

# NUCLEAR PROGRAM OF IRAN: STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS AND LEADERSHIP ROLE

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## **Abstract**

Iran started the nuclear program in late 1950s by signing *Atom for Peace* agreement with USA. Furthermore, the state elites started negotiation for assistance with Russia, France and Argentina to make the hidden arrangements in 1990s. Finally in 2003, the Iran's perception for acquiring the strategic means of the nuclear program revealed by International Atomic Energy Agency report. Since that time, this program is in the domain of serious consideration for various western states and international organizations. It has been argue that Middle East's security instability and Iran-Israel rivalry being perceived by Iran's political leadership accelerated for nuclear aspirations. By centralizing the strategic dimension of Middle East and the role of Iran's political stakeholders, this research has established a framework that why Tehran go for nuclearization as end means. It also has been reinvigorated that how the state elites manage international diplomacy in this whole scenario. The state is still perceiving to go nuclear weapons in post US withdrawal from the JCPOA. The paper further tries to reevaluate the question that in what circumstances, denuclearization of Iran is possible.

**Keywords:** Iran, strategic dimensions, leadership, nuclear program, JCPOA, Middle East

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**Introduction**

For Iran, regional strategic dimension was remained uncertain. That is why it look on to maximization of military support to protect its sovereignty and political integrity. It is argued that the political leadership of the state finds isolated military strategy to cope with the regional uncertainty. For Iran, US administration played a significant role in breaking the balance of Middle East by supporting Israel and Saudi Arabia. For Tehran, both regional states have specific aspirations against their state. That is why, it become an important element to find solution of these strategic problems. For making exponential solutions, they maximized the military spending, accelerated national spirit through nation-wide defense and military exercises.

For some states, the developing of regional military/security pacts with the neighboring states is a solution to their security problems. No confrontation with neighbors means no regional tensions and more mutual cooperation for development, peace and stability. For others, an international security shield is a real elucidation for resolving their security entanglement with the regional countries. This protected shield is a guarantee for the survival of their regime. These two arguments are still contextualized in case of European Union (EU), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The nuclearization pattern for these states has not been evolved. They are security gauranteeer for each other or some major power is responsible for maintaining their security. However, it is not relevant as we propound the security and stability of Iran<sup>1</sup>.

Iran's strategy for securing its regional and national security was solely derived by the domestic stakeholders who consider solely the regional role and aspirations in the changing regional and international scenario. Iran's strategic policy is US centric internationally while it is Israel centric in the regional context. That is why isolated, status que oriented and traditional thinking style is common in the minds of Iran's political minds. Except, Muhammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani, all presidents of Iran since 1980s had orthodox security perceptions and maintained status quo in their regional security shield. Due to this security orthodoxy, Iran

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Litwak, "Iran's Nuclear Challenge at a Crossroads: Dilemmas of a threshold State", Wilson Center, December 13, 2021, (URL: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-nuclear-challenge-crossroads-dilemmas-threshold-state>)

remained isolated political entity in post 1979 times. The military reconstruction in the post 1979 phase was advocated by every President of Iran for establishing regional strategic role<sup>2</sup>.

By understanding this whole scenario, this study is an attempt to contextualize the role of Iran's political leadership in developing, transforming and improving the nuclear program in various phases of their political regimes. Furthermore, it is also find that Iran's perceptions are still relevant with neorealist theory which stressed that state should establish such political decisions that their security domain do not distract in the international community. This paper is extremely important in analyzing the important incidences which paved the way for nuclear aspirations.

### **Context of the Research**

Iran is a unique test case for choosing of study for nuclearization in the contemporary world. There are multiple factors for studying the nuclear program of Iran which are still relevant due to the static regional policies of the country. Every country has travelled to many stages and strategic changings with respect to maintaining of their regional security, domestic aspirations and international obligations. However that is not relevant in case of researching on the aspiring trends to go for nuclearization by Iran. That is why Iran become more interesting country for exploring their trends to go nuclear weapons. There are number of articles, research dossiers, policy documents which have been written on the conventional security measures of Tehran. However little information is available on the nuclear program of the country. That information too come from international forums, research organizations, and International surveillance/monitoring bodies established by United Nations (UN). The political struggle of the Iranian leadership is still not defined or well researched in these documents, who played their significant role in developing and expanding the nuclear program since its beginning to date. In all this context, it becomes very interesting to conduct research on this topic.

