

# Revisiting the Iranian Nuclear Dilemma: A Study of 2002-2009 Developments

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## Abstract

This study revisits the development of Iran's nuclear program as progressed under distinct political regimes since August 2002, seeking to demonstrate that the international condemnation of Iranian nuclear ambitions stems from Western antipathy to the perceived nature of the Iranian regime rather than Tehran's lack of compliance with technical non-proliferation terms. This study will examine the perceived political character of the Iranian regime between 2002-2005 and 2005-2009, with a focus on the correlation between President Ahmadinejad's 2005 rise to power, and the passage of multiple United Nations Security Council (UNSCR) sanctions regimes invoking UN Charter Chapter VII. When thus viewed in a more comprehensive political context covering periods of progressive and conservative political leadership, the resulting escalation of international diplomatic tensions between 2002-2005 and 2005-2009 appears to indicate a distinctly perceptual rather than material crisis vis-à-vis the international position on the Iranian nuclear program.

**Keywords:** Iran's Foreign Policy, Nuclear programme, Diplomacy, Sanctions.

## İran Nükleer İkilemi:

### 2002-2009 Arasında Yaşanan Gelişmeler Üzerine Bir Çalışma

#### Öz

Ağustos 2002'den bu yana İran'ın farklı siyasi rejimler dâhilinde gelişen nükleer ikilemini bir kez daha ele alan bu çalışmanın amacı, İran'ın nükleer heveslerine yönelik uluslararası kınamanın, Tahran'ın uluslararası silahsızlanma anlaşmalarına yönelik uzlaşmaz tavrından ziyade Batı'nın İran'daki rejime karşı duyduğu antipatiden kaynaklandığını göstermektir. Çalışma, İran'daki rejimin 2002-2005 ve 2005-2009 yılları arasındaki siyasi karakterinin algılanış şeklini incelerken,

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Ahmedinejat'ın 2005'te devlet başkanı oluşu ile BM Şartları VII'ye destek niteliğindeki çok sayıda BM Güvenlik Konseyi yaptırım uygulamasının kabulü arasındaki ilinti üzerine yoğunlaşmaktadır. Tüm bunlar saldırgan ve muhafazakâr yönetim dönemlerini de ele alacak şekilde kapsamlı bir siyasi çerçevede incelendiğinde, artan uluslararası diplomatik gerginliğin fiziksel değil algısal bir kriz olduğu görülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler :** İran Dış Politikası, Nükleer Program, Diplomasi, Yaptırımlar.

### معضلة البرنامج النووي الإيراني: دراسة حول التطورات المتوالية في الاعوام 2002 - 2009

بقلم : محجوب زويري

تهدف هذا الدراسة الى تحليل وإعادة تقييم التطورات التي أحاطت بالبرنامج النووي الإيراني منذ اغسطس عام 2002 ، والتي تدفع باتجاه تحويل الموضوع برمته الى معضلة دولية. تسعى الدراسة الى تقديم فرضية جديدة تركز على أن الموقف الدولي المتشدد من ايران وبرنامجها النووي انما يعود الى الى التصور السلبي الغربي حول النظام السياسي الإيراني وطبيعته ، وان الملف النووي الإيراني في الحقيقة لا يبدو الا كمفردة في ملف علاقة الغرب مع ايران.

تتناول الدراسة تحليل تأثير طبيعة النظام السياسي في ايران على تطورات الملف النووي الإيراني لا سيما العلاقة مع الغرب خلال السنوات 2002 - 2009 ، وتركز الدراسة كذلك على التصعيد الذي بدأ منذ تولي الرئيس الإيراني محمود احمدي نجاد. والذي ارتبطت رئاسته بصدور حزم متعددة من العقوبات الاقتصادية الدولية التي استهدفت الاقتصاد والنظام المالي الإيراني. تركز الدراسة ايضا على طريقة اداء المجتمع الدولي في التعامل مع الملف النووي الإيراني في ظل تولي كل من القوى الاصلاحية والقوى المحافظة.

