Is Regime-Change a Solution for the Iranian Nuclear Crisis?

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Abstract *Since 2002, a distinct Iranian nuclear crisis has attracted the attention of the international community and – despite renewed negotiations in the 5+1 formula – it remains one of the most salient threats to international security. The ineffectiveness of preventive means already deployed in a bid to solve the Iranian nuclear crisis has raised the prospect of utilising other, more robust methods such as the use of armed force for the purpose of regime change. The problem is not only related to the feasibility of regime change option but also to its utility in stopping the Iranian nuclear programme, since large parts of the Iranian population support the programme. This article analyses the strengths and the chances of success of such policy as well as its weaknesses and the factors that indicate the possibility of a failure on the medium and long term if this option is chosen.*

Keywords: Iran, nuclear programme, nuclear proliferation, regime change, armed force

A Background to Iran's Nuclear Programme

Iran's interest in developing nuclear technologies dates back to the 1950's, when Shah Reza Pahlavi received technical support from the US through the Atoms for Peace Programme. In this initial phase, Iran was driven by regional fears and the deepening tensions with its rival, Pakistan and as a reaction to the Soviet Union's nuclear posture, since

Iran was (then) a steadfast ally of the US and worked with Washington to deter Soviet expansion into the Gulf region and hem it in along the Caucasian mountains and Azerbaijan.[1] The first contract for obtaining nuclear technology (1957) with the US was based on civilian nuclear assistance but included the sale of enriched uranium. The agreement requested that both parties cooperate in the research for peaceful uses of nuclear technology.[2] In addition, the US offered the Tehran Nuclear Research Centre a research reactor in 1967.

In 1973, the Shah of Iran made public the country's ambitious plans regarding nuclear energy; plans that envisioned the construction of 20 nuclear plants before 2000.[3] A year later, the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) was established and Iranian nuclear scientists began a decade-long engagement with Western technicians. This led to the conclusion of multiple contracts with Western states on nuclear energy: with the US (1974) for purchasing 8 reactors, with (FDR) Germany (1974) for the construction of the Bushehr reactor by Siemens, and with France (1977) for the construction of 2 reactors at Darkhovin.

With the 1979 Islamic revolution, and the subsequent disintegration of the pro-Western government of Shah Pahlavi, Iran's nuclear programme was suspended owing to a clear brain-drain of Iranian scientists to the West and the international isolation of the Islamic Republic following the US Embassy hostage-taking. The West severed economic, political and military ties to revolutionary Iran. Luckily – in hindsight – by the time of the sweeping revolution, the construction of two reactors at Bushehr remained incomplete, and Siemens promptly withdrew from the country. These losses, coupled with the opposition of the new head of the state, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, towards nuclear weapons – considered, at the time, as contrary to the basic principles of Islam – severely undermined Iran's nuclear programme and cast it by the country's security wayside.

In the mid-1980 however, Iran's Ayatollah revised his position on nuclear weapons. Khomeini reformed the AEOI and places great resources in the pockets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to acquire nuclear technologies as well as research and develop Iranian assets.[4] Tarock points to the 1980-1988 war with Iraq as the main reason for Iran's rediscovered desire to build nuclear weapons, since that conflict witnessed the metaphorical 'gloves coming off' and both belligerents used weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the form of tactical and strategic chemical and biological weapons.[5] Iran and Iraq

(which had, in 1981 lost its main Osirak reactor to Israeli warplanes) both sought nuclear weapons as a leasson learned from their brutal conflict.

At the same time that Iran was developing nuclear power plants, it also commenced activities at Isfahan and Karaj. With the exception of the acquisition of technology for the uranium conversion from a Chinese company, Iran was unable to purchase other facilities necessary for the nuclear cycle. It then decided (mid1980's) to buy technology for uranium conversion from the black market.[6] Through contacts with the Pakistan network headed by Abdul Qadeer Khan (AQK) which dealt with the illegal sales of nuclear technology, Iran purchased (1987) P1 centrifuge components, drawings and technical specifications for this type of centrifuge for the sum of $3 million (USD). At the same time it received, without requesting, a 15 pages document that contained the description of the transformation of uranium into metal uranium.[7]