It is evident that the policies often written in context of development of nuclear program of Iran are not available in the public domain until now. There information on establishing ambitions nuclear weapons did not explored by the state until 2003. Some international forums or organizations mostly quote IAEA or Nuclear Arms Control Association (NACA) data. The actual

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<sup>2</sup> Dale R. Davis, "Iran's Security Dilemma", (California: Unpublished M.A Thesis in International Security Affairs, Submitted to Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, California), 1994, p. iii, (URL: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA284109.pdf>)

speeches by the state political elites have not been analyzed in study until the recent time. This is evident from the sources which have been reviewed by the researchers while analyzing the document. The only reliable source for information remains domestic media coverage in Iran which has extensively given importance to the statements given by the political leaders.

It has also become very interesting while conducting research on the Middle East by different scholars that they too consider global research narratives on regional security and did not even contextualize the Iran's domestic policies and regional strategic narratives in the Iran's stakeholder's context. That is why, international security practices prevail in the analysis of different researchers. This is a new paradigm where both regional strategic environment and the role of leadership is simultaneously taken into account in a critical way.

### **Theoretical Design**

Since decades, Iran believes in power politics. It also struggles to maintain regional security in its regional security conundrum due to prevailing uncertainty in its domestic political system. In this power politics *fear dilemma* prevails. Every state passes through this dilemma and tries to cope with it with relevant strategies. Usually, states make extrovert security arrangements and resolve this dilemma. However, the perception of Iran's fear dilemma is different from the rest. The state makes introvert strategies to cope with its dilemma. In these strategies, expansion of military modernization through domestic means and spreading of national patriotism is common. All these phrases work under neorealism pattern.

This research paper is based on the neorealist philosophy. This term was coined by Kenneth Waltz in 1979. He studied the changing scenario of power politics in different regions and found that power politics prevail predominantly exploring security arrangements to expand ends means. Competition and conflict are the two important functions in the power politics. This argument is significantly valid in case study of nuclear program of Iran. The country experienced both situations with its regional and international security posture and steadily aspires to develop an ambitious nuclear program<sup>3</sup>.

Another study based on neorealism theory was published by Barry Buzan & Ole Wæver, where they contextualized that the regional patterns of security become more prominent in the

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<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Waltz, "Theory of International Politics", (New York: McGraw Hills), 1979: 15.

post-colonial world. They aspired Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) in which they argued that in many regions there are still old security patterns which are based on orthodox security decisions. Middle East is an important case studies in their work<sup>4</sup>. This theory too shed in a way that there complex security arrangements in Middle East where Iran contextualize the old conflict patterns. That is why this significant work also theoretically explain Tehran's nuclear ambition.

The threat patterns in security paradigm push many states for developing nuclear weapons is argued by Monteiro & Debs in their article "*The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation*". According to this study uncertain security paradigm of any state compel it to go for weapons of mass destruction<sup>5</sup>. This theory is too relevant with our research that Iran consider its security as a prioritized field. That is why, when this was threatened during Iraq-Iran war of 1980s, Iran strategically decided to become a nuclear state for developing deterrence in it regional security environment<sup>6</sup>. This research paper is based on all these theories. It contextualize that regional fear dilemma advance the political leadership to make orthodox decisions and strategies to cope with regional security uncertainty. Iran's political leadership keep on working maximization of security until it cannot be challenged. That security maximization tends to ambitiously developing nuclear weapons. Iran's aspirations for nuclear weapons always remained a real time testing issue for regional and international community.