كلمات دالة: سياسة ايران الخارجية، الغرب، البرنامج النووي. الدبلوماسية. العقوبات.

## **Introduction**

**T**he last seven years have seen a growing concern over Iran's nuclear program, and an escalation of tensions between Tehran and Western powers. Although the Iranian government has claimed its nuclear program serves only peaceful purposes, the prospect of a potentially destabilizing nuclear Iran has led some Western powers to consider a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Iran's nuclear program has however been in place for some time, and without causing today's international controversy. Iran's nuclear program began in 1967, when the country received a US research reactor as part of the Atoms for Peace agreement signed by Reza Shah Pahlevi and the Eisenhower administration in 1957. Although Iran's nuclear program halted after the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iranian president Rafsanjani restarted it after the death of the Ayatollah, causing the US to unilaterally impose the Iran-Libya Sanction Act of 1996. This piece of legislation shows that although Iran's nuclear program was seen as a problem, it was not considered a pressing concern, an attitude possibly attributable to Iran's compliance with IAEA safeguards and NPT treaty obligations.

This however changed in 2002. Following a report from the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) revealing uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz, Iran's nuclear program quickly became one of the most important international concerns in the Middle East. As such, this study will revisit the Iranian nuclear program as advanced under distinct regimes between 2002 – 2009, focusing on initial Iranian political concessions, and the alienating rhetoric of revolutionary neoconservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad prompting Israeli threats of pre-emptive military strikes and UN sanctions invoking UN Charter Chapter VII terms. During this period some four UN Security Council sanctions were placed against Iran. It seems however that during the last seven years, the key factor motivating UN sanction imposition has been the perceived nature of the Iranian regime, rather than Iran's violation of NPT terms.

### **2002-2005: Conflict Origins and the Possibility of a Diplomatic Solution**

On August 15 2002 the NCRI disclosed information on the Natanz and Arak

nuclear facilities; satellite imagery released that December confirmed the existence of centrifuge facilities at Natanz for uranium enrichment. It was estimated that upon completion, the Natanz uranium enrichment complex would be capable of producing weapons-grade uranium sufficient for several nuclear weapons per year, employing more than 50,000 centrifuges. Uranium extracted from mines in the Yazd province would provide Iran with a domestic uranium source, eliminating the need for imported Russian nuclear fuel regulated under IAEA safeguards.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, the heavy water facility at Arak could enable Iran to produce enough weapons grade plutonium for one to two nuclear weapons annually.

Iran found itself in a difficult position following the NCRI disclosure of the Natanz and Arak nuclear facilities. During the previous year, the Khatami government attempted to open up to the West and to normalize Iran's diplomatic relations. In order to regain credibility, Iran attempted to contact US diplomats through the Swiss embassy in the spring of 2003. Iran's "grand bargain" sought access to peaceful nuclear technology in exchange for acceptance of the two state solution and an end of support for Hamas and Hezbollah –two important political concessions.<sup>2</sup> The Bush administration however ignored the Iranian proposal, convinced the Iranian regime would soon collapse. Following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the US was in at the zenith of its ability to intimidate Iran militarily, and with such an awesome initial strategic position, saw no need to engage in diplomacy. President Bush made it clear that Iran could not have a nuclear weapon and that to prevent this "all options are on the table", including preemptive strikes against Iranian nuclear sites.<sup>3</sup> Thus despite a conciliatory regime in Tehran and no concrete evidence of NPT violations, the West stood opposed to Iran for primarily political reasons.