With the acceptance of nuclear power and weapons by Khomeini, Iran's attitude to the technology dramatically changed and in the first decade after the Islamic Revolution a series of new cooperative relationships were harnessed including the signing of a series of contracts with Pakistan (1987) – an irony, since these two states are locked in a seemingly perpetual rivalry – and China (1990). Both agreements referred to the training of Iranian nuclear personnel and, additionally, China offered Iran certain types of reactors, but ultimately – under the weight of US pressure – changed course and this aspect of the contract was not fulfilled. Also, in 1990, there was rapprochement between Iran and the USSR, which led to the signing of a cooperation agreement in nuclear technologies while Iran purchased complex technology for military aircraft.[8] The dissolution of the USSR again retarded Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Getting back on its nuclear feet required a further decade – or so – and Iran undertook a series of experiments regarding different stages of the nuclear cycle; experiments that were mostly recognised and reported to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) after the Iranian nuclear programme began to draw the attention of the international community in 2003. The experiments in this period were not restricted to uranium conversion and centrifuge production, but also focused on plutonium separation, an activity that took place at the Tehran centre between 1988 and 1993.

The contacts and the cooperation with the AQK network continued throughout the 1990's—as later revealed to the IAEA. According to Iranian declarations, this time it was the Khan's network that approached an Iranian company with the aim of selling it uranium conversion technologies. In order to compensate for the low quality of the P1 centrifuge components delivered in the 1980's, the network offered Tehran (1996) a complete set of drawings for P2 type of centrifuge.[9]

Despite early suspicions by Russia that Iran was trying to build nuclear weapons in the mid-1980's – and therefore challenge Soviet supremacy in the Caspian Sea region – cooperation between the two states continued after the Cold War. In 1992, Iran and Russia signed, as part of a long-term cooperation and trade programme, two agreements on support in the nuclear energy field. The nuclear assistance was to materialise in the construction of nuclear plants for Iran, the recycling of nuclear waste, fuel delivery for research reactors, the production of isotopes for scientific use and medical research, and the training of Iranian scientists in Moscow. Negotiations on the construction of the Bushehr reactor were finalised in 1995. Experiments did not stop during this period. According to the declarations of Tehran, Iran imported (1991) a quantity of 1800 kg of natural uranium for use in various experiments, the contents of which remain out of the public eye.[10] Then, in 2001, Iran began work on the construction of two nuclear facilities at Natanz: the pilot enrichment plant of a smaller dimension was to comprise 1000 centrifuge for uranium enrichment up to the level of 5% and the enrichment plant of commercial dimension was to comprise 50000 P1 type centrifuge for enrichment up to the level of 5%.[11]

The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) – an Iranian opposition movement in exile – accused (2002) the Iranian government of secretly constructing two nuclear facilities, one in Natanz for enrichment, and one in Arak for the production of heavy water. Initially, Iran publicly responded to these accusations by denying the existence of these two facilities, but the declarations of this group were confirmed in December 2002 when CNN published satellite photos of the two new nuclear facilities and the standard denials were dropped from Iranian rhetoric.

Following the NCRI's 2002 revelations, the IAEA requested, in September, an inspection of those locations. The inspections occurred in February 2003, occasion on which Iran declared for the first time the construction of the two enrichment facilities at Natanz, one pilot and

one commercial, as well as the construction of the heavy water facility at Arak.[12] In other words, it confirmed the NCRI's accusations and had to admit that it again sought nuclear technologies.

In the first comprehensive report issued by the IAEA in June 2003, Iran was accused of not adhering to its international obligations from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) by not reporting the construction of the nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak, not declaring the importation of uranium in 1991 and denying access to IAEA inspectors at the Kalaye Electric Company. Also, in this report, the IAEA mentioned that it received information in May 2003 about the intention of the Iranian authorities to construct a heavy water reactor at Arak and a fuel manufacturing plant at Isfahan in the near future.[13]

Until August 2003, when the IAEA issued a new report on Iran, Agency inspectors made new discoveries consisting of: the presence, at Natanz, of samples of highly enriched uranium; the testing of the first centrifuge cascade at the Natanz pilot plant; and the recognition on the existence of an enrichment programme starting in the 1980's for which it benefited from external support in the form of centrifuge drawings.[14]

Despite the threats made by Iran that it would end cooperation with the IAEA due to the deadline imposed for clarifying its nuclear programme, Iran showed a willingness to cooperate with the international community in November 2003. Through a letter sent on 10 November, to the IAEA, Iran agreed to sign the Additional Protocol, as requested by the Agency and by the international community, and to voluntarily proceed to a suspension of all enrichment activities.[15] Following the signing of the Protocol and the Paris Agreement with the EU-3 (France, Germany and the UK) in 2004, Iran suspended its nuclear activities voluntarily—and only for a limited time.