## **Research Methodology**

The research is based on the qualitative analysis of the sources which have been incorporated in this article. Those sources are usually secondary in nature. Firstly, authors collected all the sources such as relevant books, research articles, news reports, public documents of the issues especially by international organizations such as IAEA and United Nations and country reports usually by the western states which have serious concerns with the nuclear program of Iran. At the second stage, content analysis was carried to decide the research topic and its organization. The organization of this article is compact in nature and period wise data has been provided with

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<sup>4</sup> Barry Buzan & Ole Wæver, "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security", (London: Cambridge University Press), 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Nuno P. Monteiro & Alexandre Debs, "The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation", *International Security* 39, No 2, (2014): 7-51, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00177

<sup>6</sup> Peter Jones, "Iran's Threat Perceptions and Arms Control Policies", *The Nonproliferation Review*, (Fall 1998): 39-55, doi.org/10.1080/10736709808436734

solid arguments and quoted sources so that a research based debate and conclusion can be evolved. Finally, after preparation of the research article, a thorough review was carried out to contextualize the given research in the contemporary age and its impact on the future of the nuclear program of Iran. The research ethics has been obliged while conducting this research. Furthermore, there is no conflict of interest between the researchers while doing this research.

### **Regional Security Context and Iran's Fear Dilemma**

It has been argued that nuclearization is a post Second World War development. United States was the first country which firstly laid their national security foundation based on the nuclear weapons. Prior to this period, the security was considered as maintenance of strategic depth by the states without indulging prolonged rivalry with other states. It the nuclearization reshaped the old patterns national security. Apart from this, regional security context is a prime factor which have established perception in many states that nuclearization is the only option for the survival of their political regimes<sup>7</sup>. This argument is relevant in North Korea and Iran's national security strategy.

The power politics in Middle East was extremely critical/competitive in 1980s. Iraq attacked Iran and several thousand casualties and large scale destruction occurred in Iran owing to burst of chemical weapons. That was miscalculated expectations from Tehran. The US administration too imposed sanctions on Iran in the post revolution period in 1979. The Israel was secretly working on maximization of security by constructing nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia too exploring new developments in economic and security competition against the Iranian state. The whole regional security situation was not in favor of Tehran's stakeholders. That is why a complex period of insecurity appeared. This situation truly will establish more insecurity, more strategic uncertainty with less opportunities for peace and stability.

This situation created a *fear dilemma* in the minds of political leadership. This dilemma is a result of strategic pressure from USA and Israel. They started planning to fulfill the ambition of going nuclear. As the neorealist paradigm focused on maximization of state security by utilizing all available means. In case of Iran, it became too difficult to survive along with traditional security arrangements. The leadership analyzed the firing of chemical weapons by Iraq on its territory and people and concluded that, Tehran must now fully establish its nuclear program on strategic line.

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<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Faisal, "National Security Strategy of Iran and North Korea: A Quest for Nuclearization 2005-2015", (Lahore: *Doctoral Dissertation*, Submitted to Department of Political Science, Punjab University Lahore), 2020: 51.

In 1980s, Iraq was the primary security threat for Tehran. After Saddam's dethroned in 2003, the political stakeholders started perceiving Israel and US as the main threat to their regime survival<sup>8</sup>.

It is evident that strategic culture of Middle East was not favorable for Iran. This situation developed a fear dilemma. The dilemma about the survival of political regime. The dilemma about achieving national security interests. And the dilemma of maintaining regional hegemony in Middle East by Iran by facing every critical juncture. The more fear will eventually create more insecurity and paving the way for establishing strategic deterrence for Tehran. These two scenarios established a critical environment for Iranian political leadership. That is why, they preferred to go ambitiously for acquiring strategic nuclear weapons.