In response to US pressure to adopt a tougher stance against Iran, Mohamed El Baradei, the Director General of the IAEA claimed that "Iran failed to report certain nuclear materials and activities" and requested "cooperative actions" from the country. Iran cooperated by engaging in diplomatic talks with the EU-3 (Great Britain, France and Germany), and in October of 2004, the

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- 1 Sammy Salama, Karen Ruster, *"Preemptive Attack on Iran's Nuclear facilities: possible consequences"*, James Martin Centre for Nonproliferation Studies, August 12, 2004.
  - 2 Glenn Kessler, "2003 Memo Says Iranian Leaders Backed Talks." *Washington Post*, 14 Feb. 2007. <[www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-08-13-bush-iran-nuclear\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-08-13-bush-iran-nuclear_x.htm). Accessed on 28 Oct. 2009.
  - 3 "Bush: "All options are on the table" regarding Iran's nuclear aspirations." *USA Today*, 13 Aug. 2005.

Paris agreement was signed. Even though the EU-3 recognized Iran's right to develop a civilian nuclear program as a part of the NPT, Iran temporarily agreed to suspend its enrichment program and all related activities. The Paris Agreement seemed a diplomatic success and Iran submitted a report on its nuclear program. However just a few days afterwards in early November, the IAEA stated that Iran was still failing to fully comply with the safeguards agreements. There was however no evidence of a military nuclear program. On December 18, Iran signed the Additional Protocol in order to allow unnoticed and more intense inspections, and although it was un-ratified, Teheran voluntarily permitted inspections in a display of good will.<sup>4</sup>

As apparent, Iran seemed ready to find a compromise. Tehran offered to suspend enrichment on an industrial level, but at the same time asked to continue research and experimentation with some twenty-four centrifuges. This proposal however was not even taken into consideration due to US pressure. Indeed US influence on the EU-3 prevented a diplomatic solution, as the Bush administration did not want to allow Iran an enrichment capability of any sort. US influence could also be seen in the re-election of El Baradei as head of the IAEA. Apparently, Washington made clear through Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that the re-election would depend on a tougher policy against the Iranian nuclear program. El Baradei won his third term in June 2005.<sup>5</sup>

Even as negotiations came to a stalemate and tensions rose, Iran, according to the IAEA, abided by its agreement to halt uranium enrichment. Only the conversion of uranium and some enrichment related activities were resumed in facilities under IAEA safeguards. Moreover, on August 9 2005, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons declaring them once again immoral and contrary to Islam. Up to the summer of 2005, Iran kept the door open for negotiations and possible solutions on the nuclear dilemma. However emboldened by initial victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration decided to refuse Iranian offers. Again, it is important to note that throughout this period, the Khatami government was attempting to adopt a more conciliatory line vis-à-vis the international community. In addition to diplomatic overtures to the US, Khatami's 2001 Dialogue Among Civilizations initiative "replaced the previously existing belief that Iran's foreign policy was

4 *BBC News*, "Middle East, Timeline: Iran Nuclear crisis" [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/middle\\_east/3210412.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/middle_east/3210412.stm)

5 *BBC News*, "US Agrees to back UN nuclear head", 9 June 2006.

closely connected to, and indeed an extension of the priorities of the theocratic regime and its dominant elite".<sup>6</sup> Indeed despite UN opposition to Iranian nuclear ambitions, the international community responded to Khatami's reformist position. Although the Iranian nuclear dilemma was of paramount concern, it was not brought before the UN Security Council (UNSCR) or filed under UN Charter Chapter VII until after the election of firebrand Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

It thus seems then that the primary factor influencing Western resolve against the Iranian nuclear program was not Iranian recalcitrance or belligerence. As noted, Tehran made repeated diplomatic overtures to the West, and offered important policy concessions in return for a limited enrichment capability. Far from Tehran's belligerence, what motivated Western opposition and aggression to Iran between 2002-2005 were strategic and political factors, primarily consisting of a dominant US strategic position in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the political influence of neo-conservatives calling for regime change. As the neo-conservative political influence began to decline in pace with the deteriorating US military position in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2005-2009 however, the factors motivating Western opposition to the Iranian nuclear program changed. They nonetheless remained entirely political, albeit this time stemming from the fiery rhetoric of Iran's then newly elected president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, rather than Western strategic dominance or Iran's violation of NPT terms.