While the European leaders were trying to sign agreements with the leaders in Tehran, the IAEA did not stop its efforts of informing the international community as to the stage of Iran's nuclear programme. Consequently, in November 2004, the Agency issued one of the most comprehensive reports regarding the programme, which contained a chronology on each stage of the nuclear cycle in which Iran undertook in the past. At the end of the report, the conclusion was that Iran had made substantial efforts over the past two decades to develop an indigenous nuclear cycle. In this sense, it had made experiments to acquire knowledge on almost every aspect of the nuclear cycle.[16]

From 2004 until the present Iran's nuclear programme has seen spectacular evolutions which include, among other things: the finalising of the Busher nuclear plant, improvements to the 2 plants at Natanz, the inauguration of the heavy water plant at Arak, the continuation of the construction of the heavy water reactor at Arak, the construction of a new enrichment facility at Qom, the construction of a fuel manufacturing plant at Isfahan, and enrichment up to the level of 20% starting in 2010.

After 8 years of investigations, the report issued by IAEA in November 2011 is probably one of the toughest, as it contains several details and clarifications on the possible existence of a military nuclear programme. The information available to the Agency indicated that Iran undertook the following relevant activities for the development of a nuclear explosive device: efforts, some with success, to purchase dual use equipment and materials by individual and entities from the military sector; efforts to develop on undeclared paths nuclear material; buying information and documents relevant for developing nuclear arms from a clandestine network; activities for developing indigenous drawings of a nuclear weapon, including the testing of components necessary for nuclear arms.[17]

After years of disputes between Iran and IAEA on clarifying all aspects related to Iran's nuclear programme, in November 2013 the two sides were able to agree on a Framework for Cooperation, an agreement that preceded the signing on 24 November 2013 by Iran and the P5+1 group of a Joint Plan of Action which will be valid for a period of six months to allow the sides to negotiate a comprehensive agreement. Despite these developments, the IAEA concluded, in its report issued on November 2013, that

> while the Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material at the nuclear facilities and LOFs declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement, the Agency is not in a position to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran, and therefore to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities.[18]

In other words, there remain serious doubts that Iran's nuclearisation is entirely peaceful. Against this backdrop, it is interesting to see the reaction of the international community. Iran has certainly produced a nuclear crisis and it is important to see how this crisis is per-

ceived and the means deployed to overcome it.

Reactions of the International Community to Iran's Nuclear Programme

The first attempts to solve the Iranian nuclear crisis came from the EU-3, which signed two separate agreements with Iran in 2003-2004. The first, the Tehran Declaration – signed on 21 October 2003 – meant that Iran agreed to sign the Additional Protocol with the IAEA and to suspend its enrichment activities, while the EU states promised, in exchange, improved access to technology and deliveries in a number of other areas. In other words, the EU-3 agreement to Iran was based on Iran signing another agreement. Furthermore, following the agreement signed with European leaders, Iran transmitted to the IAEA (October 2003) a series of documents that aimed to clarify the chronology of the Iranian programme from the 1980's.

Verifying the suspension by Iran's nuclear activities has proved to be a hard and complex process for Agency inspectors since: verification was limited to places indicated by Iranian authorities, the Agency being unable to confirm that there were undeclared locations where the activities continue; some suspended activities, such as production of centrifuge components proved to be extremely difficult to verify in practice.[19]

Following intense negotiations between the EU-3 and Iran, at the end of 2004 the two parts signed a new cooperation agreement, entitled the Paris Agreement. The document, officially signed on 14 November 2004, stipulated that Iran would extend the suspension process to include all the enrichment and reprocessing activities, including the production, testing and assembly of centrifuge, any activity related to plutonium separation, and any tests or production activities at the uranium conversion facilities. In exchange, the European states agreed to restart negotiations with Iran with a view to concluding a Trade and Cooperation Agreement and to offer clear security incentives to Iran.

The agreement was well received by the international community and by the IAEA, but soon fell under intense scrutiny. Among the main criticisms were the voluntary (re: not mandatory) character of the suspension and the direct link between the suspension period and the negotiations between the two parts related to a series of other matters. Another criticism was the fact that the agreement did not request the Iranian authorities to suspend also the construction of the heavy water

reactor at Arak.[20] Discussions, meetings and negotiations between the leaders of the European three big member states, supported by the European Union High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the leaders in Tehran dominated 2005. In order to contribute to an atmosphere as adequate as possible for negotiations, even the IAEA reports were extremely short and concise on the evolution of the nuclear programme. Still, negotiations were too slow and marked by the lack of trust between the sides and even the absence of the desire to reach out to a compromise. Iranian leaders used every occasion to announce that the suspension is temporary no matter what the results of the negotiations with the EU leaders would be.