### **Development Phases of Nuclear Program of Iran**

There is successive history of the nuclear program of Iran. It started in late 1950s and steadily increased until 1979 Islamic revolution in the state. In the post 1979 phase, the state's political stakeholders perceived regional security threats. These threats steadily exposed during Iran-Iraq war. That was a turning point for the Iran's political leadership. On the other end, it is also emphasized that acquisition of nuclear technology is way for developing modernization in security and is equally important for the post-1979 political regime survival. They decided to pursue its nuclear program in strategic dimension by seeking agreements with Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Argentina. It has been argued that going for nuclearization by Iran was adopted in the post-1979 political phase however, its foundation was being laid down by Reza Shah Pehlevi in 1950s. A phased development of the nuclear program of Iran until the recent time has been briefly analyzed as following;

#### **Shah of Iran**

Shah of Iran had cordial bilateral relations with all western countries. In 1950s to 1980s. It is said that the US administration had given a regional security role to Iran in Middle East at that time. That is why, under "Atoms for Peace deal", Iran signed civil nuclear deal with US administration in 1957. The fundamental objective for the conclusion of this agreement was to oblige the role of Iran as regional strategic ally against the Soviet Union. That is why US

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<sup>8</sup> Xiaoning Huang, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Regional Security: Dilemmas, Responses and the Future", (Columbia University: School of International and Public Affairs), 2016: (URL:<https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/The%20Iranian%20Nuclear%20Issue%20and%20Regional%20Security.pdf>)

established 5 megawatt nuclear reactor in 1967 to enrich the uranium at less than 3% scale. That reactor was named as Tehran Nuclear Reactor (TTR). The CENTO nuclear training which was established in Baghdad was shifted to Tehran after Iraq's withdrawal from the treaty in 1958. That too favored Iran in contextualizing the nuclear dimension in the national security.

In early 1970s, Shah of Iran established Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI). The basic objective for developing this organization was to find the ways where the energy needs of the state can be achieved through nuclear program. In the same year, Iran also advocated a 20 years roadmap for energy production through nuclear program. It was decided to produce 23,000 megawatts of energy under this plan in next 20 years. The construction of 23 additional nuclear power sites was also part of this program. A full scale indigenous nuclear fuel cycle plant's establishment was also decided<sup>9</sup>.

As specifically studying the strategic narrative of establishing nuclear power in Middle East, the Shah of Iran once advocated the ambition of its state for going nuclear. The Shah argued that there is growing security uncertainty in the Middle East. The traditional security dimension of Tehran is incompatible with its regional competitors such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. So, I wish that our nuclear program does not fulfil the domestic energy needs but also establish a strategic deterrence against the regional states in near future<sup>10</sup>. That was alarming statement. However the western states and US administration did not take it on serious note. Iran's consistent ambition of becoming a nuclear state was first narrated by Reza Shah Pahlavi. He argued about this revelation in response to the Indian, Israeli and Pakistan's nuclear programs which were too working in the strategic direction at time.

### **Ayatollah Khamenei**

Ayatollah Khamenei preoccupied a role of spiritual leader of Iran after the successful revolutionary ouster of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979. He advocated the peace and stability in the domestic and regional environment in the Middle East. He also decided to roll back the nuclear program. He advocated the spirit of Shia Islam and *Persian* Character of Iran in the region and decided to establish a regional perception in their favor. However, that decision proved only

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<sup>9</sup> David Patrikarakos, "Nuclear Iran: The Birth of An Atomic State", (London: I.B Tauris Publishers), 2012

<sup>10</sup> Ariel (Eli) Levite, "Deciphering Iran's Nuclear Strategy", *Carnegie Endowment Organization*, (September 10, 2021), (URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/09/deciphering-irans-nuclear-strategy?lang=en>)

short lived as during Iraq-Iran war, the security of Tehran exposed weak. Then, the state elites decided to re-establish their nuclear program.

During 1980s, many other states in the world were also establishing strategic nuclear sites in their domestic framework. Iran's political elites too started thinking to establishing an independent but domestic line of strategic which permanently provide a security shield to Iran. The deep security challenges from Iraq and the US involvement in the regional security dynamic pressured Tehran for re-establishing the nuclear program<sup>11</sup>.