### **2005-2009: The Election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and UNSC Sanctions**

The summer of 2005 marked the election of neoconservative candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as well as escalating tensions resulting in the passage of several UN sanctions regimes. In Europe, the EU-3 was expecting the election of the former pragmatic president Rafsanjani, who in all likelihood would have continued the dialogue for alternative solutions. Ahmadinejad made it immediately clear however that he rejected his predecessor's relative openness with the West. Every previous possibility of a diplomatic solution vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear program was refused. 2005 also marks Bush's second term,

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<sup>6</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Mahjoob Zweiri, eds. *Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 2008, pp. 121-122.

immediately characterized by troubles in Iraq and a loss of neo-conservative influence. Although Washington was still considering a pre-emptive strike at the time, the aforementioned military and political environment prevented any serious consideration of an attack against Iranian nuclear facilities.

In September of 2005, Ahmadinejad stated at the UN that Iran was willing to accept foreign investments in its nuclear program. Iran stopped complying with IAEA safeguards, and blocked UN snap inspections. Tehran also continued the enrichment of uranium, as Ahmadinejad had insisted upon their right to do so under the NPT. In early April of 2006, Ahmadinejad announced, "Iran has joined the group of those countries which have nuclear technology. This is the result of the Iranian nation's resistance. Based on international regulations, we will continue our path until we achieve production of industrial-scale enrichment".<sup>7</sup> Later during the same month the supreme leader Khamenei threatened to retaliate against a possible American attack.

Besides a reckless push for nuclear technology at the expense of international cooperation, Ahmadinejad's fiery anti-Israeli and US rhetoric alienated Iran from both the West and neighboring Arab states. In his 2005 speech from the "World without Zionism Conference", Ahmadinejad agreed with the late Ayatollah Khomeini's belief that "the occupying regime [Israel] should be wiped off the map", calling the bellicose pronouncement a "very wise statement". In a discreet attack against neighboring Arab states, Ahmadinejad would further assert that Muslim states accepting peace with Israel were "acknowledging the defeat of the Islamic world". In December of 2005, Ahmadinejad expressed doubts over the validity of the holocaust, stating that "[we] don't accept the claim that...Hitler burned millions of Jews and put them in concentration camps." Using examples of other previously considered invincible, today bygone empires, Ahmadinejad would go on to state that "they say we cannot have a world without the United States and Zionism. But you know this is a possible goal and slogan". Having grown accustomed to the more conciliatory approach of Ahmadinejad's predecessors, the Iranian president's comments added to a growing sense of apprehension in the West and among Iran's Arab neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

7 *BBC News*, "Iran declares key nuclear advance", 11 April 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4900260.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4900260.stm).

8 Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri. *Iran and the Rise of the Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution*. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007, pp. 109-110.

In this new international atmosphere the IAEA still tried to promote a diplomatic approach, stressing the necessity of Iran's cooperation during inspections. The US and Israel however rejected any form of negotiations, as Ahmadinejad's confrontational public statements and political recalcitrance gave different signals to the international community. Although cooperating with the IAEA and looking to further negotiations, Tehran was also refusing to sign further protocols, while reaffirming its intention to use nuclear energy. Tensions rose and the issue was brought to the UN Security Council. Resolution 1696 passed with only one opposing vote, threatening to impose sanctions if Iran would not suspend all enrichment related activities. Iran complained by defending its right, under the NPT, to develop a nuclear program. Iran's refusal to suspend all uranium enrichment-related reprocessing activities resulted in the passage of UNSCR 1737 in December of 2006.

