuclear weapons, and withdraw its support for the groups on the U.S. 'terrorist list,' ... As one observer of Iran-U.S. relations recently pointed out: "About

the only way Iran would become a 'friend' of the U.S. would be if it became a vassal state, a la Afghanistan and, more recently, Iraq" (Hooshiyar 2006: 34).

While Hooshiyar's statement above is factual, in that American imperialism desires absolute cooperation from in order to solve the long running conflict between the two, the nuclear program is underestimated. Ideologically, Iran's nuclear policy is a symbol of changing the status quo in the region and growing resistance. "The Iranian policy of resistance and attaining its legitimate rights, according to Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) provisions, is somehow derived from the concept of resistance to the encroachment of foreign powers" (Kamrava, 2012: 233).

### Fading U.S. Imperialism and Rise of New Powers

The 9/11 rhetoric of empire building during the Bush administration has proven to be problematic and unsustainable in maintaining American led imperialism. Thoughts on the decline of American hegemony and its relative power in the world have begun as the economic prowess of India, China and Russia gain momentum. The strategy of the Obama administration has been towards shifting foreign policy aims from the Middle East to Asia. However, Iran is perceived to pose one of the greatest threats to its imperial economic survival in the region. Similarly, Gulf coast Arabian states, Jordan, Egypt, and, most notably, Israel have also expressed their fears as neocolonial patron states. The Islamic Republic in the meanwhile continues to develop its nuclear program which complies with IAEA standards and monitoring. However, the Iranian government has continued to lambast Israel as Zionist entities with no possibility of Israeli recognition in the near future. This section argues that in order for the United States to maintain its dominance in the region, it has begun a period of rapprochement. This coincides with the rise of Chinese and Russian economic interests whom have begun seeking their own circles and ensuring their own oil supply from the region. There is a possibility of accommodation and negotiation between the West and Iran regarding the nuclear program. This has been particularly evident during the Obama administration and the recently elected government of Hassan Rouhani. In essence, rapprochement and mediation with Iran seems to be in the interest of protecting and preserving Western imperial interests in the region.

The nuclear program has facilitated the Islamic Republic's access to nuclear energy and economic growth. According to Kamrava, the nuclear program has also enabled Iran to master indigenous knowledge of nuclear technology, which is directly correlated to national progress, pride and prestige (Kamrava, 2012: 229). "The embodiment of progress and regional and international prestige for Iran, as the nuclear program has become a symbol of national unity, the country's desire for development and advancement, as well as resistance to foreign powers' unacceptable demands" (Kamrava, 2012: 229). This national pride and prestige is derived ideologically as it views Western animosity towards Iran's nuclear program cynically. The purpose of the nuclear program for Iran also derives from a desire to change the global status quo, which can be characterized largely by American led capitalist expansion. Iran's ideological confrontation with the West also stems from repeated attempts by outsider forces to impose its own imperial rule. For example, the imperialism experience in Qajar Iran by Russian and Great Britain (Abrahamian 1979: 395) the ousting of Mossadegh by covert forces of the United Kingdom and the United States, the imposition of the autocratic Shah as a client of the United States, and Israeli and Western support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War has forced Iran to challenge the world order, develop indigenous capabilities, and expand its influence across the region to safeguard itself.

The United States and its Western allies has sought rapprochement towards Iran and its nuclear program during the Obama administration on the account of several reasons. First, declining American influence in the world relative to other rising powers, notably the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China), have made the United States, and its imperial ambitions, rethink its grand strategy in the region. Second, states who have asserted publicly that American unilateralism and empire building is an obstacle for an ideal world order have begun to rise relative to American power. While China and Russia have collaborated with the United States on a number of issues pertaining to Iran on watered down sanctions and Security Council Resolutions, they have their own imperial ambitions. Over the last few decades China has forged close links with Iran due to China's insatiable energy needs in order to remain economically salient. China has remained vital for Iran to preserve an 'oriental alternative' towards rapprochement with the West. Delpech (2007) argues that China will remain a de facto close ally with Iran. Additionally, China has sought closer relationships with oil producing states like Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Sudan, and Zimbabwe for its energy needs and in 2004 signed a \$70 billion



dollar contract to purchase Iranian oil and gas (Delpech 2007: 50). While China has ended all direct cooperation with respect to Iran's nuclear program, indirect cooperation through China's ally Pakistan cannot be ruled out (Delpech 2007: 51). The United States policy on Iran-related secondary sanctions has also created tension with China which needs Iran's oil purchases to maintain its economic growth. Under the World Trade Organization (WTO), a signatory may restrict trade with another country under national security issues, but there is no legal basis for one state to impose sanctions against another state that conducts trade with a third country (Leverett 2012). These extraterritorial sanctions are designed to prevent foreign individuals or companies from conducting activities that US primary sanctions seek to prohibit by imposing various penalties such as limiting their access to the American market (Ferrari, 2012). The Obama administration has been able to collaborate with Congress to enact these secondary sanctions and has created tension with the administration's dealings with China (Leverett, 2012). China however, states that "its oil imports from Iran are fully reasonable and legitimate and do not violate any relevant UN Security Council resolutions" (Luan, 2012).