### **Mir Hussein Mousavi**

Mir Hussein Mousavi was a hardliner political leader and a first generation revolutionary who served as the prime minister of Iran during Iran-Iraq war. He was the strongest supporter for reviving the nuclear program in strategic direction. He was the opinion that nuclear program is the only guarantee for the regime survival and also could protect the regional strategic interests of the state. In the given context he asked the political stakeholders that put maximum effort to fulfill the Iran's ambition to going nuclear. He also served and engaged with the international pressure to tackle the challenges and diplomatic hindrances in the way of this nuclear program<sup>12</sup>.

He advocated Iran's role as revolutionary nuclear state which must establish a regional strategic role to curtain the US and Israel security pressure. He also obliged an independent role of the state in the international and regional forums which must critically evaluate the policies in its favor beyond ideological indifferences among the state elites.

### **Akbar H. Rafsanjani**

Akbar H. Rafsanjani served two time president of Iran from 1989-1997. He took bold decisions to expand the nuclear program. He pledged a nation-wide announcement to the Iran's scientists who was working in different parts of world to come back and help the government for establishing its own nuclear program. He opined in an interview that it was the chemical explosion threats of

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<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Faisal, "National Security Strategy of Iran and North Korea: A Quest for Nuclearization 2005-2015", 2020: 73.

<sup>12</sup> Shahram Chubin, "Iran Primer: The Politics of Iran's Nuclear Program", *United States Institute of Peace*, (September 01, 2010), (URL: [https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/PDF%20Nuclear\\_Chubin\\_Politics.pdf](https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/PDF%20Nuclear_Chubin_Politics.pdf))

Iraq which was also working its nuclear program; which pushed my government to take nuclear program as a mean to acquire strategic weapons.

He expanded the nuclear cooperation with China, Russia, North Korea and Pakistan and signed many bilateral agreement to acquire technical assistance in establishing nuclear weapons. In 1990, Iran took an agreement with China. Furthermore, Iran and Russia signed an agreement in 1995 in which it was pledged to complete the Bushehr nuclear reactor. This reactor was initiated by Germany in 1970. However, due to US pressure this project did not completed. Under bilateral agreements, Iran sent its scientists to Pakistan and Italy to acquire scientific skills for developing nuclear weapons<sup>13</sup>.

### **Mohammad Khatami**

Muhammad Khatami also served as two terms as the president of Iran from 1997 to 2005. Due to efforts of the previous president of Iran, the scientists succeeded in developing centrifuges which are helpful in the nuclear weapons development. The state steadily but in hidden way developed the whole posture in 1990s to early 2000s. Muhammad Khatami expanded the working of AMAD program which was initiated his predecessor. This plan advocates;

- Establishing of Missile development experiments
- The Uranium enrichment was started at new station in Natanz by expanding its ratio to 20%.
- At the Parchin Military Complex, high explosive experiments for the acquisition of nuclear material was started<sup>14</sup>.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) which an opposition political group of Iran revealed two previously undeclared nuclear sites of Natanz and Arak to the international community during the regime of Muhammad Khatami in 2003. In that political regime, a *green salt project* was also exposed. This project revealed Iran's political stakeholders were busy in

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<sup>13</sup> Sina Azodi, "Iran's Nuclear Program has a long history of advances, Setbacks and Diplomatic Pauses", *Stimson Center*, (June 28, 2023), (URL: <https://www.stimson.org/2023/irans-nuclear-program-has-a-long-history-of-advances-setbacks-and-diplomatic-pauses/>)

<sup>14</sup> J. Warrick., "Nuclear Program in Iran tied to Pakistan", *The Washington Post*, (December 21, 2003), (URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/12/21/nuclear-program-in-iran-tied-to-pakistan/7bae88d3-c429-4ac6-92f1-90c47e968b07/>)

underground nuclear explosion experiments. That was attracted the world attention for the first time on serious note<sup>15</sup>.

### **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**

In the very beginning after electing the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad proclaimed strategic strictness in his policy towards western world. He also argued that, the 16 years détente policy did not establish any significant strategic role for his nation. This is the real time to review this static policy and establish an indigenous strategy to compel the old system. It has been argued that Ahmadinejad's approach was based on egalitarian principles. He developed a retaliatory, aggressive, self-proclaimed self-reliance and offensive strategy in aspiring the nuclear weapons.