UNSCR 1737 consists of a ban on the import or export of sensitive nuclear material and equipment, and a freeze of the financial assets of persons or entities supporting sensitive nuclear activities or the development of nuclear-weapon delivery systems. UNSCR 1737 would be terminated if Iran fully complied with its international non-proliferation obligations –or conversely expanded if Iran continued to defy the UNSCR. Delivering a characteristically tough message, the US UNSC representative stressed Iran would face “serious repercussions for its continuing disregard and defiance of the Security Council”, hoping “Iran [would be convinced] that the best way to ensure its security and end its isolation was to end its nuclear program”. The UK closely followed the US position, stating Iran had simply “thumbed its nose” at UNSCR 1696, and that if Iran would not change course, “the Council had committed itself to further measures”. Although supporting sanctions, China and Russia adopted a slightly more conciliatory approach, noting that UNSCR 1737 should not completely restrict cooperation with Iran, and should be viewed as a means to return Iran to the negotiating table, rather than a purely punitive end. The Iranian representative responded that it was a “sad day” for the UN, while reaffirming the Islamic Republic's right to peaceful nuclear energy.

A key point to be noted was UNSCR 1737's invocation of UN Charter Chapter VII, which addresses action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches to the peace, and acts of aggression. UNSCR 1737 placed Iran under Article 41



sanctions, which although not including military force, allow for the interruption or severance of trade, diplomatic ties, and communication. This event is important because it signals a politization of the Iranian nuclear dilemma, rather than a continued focus on technical NPT violations. Again, although Iran had refused to halt enrichment it was at no point violating NPT terms, which allow for the development of peaceful nuclear technology. That the UNSC should classify a state as a threat to the peace, and among breaches to the peace and acts of aggression –with no concrete evidence of NPT violations- suggests a distinctly perceptual crisis.<sup>9</sup>

UN Charter Chapter VII would be again invoked upon the March 2007 expansion of 1737 sanctions: UNSCR 1747. Determined to constrain Iran's development of sensitive technologies in support of its nuclear and missile programs, the unanimously adopted resolution banned Iranian arms exports, and froze the assets and restricted the travel of additional individuals engaged in the country's proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities. The US and UK representatives reiterated guarantees to cooperate with Iran on civil nuclear energy, as well as wider political, security, and economic issues. China and Russia stressed the measure was less a punitive measure than a means to persuade Iranian participation in comprehensive negotiations. Iran's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Manouchehr Mottaki, responded that the UNSC was "being abused to take an unlawful, unnecessary, and unjustifiable action against the peaceful nuclear program of the Islamic Republic of Iran". Coercive sanctions it seemed, were not weakening Iranian resolve.<sup>10</sup>

Having preceded UNSCR 1737 and 1747 sanctions and invocation of Chapter VII sanctions, the aggressive, defiant, and altogether counter-productive rhetoric and foreign policy of Ahmadinejad is in all likelihood to blame for this distinct shift in the UNSC position –even China and Russia, Iran's two most important military suppliers, supported Chapter VII sanctions. Although throughout the 2002-2005 period the UN resorted to far softer language and measures against Iran, following Ahmadinejad's election and distancing from his moderate predecessor's progressive policies, a shift in the international community's position vis-à-vis Iran is immediately apparent. The Iranian president's imprudent comments about Israel and insistence on confronting

9 *United Nations*, "UN Security Council: Resolutions", <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/6233960.html>

10 *UN Security Council*, "Security Council Toughens Sanctions" <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/sc8980.doc.htm>

the West over the Palestinian cause alienated him from both Europe, and his Arab neighbors, while providing an easy target for hawks in Washington pinning for regime change.