Russia has had a long and problematic relationship with Iran. From Qajar era, imperialist competition with Great Britain (Abrahamian 1979: 395), to military arms supplying and nuclear technology expertise during the 1990s, Russia has been relatively ambiguous on Iran's nuclear program following growth of intense scrutiny against the Islamic Republic. Cooperation between Russia and the United States has led to Iran harshly criticizing Russia for bowing to American imperial maneuvers in the region. Due to the escalating tensions over Iran's nuclear program with the West, Russia has halted arms delivery under a 2007 contract. Iran has therefore initiated a \$4 billion dollar lawsuit over a broken 2007 contract which has damaged their relationship (Strokan 2012). Delpech follows along a different argumentative path stating that Russia sees Iran as an important partner in the Middle East for Russia's future growth. Additionally, such relationship must be built with Iran that can control its intransigent behaviour (Delpech 2007: 47).

### Conclusion

This essay has explored reasons for Western apprehension towards an Iran that possesses a burgeoning nuclear program. The role the West plays in the Middle East is one of imperial ambitions of equating energy acquisition, particularly of the vast oil resources to national

security. Iran has attempted to change the status quo of the region, challenge American dominance in the region, while threatening its many neighbours with the fear of a possible arms race in the region. This essay argues that Iran and its indigenous nuclear program is a source of national pride that has branched out to regional aspirations to create hegemony. It has become a symbol of anti-American imperialism, but has been met with apprehension that threatens the future viability of the region.

Sanctions in place during the last decade have not harmed the Islamic Republic in the way the West hoped to achieve. With continued defiance in halting its nuclear program and uranium enrichment, Iran has even furthered its nuclear capabilities and has grown tremendously. The implications are being felt however, by the common people in Iran. United Nation Security Council resolutions 1747, 1803, 1929, 1984 and 2049 as well as non-UN mandated sanctions against Iran have severely restricted economic development and trade with several of their once very strong trade partners like the European Union. Sanctions have also made access to Iranian oil, a vital source of their economic development, difficult. Oil exports have subsequently decreased in recent years from 2.5 million barrels per day to 1 million barrels per day (Gardner 2013). Most importantly, the plunging of the Iranian Rial has had a negative consequence for the Iranian people making the cost of basic goods rise. Tensions in the region have also been exacerbated by Iran's nuclear program. The sanctions placed on Iraq following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait until his downfall in 2003 illustrate the devastating effect of sanctions. It devastated the lives of millions of Iraqis, life expectancy lowered, and quality of life declined, with the spread of malnutrition, lack of medical supplies, and unclean water. Average per capita income dropped from \$3,510 to \$450 in just six years (Azadian 2012).

Western imperialism through American pressure, and Chinese and Russian compliance has been devastating to the Iranian economy and its people. A long history of subjugation by imperialist powers has created an *ethos* carried by the Mullahs who detest any outside interference in Iranian politics. The United States has been extremely hypocritical towards the Iranian nuclear program, while Iran has provided cooperation to the IAEA and is guaranteed to produce a civilian nuclear program under NPT article IV (Non-Proliferation). Western assistance to Israel and its nuclear weapons ambitions to create nuclear opacity and support for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, these states are not parties to the NPT treaty and are not subject to

IAEA inspections (Kamrava 2012: 201). The United States must let Iran practice its sovereign right to nuclear enrichment for civilian and medical purposes. The new deal with the p5+1 powers and Iran came to an agreement that key parts of Iran's nuclear program will be frozen in exchange for temporary relief on economic sanctions placed by the Security Council (Gearan 2013). This enables some form of enrichment according to President Rouhani while engaging with the West. Similarly, this suggests that fading American imperial power has made American foreign policy react more realistically. However, this also signifies that Iran desires to be inclusive with the world community, and that the United States desires Iran to be within its economic sphere in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Issues of commitment still remain. In 2010, the United States voiced deep concern on a possible deal to send 1,200 kilograms of low enriched uranium to Iran in return for reactor fuel (Reuters 2010).

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