The Uranium enrichment experiments were derived at the advance level during 2005-2011. The numbers of centrifuge development was also meaningfully expanded from the previous targets. Personally, he presented himself as the guardian of the nuclear program of Iran in regional and International organizations. The regime took an agreement with Russia to develop the Natanz plant which was halted in 1990s. The plant was completed in 2011. At one step in 2010, he declared Iran as a nuclear state due to high enrichment percentage<sup>16</sup>.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took a hard liner policy in establishing and manipulating the nuclear program of Iran for obtaining strategic balance for Iran in the Middle East. He presented an inflexible look to the western bloc and executed tumultuous position of his political role. This manipulation resulted in adopting a security in line with threat perception base so that the regional and international actors abandoned their previous position of strategic pressure on Iran's political stakeholders<sup>17</sup>.

### **Hassan Rouhani**

Hassan Rouhani managed the nuclear issue of Iran with western states on diplomatic lines. Previously served as the nuclear negotiator during the presidency of Muhammad Khatami, he really understand the western narrative on the nuclearization in Iran. That is why, he advocated a moderate stance on the nuclear program of the country being utilized only for peaceful objectives.

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<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Faisal, "National Security Strategy of Iran and North Korea: A Quest for Nuclearization 2005-2015", 2020: 75.

<sup>16</sup> "Ahmadinejad: Iran is now a "Nuclear State", NBC News, (February 10, 2010), (URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna35343465>)

<sup>17</sup> Farideh Farhi, "Ahmadinejad's Nuclear Folly", *Middle East Research and Information Project Report*, (Fall 2009): 2-5, (URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27735307>)

He established open door diplomacy with US and other states and announce to abandon the present stage of nuclear experiments if US must lift the previously imposed economic sanctions.

After successive talks and negotiation rounds, Iran signed a nuclear deal with P5+1 countries in July 2015. The only objective to sign this deal was to take away Iran from the nuclear expansion agenda in the region. That is why, Iran's political regime established a moderate stance on the development of nuclear technology in the ambit of peaceful objectives. The perception which he made was that it is very important to resolve the nuclear issue with the western world and establish a moderate image of his nation in the international community. That is why his whole policy was to establish a non-strategic nuclear program.<sup>18</sup>

**Ebrahim Raisi**

Recently died president of Iran in a plane crash at mountainous East Azerbaijan province took ultra conservative decision regarding the expansion of the nuclear program. That decision was made in response to US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal which was signed earlier in 2015. At the sideline of annual UN session, while giving an interview with CNN news, he strongly advocated the uranium enrichment facility by Tehran. He said, that is we did in response to the EU3 states (Britain, France and Germany) which abrogated all trade deals owing to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. He further argued that this is the pressure, which our regime is putting on the western states. Roll back the decision or otherwise Iran is free to choose from the choices to go for nuclearization<sup>19</sup>. In a report, IAEA also confirmed that Iran has acquired 60% Uranium enrichment which is nearing to establishment nuclear weapon.

There regional security of Middle East is still uncertain amid Hamas-Israel year's long conflict. This dynamic has also serious security implications for Tehran as well. In this scenario there are certain reports which are indicating that the nuclear program of Iran is at the tipping edge to go for nuclearization as sanctions on Tehran are ongoing resulting narrow opportunities for the country. Although a round of indirect talks with US officials has recently held in Dubai. It also has been

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<sup>18</sup> Rodger Shanahan, "Iranian Foreign Policy under Rouhani", *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, (2015): 1-16, (URL: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/188299/iranian-foreign-policy-under-rouhani.pdf>)

<sup>19</sup> Nadeem Ebrahim, "Iran's President defends Uranium Enrichment after Europeans, Trampled on their commitment", CNN, (September 24, 2023), (URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/24/middleeast/iran-raisi-fareed-zakaria-interview-intl/index.html>)

reported that Tehran has also invited IAEA watchdogs for inspection<sup>20</sup>. But, the situation is not still clear. There is uncertainty which is prevailing in the regional security conundrum in Middle East and the nuclear program of Iran is still growing in the strategic direction. Following is table which presents a summary of the efforts of different Iranian President for developing nuclear program.