Thus following the passage of UN sanctions regimes 1737 and 1747, the US Congress passed new sanctions against Iranian refined petroleum products in order to cut Iran's revenues and slow down their nuclear program. In March 2008, another resolution was passed by the UN, with only one abstention. Sanctions provided by resolution 1803 bar exports to Iran that might have either nuclear or military dual use, while also calling upon states to inspect cargo to and from Iran of aircraft and vessels owned or operated by Iran Air Cargo and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line. By the end of the month, Iran received its last authorized shipment of fuel and equipment.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the passage of repeated sanctions regimes, there was no evidence to indicate either an Iranian nuclear weapons program, or technical violations of NPT terms.<sup>12</sup> In February of 2009, El Baradei confirmed that UN inspectors could not assess if Iran was working on a nuclear weapon given the lack of information on some facilities. In the absence of concrete intelligence indicating Iranian treaty violations, what was clearly stoking Western fears was not a discovered Iranian nuclear weapons program, but rather Iranian president Ahmadinejad's bellicose rhetoric threatening American interests and a war of annihilation against Israel.

In 2009, US president Barack Obama's promise to use diplomacy to solve the Iranian crisis has raised hopes for a peaceful solution. As of this paper's writing, Iranian delegates are meeting with the EU-3 in Vienna to discuss a regional agreement that would allow for Iranian access to peaceful nuclear technology in return for Tehran's suspension of enrichment activities and a renouncement of the right to domestic uranium production and enrichment. It seems however that Iran is unlikely to give up its right to domestic uranium enrichment as guaranteed under NPT, with Iran's foreign minister stating on October 21 2009 that Iran will never abandon "its legal and obvious" right to

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11 *UN Security Council*, "Security Council Toughens Sanctions." <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9268.doc.htm>

12 *UN Security Council*, "Security Council tightens restrictions on Iran's proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities", 13 March 2008, [www.un.org/news/press/docs/2008/sc9268.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/news/press/docs/2008/sc9268.doc.htm)

nuclear technology.<sup>13</sup> The dilemma appears to be heading towards an escalation of tensions, and possible military confrontation, with Israel giving the US government until the end of the year to find a diplomatic solution, after which it threatens to preemptively strike Iranian nuclear facilities. Nonetheless Iran's willingness to enter diplomatic talks signals a pause in the persistently hostile US-Iranian relationship as held under both Bush administrations. True soft-power diplomacy, which relies on understanding, cooperation, and mutual respect rather than an underlying coercive strategy, will be put to the test as Obama attempts to solve the Iranian nuclear dilemma at a stroke, without preconditions, or a crippling poor international profile.

Thus upon a historical review of political developments regarding the Iranian nuclear program between 2002-2009, it is immediately clear that what motivated Western opposition to Iran's nuclear program were primarily political considerations, ranging from America's dominant regional position between 2002-2005, to the perceived nature of the Iranian regime under firebrand president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad between 2005-2009. Despite Iranian diplomatic overtures between 2002-2005, the US, emboldened by initial victories in Iraq and Afghanistan, rebuked the progressive Rafsanjani administration's grand bargain offering significant political concessions in exchange for a limited uranium enrichment program.

As the US position in Iraq and Afghanistan deteriorated however, so did the political support and material feasibility for a preemptive strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Although this would seem to have once again made a diplomatic solution viable, the newly elected Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's bellicose rhetoric alienated the international community. The resulting UN sanctions regime and issue of more than fifty IAEA reports and information circulars on Iranian nuclear activities since 2002 stem directly from the perceived nature of the Iranian regime under Ahmadinejad, and not from material violations of NPT terms. This analysis would however be incomplete without an understanding of Iran's relationship with its neighbors, and how this relationship affects Tehran's interaction with the West and its stance on Iran's nuclear program.

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13 Ibid.

### **Additional Variables: Iraqi/Russo-Iranian Relations**

So far this study has focused on Western-Iranian relations, with a particular emphasis on the political factors affecting negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. An important variable to consider however is Iran's relationship with neighboring countries, and how this relationship has affected Iranian-Western relations and negotiations occurring in a wider regional context between 2005 and 2009. Although Iranian-GCC/EU relations are important generally, this section will focus more specifically on Iran's relationship with Iraq and Russia.