The lack of progress in the negotiations with the EU-3 led Iran to inform the IAEA, on 01 August 2005, that they would restart activities at the Isfahan uranium conversion facility.[21] Before restarting these activities, the EU-3 presented Iran, 05 August 2005, a proposal for a Long Term Agreement. The package included assurances of the Europeans that they would help Iran in the nuclear, technological and economic areas in exchange pledge that Iran would abstain from developing nuclear arms and that they would halt all the activities in the field of uranium enrichment, plutonium production and the construction of the heavy water plant.[22]

Iran fully rejected the EU-3 package claiming that there were not enough attractive incentives, and the absence of clear engagements on security issues that were very important for Iranian leaders. Iran wanted a deal that would solve *all* its problems with the West, and this agreement did not correspond to the requests of Iran.[23] On 08 August 2005, Iran restarted activities at the Isfahan uranium conversion facility.

Iranian rejection brought about a changed tone in nuclear diplomacy. If, until this time, the international community showed patience in order to let negotiations between the EU-3 and Iran produce a tangible outcome, things started to change with the decision of Iran to restart the uranium conversion activities. There were more and more voices asking for the file to be sent to the United Nations Security Council, an action Iran wanted to avoid at all costs.

The tougher stance of the international community regarding Iran became obvious with the adoption by the IAEA Board of Governors of a resolution on 24 September 2005. For the first time, the resolution mentioned that the activities of Iran violate the provisions of the Nu-

clear Nonproliferation Treaty and that these activities, the lack of cooperation from the part of Iranians as well as the lack of trust that the programme is exclusively for peaceful purposes are all matters that the UN Security Council deals with, as the main organ responsible with maintaining international peace and security.[24]

The rejection of a proposal made by Russia for Iran to enrich uranium on its territory, was followed, in January 2006, by some steps made by the leaders in Tehran for restarting the enrichment activities by removing the seals of the IAEA at three nuclear facilities, including Natanz, with the aim of restarting the research and development activities under Agency surveillance. Due to these decisions, world leaders met in Vienna, and through a resolution of the IAEA Board of Governors, decide to send the case for analysis to the Security Council.[25]

The UNSC analysed, for the first time, the Iranian nuclear case in March 2006. Due to the lack of consensus on the necessity and opportunity of adopting a resolution, it decided to adopt a Declaration of the Presidency of the Security Council. Through this declaration, Iran was asked to respond to all the requests of the IAEA, the cooperation having the capacity to lead to a negotiated and diplomatic solution that would guarantee that the programme is solely for peaceful uses.[26]

A new proposal was forwarded in June 2006, this time by the newly formed P5+1 group (the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany). The package contained a series of incentives but also possible sanctions. The refusal of Iran to accept this package determined the UNSC – reunited in a meeting in July 2006 – to adopt a resolution against Iran. Resolution 1696, adopted with a single vote against, requested Iran to suspend all its enrichment activities until 31 August 2006, and mentioned the possibility of adopting, in the future, a sanctions regime against the Islamic Republic according to Chapter VII of the UN Charter.[27]

Since then, the UNSC has adopted five more resolutions against Iran which may be resumed as follows: they ban the transfer to Iran of dual-use nuclear and ballistic goods and equipment, with the exception of light water reactors; they ban the exportation to Iran of arms and technology useful for developing weapons of mass destruction; they ban the investments in the uranium mining industry, nuclear technology and nuclear ballistic technology in Iran; they freeze the assets of individuals and entities suspected of being involved in nuclear activities. The multilateral sanctions adopted by the UNSC were very limit-

ed and had little effect on the Iranian economy. Consequently, the US and EU decided to adopt unilateral sanctions, the toughest of which proved to be the ban imposed by the European states on oil imports from Iran. These sanctions were more effective than the multilateral ones and seriously affected the economy of Iran which is highly dependent on the revenues from oil exports.

The imposition of these sanctions did not lead to a halt in negotiations between the big powers and Iran. Negotiations continued infrequently, as well as the cooperation between the Iranian authorities and the IAEA inspectors. After nearly a decade without agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme, and after months of negotiations, the P5+1 group and Iran signed in Geneva on 24 November 2013 a Joint Plan of Action, which is actually an interim agreement to allow the parts to reach 'a mutually-agreed long-term comprehensive solution that would ensure Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful. Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek or develop any nuclear weapons.'[28] The interim agreement stipulates that Iran halt its enrichment to medium-grade (20%) purity, and will give better access to UN inspectors in exchange for sanctions relief worth about $7 billion (USD) on certain sectors, including precious metals.

Despite the Geneva talks and the ceasing of sanctions, there is a deep suspicion that Iran is continuing on the path towards nuclear weapons. The question therefore remain, are there more robust steps that could be undertaken to ensure that Iran remains nuclear-weapons free? And thus …

Is Regime Change a Solution for the Iranian Nuclear Crisis?

Considering the inefficiency of the means deployed – until now – by the international community to solve the long-term, Iranian nuclear crisis, many observers have started to research the possibility of deploying other methods. So far, besides negotiations, IAEA inspections and sanctions, whether multilateral or unilateral, the literature mentions two other instruments at the disposal of the international community: regime change and military attack. Military attack is a last resort solution with low chances of being put into practice.

The chance of regime as a solution to halting the Iranian nuclear programme is viewed in the literature as being feasible, while other researchers incline to be less enthusiastic when it comes to the success

chances of this solution. Surely, regime change is not a new consideration for Iranian decision-makers and (former) US President George W. Bush actively promoted this policy. The problem is not only related to the feasibility of this option but also to its utility in stopping the Iranian nuclear programme, since large parts of the Iranian population support the programme. The last substantive section of this work analyses the strengths and the chances of success of such a policy as well as its weaknesses and the factors that indicate the possibility of a failure on the medium- and long-term if this option is chosen.

Using arguments related to the disastrous economic situation in Iran, the lack of unity among its civil society and decision-makers – and among decision-makers themselves – the presence of a deep democratic tradition (suspended in 1979) and past attempts to revolt against Iranian suppression, some authors promote the change of regime as being the most feasible method for stopping Iran's nuclear programme. There are even voices arguing that regime change could take place relatively soon; within two years.[29]

Iran's economic situation is a key factor that has analysts considering regime change as being inevitable. The economic and social situation of Iran can be characterised as follows: huge and rapid growth of the population over the past 25 years and the youngest population in the entire Middle East and some 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. There is a high number of students accompanied by a high unemployment rate, hyper-inflation and the dependency of the economy on the oil exports.[30] The economic situation has become even more disastrous due to the unilateral sanctions applied, over the past years, by the EU and US, as revenues from oil exports have decreased significantly, putting a lot of pressure on the Iranian population as well as on Iranian leaders. Besides the necessity of solving these economic problems, there are also demands by the Iranian population related to the change of the current political system, without necessarily changing it radically with a democratic one.

Critics of the current theocratic system request a higher level of public participation in Iran's political life through the election of the Supreme Leader (Ayatollah) and imposing fixed terms for his mandate; the elimination of the veto right of the Council of Guardians regarding the candidates for the parliamentary elections; the elimination of the control imposed by clerics on the judicial system and consolidation of the powers of the elected president as counterbalance to the power of

the Supreme Leader.[31] Furthermore, a close analysis of Iran reveals the presence of strong democratic elements that encourages analysts to view regime change as possible. Among the democratic elements that characterises Iran, is the organisation of presidential elections, which may not be really democratic but are still an important event, the limitation of the presidential mandate, the existence of a parliament in which the culture of debate is present.[32] At the same time, the Iranian state has the characteristics of a modern state, such as the emergence of a civil society, interactions with Western cultures, education, women participation in political life, access to the Internet and the existence of intellectual debates. Religious authorities and security officials may have attempted to construct a police state, but the power and aspirations of the country's civil society continue to account for some political choices.

Other encouraging signs for those who believe in regime change come from Iran's history of revolts and from the existence of organisations that fight for this aim. The opposition movements have intensified, especially after the "re-election" of President Ahmadinejad in June 2009. The revolts, which in the end failed, were organised under the coordination of the Green Movement, an opposition group that gained much support among young Iranians. Another revolt took place in Iran in 2010, this time organised by the bazaaris, small retailers that protested against the rise of taxes. Such movements and Iranian opposition movements in the West, gives hope to the ones that still believe that regime change is possible from the inside. Certainly the election of Rowhani revealed that the Green Movement is no longer able to mobilise thousands of supporters – mostly because of the rape and murder of activists in 2009 – but Iranian political anger helped shape the 2013 elections.