First, it is important to consider how Iraqi-Iranian relations have affected US regional interests and stance vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear program. Security and stability in Iraq are paramount to US regional interests, strategic position, and domestic political opinion. Thus any undue Iranian influence or interference with Iraqi affairs will affect Iranian-US relations. In this matter, Iran has been repeatedly accused by both Iraqi and US officials of interfering with Iraqi affairs, with subversive activity ranging from self-interested economic "assistance", to actively destabilizing Iraq and indirectly targeting US forces by arming and funding Shi'a militias. In 2007, a group of eight Arab nations joined the US in issuing a "veiled warning to Iran against interfering in Iraq's affairs".<sup>14</sup> Two years later and this warning has yet to be heeded, as Deputy Chairman of the Iraqi Parliament Security and Defense Committee noted on October 18, 2009 "...the extent of [Iran's] meddling in Iraq is huge. All the available evidence and explanations in Iraq point to this fact".<sup>15</sup> Indeed from the moment the US strategic position in Iraq began to degrade, Tehran moved to stake its interests in post-Saddam Iraq.

From the Iranian perspective, expanding its influence to include Shi'a majority communities in neighboring Iraq was a clear-cut decision made in the interests of national security. Although Tehran's enemies in Baghdad and Kabul were either dead or on the run thanks to the 2001 and 2003 US-led invasions, the close proximity of 160,000 American troops lent a palpable immediacy to US calls for regime change in Iran. The breakdown of security in Iraq however

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14 Glen Kessler, "Arab Group Signals Iran To Avoid Meddling in Iraq", *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/16/AR2007011600406.html>

15 Glen Kessler, "Iraqi MP: All the evidence points to Iranian regime meddling in Iraq", *NCRI*, <http://ncr-iran.org/content/view/7295/152/>.

allowed Iran to both secure lasting political influence over its traditional regional enemy, and indirectly target and pressure threatening American forces. Besides supplying insurgents with advanced improvised explosive devices (IED) responsible for 70% of coalition casualties and capable “of turning an Abrams tank into airplane”,<sup>16</sup> Iran hangs a Damoclesian sword over the heads of US forces in Iraq: an Iranian diplomat reportedly warned the US through Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that thousands of American troops would be kidnapped if Iran were attacked, suggesting Iran has established an extensive subversive terrorist network in Iraq similar to its regional proxies Hamas and Hezbollah.<sup>17</sup> Each noted example of political meddling, IED proliferation, and terrorist sleeper-cell activation point to the following: Iran has succeeded in staking its interests in post-Saddam Iraq, as well as undermining the strategic position and pre-emptive capability of threatening US military forces.

Considering the importance of Iraq to American regional interests, Iranian subversive activities in Iraq are clearly of issue, and affecting US-Iranian relations. Although Iran has extensively financed reconstruction efforts and is second only to the US in its support for the new Iraqi government,<sup>18</sup> evidence of Iranian political meddling and arms proliferation contradicts claims of a purely humanitarian concern motivating Iranian munificence. Tehran’s operations in Iraq have only further reinforced Arab fears of Persian regional dominance, and Western perceptions of Iran as a maleficent entity intent upon spreading its subversive tentacles across the region. Iran is the Middle East’s “Shi’a super power”,<sup>19</sup> and as the driving state behind the regional phenomenon of Shi’a empowerment, Iran has found itself at the center of a Sunni call to resist spreading Shi’a influence. Should Iran wish to improve its regional and international profile, especially with the US, it must adopt a perceptibly constructive role in Iraq. Although Iran’s indirect targeting of US troops through IED proliferation has decreased dramatically following the election of Obama, this is likely due to the fact that Europe’s historically conciliatory stance towards Iran is attributable to its disdain for President Bush. As such

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16 Anthony Cordesman, *Iraq’s insurgency and the road to civil conflict*. London: Praeger Security International, 2008, p. 585.