Focusing on regime change, Hemmer notes that among the benefits this solution would produce, in case of success, there are the elimination of the threat that Iran poses to the disturbance of oil deliveries from this region; the issuing of a strong message for those who proliferate on the costs of similar actions; the possible decrease in the support offered by Iran to terrorism; and even the possible elimination of the Iranian interference in Iraq and Afghanistan; and the decrease in the nuclear ambitions of Iran.[33] Writing from the same perspective – but exaggerating the potential benefits of such a policy – Sobhani, adds the increase in the stability and security of the Gulf States the

normalisation of relations between Iran and the US, and even a rapprochement between Iran and Israel as first moves of a secular government in Tehran.[34]

Despite optimism showed by some authors, there are indicators that render this option less-than-optimal. Counterarguments are related to economic and political areas and the history of revolts of the Iranian people. Even though the Iranian people have suffered from economic hardships, there have been few revolts by Iranians between 1982-2011, the country is virtually a police state. In these circumstances, there can be no guarantee that economic problems – especially if not accompanied by public revolts – will lead to regime collapse.[35]

Although, above, the presence of elected democratic institutions and of signs of early democracy in Iran was depicted, these alone should not be exaggerated. The Iranian political system is very stable; being a mixture of elected and unelected institutions, in the sense that a religious institution balances each elected democratic institution.[36] Additionally, the chances of a fundamental reform in Iran in the short- and medium-term are minimal due to the lack of an organised and coherent opposition—with the Green Movement crushed. Although some may desire an international regime change mission, there are no feasible methods for that to occur. Iraq revealed the dangers of exogenous regime changes in the Middle East and Iran would be substantially more difficult than Iraq was.

Recent political developments in Iran also indicate that regime change may not be a solution to solve the nuclear issue. Economic sanctions have led to a dramatic internal economic situation which in its turn determined the Iranian population to elect as president in 2013 a (more) moderate personality—Hassan Rouhani. His election made it possible for the P5+1 to restart negotiations and even sign an interim agreement on the nuclear file at the end of 2013. But these moves should not be taken as an Iranian acceptance of its international agreements or its rejection of nuclear weapons. On the contrary. Rouhani – even though considered moderate in contrast to former president Ahmadinejad – while reassuring the international community that Iran will not develop nuclear weapons and signalling its readiness for constructive dialogue with the global powers, clearly stated that Iran will not renounce to its indigenous nuclear programme which, he claims, is peaceful. Rouhani once announced that the 'nuclear wishes of Iran need to be recognised by Americans'[37] as the programme 'is tied into

not only addressing Iran's energy needs but also into establishing its place in the world.'[38] In other words, Iran's nuclear programme is about energy and international clout and it is difficult to see how producing nuclear energy will increase its international reputation. So, Iranian nuclear ambitions are also about political power and power typically comes from arms.

Conclusion

Although considered by many scholars and practitioners as a universal panacea for solving all the problems the Iranian state has with the international community, an in-depth analysis shows that a regime change strategy may not be wholly appropriate for dealing with Iran even though the Islamic Republic is a danger to its own people, the wider region and probably the international community more vividly. Iranian society is, on its own, unprepared for overthrowing the Ayatollah and the IRGC and it cannot rely on international support since the debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan have many deeply suspicious of regime change. In addition to the problems related to the feasibility of this solution, the problems are even more serious when it comes to its utility in putting an end to the nuclear crisis, keeping in mind the wide support it receives – or is suspected to receive – within Iran's civil society.

In this context, it is clear that regime change in Iran is improbable in the near future. It is clear that

> a regime change, or any change in the policy of the Iranian Islamic state, cannot be imposed either from outside or from within by an activist minority, but can only be initiated within the framework of a domestic debate. In such a process, the international community can only play a limited role, creating a positive context by fostering containment or facilitating openings.[39]

So, no matter how fine Iran's game of nuclear brinkmanship is, until it crosses the nuclear threshold, there seems to be few options besides sanctions. And even the sanctions regime has hit some snares as the US and many European states have used the interim Geneva agreements to economically engage the Islamic Republic and the sunken costs of doing so may pressure those same governments into disavowing the sanctions regime altogether. While it is impossible to predict the political future of Iran, it should be remembered that regime change – with

all its uncertainty – is a better option than allowing a radicalised theocratic state develop nuclear weapons capabilities that would be used to blackmail the international community and further stifle internal opposition. Iranians certainly deserve better than what they have.

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Notes

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