17 Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, eds. *Iran’s Foreign Policy: From Khatemi to Ahmadinejad*. Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 2008, p. 117.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., pp. 120-121.

Iran's actions should be understood as a strategic hedge against alienating EU powers favoring Democratically controlled Washington, and not as a shift in anti-US policy in Iraq.

Iranian-Russo relations have also affected negotiations with the West over Iran's nuclear program. As Iran has only further alienated itself from the West since the election of revolutionary hard-liner Ahmadinejad, Tehran has inevitably gravitated towards an alliance with Moscow and Beijing. Iranian-Russo relations are however more complex than a simple anti-Western strategic alliance. On one hand, Russia and Iran have a shared interest in limiting US influence in Central Asia, and maintaining lucrative trade relations. On the other, Russia has no interest in allowing for a complete opening of Iran's economy and reform of revolutionary political system that would break Russia's natural-gas sales monopoly in Europe, cut Iranian purchases of late-to-arrive and often faulty Russian weapons systems, and minimize Iran's dependence on Russian support in the UNSC.

Consequently for Russia, Iran's nuclear program is both a lucrative source of income –the Russian built nuclear power plant at Bushehr is projected to cost 800 million USD – and source of diplomatic and economic leverage vis-à-vis the West. Although a nuclear Iran is not in Russia's interests, it is only considered but one of many threats facing the Russian Federation. Russian officials may express doubts in private as to the intended purpose of the Iranian nuclear program, however Russia seeks to institutionalize its role as Iran's main source of nuclear technology and fissile material, as it has proposed in the most recent round of negotiations in Vienna over the Iranian nuclear program. This would solidify Russia's position of intermediary between Iran and the West, allowing Moscow to extract major concessions from Washington in order to help resolve a crisis that thus far has only benefited Russian interests; Iran buys Russian weapons, keeps its sanctioned gas out of European pipes, and is a pretty chip at the UNSC table. The Russo-Iranian relationship, which seems to benefit Moscow more than Tehran, will only complicate Iranian-US relations and nuclear negotiations. Despite Obama's best diplomatic efforts, Moscow does not want Iran to embark on a course of action that will diminish Russia's value as a protector and partner of the Islamic Republic.<sup>20</sup>

20 Michael Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations: Functional Dysfunction" *Mideast Monitor*, [http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0907/0907\\_5.htm](http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0907/0907_5.htm)

## **Conclusion**

Since 2002, Iran's relationship with the West has moved towards an escalation of tensions attributable to Western perceptions of the Iranian regime rather than material violations of the NPT. The West has used this escalation of tensions and diplomatic pressure as a means of extracting further concessions from Iran. Washington will only allow the Islamic Republic a seat at the table of great regional powers should Iran forego security in Iraq, a strategic partnership with Beijing and Moscow, and its guaranteed rights under the NPT to nuclear power production.

This is a price Tehran is unwilling to pay, as perhaps less than eloquently articulated by President Ahmadinejad. It seems however that diplomatic efforts only delay a decisive confrontation with the West; Israeli threats to strike Iranian nuclear sites by the end of the year are a ticking clock to regional Armageddon should Washington fail to broker a comprehensive deal. Obama's cautious approach to negotiations with Tehran certainly mark a change in US-Iranian relations – the US has all but acceded to a Iran's civilian nuclear power program – however mutual mistrust will remain, a perceptual tragedy exacerbated by competing regional interests in Baghdad and Moscow. As such it seems tensions will only increase as political perceptions continue to dominate Iranian-US relations rather than a faithful adherence to technical terms and treaty obligations. The negotiations in Vienna meeting on October 2009 over the Iranian Nuclear program did not lead to a diplomatic breakthrough helping to normalize Iran's relationship with the international community, and it seems that a new UNSC resolution is yet to be approved in near future. The future of the escalating Iranian nuclear dilemma however – tied inexorably with that of the Middle East – has yet to unfold.

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