### **Masoud Pezeshkian**

The incumbent president of Iran are considered moderate who was elected after the demise of former president of Iran Ebrahim Raisi in a plane crash in July 2024. after being elected as the president of Iran, his informal press speech said that, Iran do not want to acquire nuclear weapons. He also explored that its country wants diplomatic engagement with west including US to resolve the ongoing nuclear tensions. In the speech, he also said that, the defense doctrine of Tehran does not include the use of nuclear weapons<sup>21</sup>. A staunch propagator of social liberation and political pluralism, president Pezeshkian wants to promote political engagement with the world for the peace and stability in Middle East.

According to foreign policy magazine recently published article, the regional and international circumstances although hardly support a durable nuclear negotiations and deal. However, being a reformist regime in Iran under the presidency of Pezeshkian hope to see an opportunity of de-escalation with the west on the nuclear issue<sup>22</sup>. This article also emphasize that the hopes are raised to establish diplomacy between Iran and the west for reaching on a durable peace and stability in the region. These hopes should not be compromised. The engagement between Tehran and west will bring new phase of diplomatic thaw. The IAEA have the similar feelings. However, it seems difficult to establish prior results on the basis if statements by Tehran and the western powers. It needs long term legal and institutional SOPs for resolving the issue of nuclear aspiration of Iran.

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<sup>20</sup> "Iran's Nuclear Policy of Pressure and talks likely to go on even after president's death", *The Economic Times*, (May 22, 2024), (URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/irans-nuclear-policy-of-pressure-and-talks-likely-to-go-on-even-after-presidents-death/articleshow/110316897.cms?from=mdr>)

<sup>21</sup> Iran's pezeshkian says Tehran not seeking nuclear weapons, want to engage with Europe, *The Times of Israel*, (July 13, 2024), (URL: [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/irans-pezeskian-says-tehran-not-seeking-nuclear-weapons-wants-to-engage-with-europe/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/irans-pezeskian-says-tehran-not-seeking-nuclear-weapons-wants-to-engage-with-europe/))

<sup>22</sup> Ali Vaez, "Will Pezeshkian's win lead to thaw in US.-Iran Relations", *Foreign Policy*, (July 12, 2024), (URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/12/iran-election-pezeskian-khamenei-nuclear-sanctions-biden-thaw-relations/>)

**Table: Development of Nuclear Program of Iran (1950-2024)**

<b>Political Elites</b>	<b>Agreement and Mission</b>
Shah of Iran 1950-1979	Atoms for peace agreement with US and establish TNRC in 1967 and also concluded additional nuclear cooperation agreements and protocols with France, South Africa
Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader) 1979-89	Concluded nuclear and missile technological cooperation agreements with Pakistan, North Korea, China and Argentina
Mir Hussein Mousavi, President 1981-89	
Ali Khamenei (Supreme Leader) 1989 to date	Concluded Russia-Iran bilateral Nuclear Cooperation Agreement in 1992. Also expanded cooperation with China, North Korea and Pakistan during 1990-1997.
Akbar H. Rafsanjani (President) 1989-97	
Mohammad Khatami (President) 1997-2005	
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (President) 2005-13	Iran Expanded the Uranium Enrichment at 20%
Hassan Rouhani (President) 2013-17	Iran halted its program after JCPOA in 2015
Ebrahim Raisi (President) 2017-to May 19, 2024	Tehran start strategic nuclear weapons by expanding Uranium enrichment sites.

**Source:** Muhammad Faisal, “National Security Strategy of Iran and North Korea: A Quest for Nuclearization 2005-2015”, (Lahore: *Doctoral Dissertation*, Submitted to Department of Political Science, Punjab University Lahore), 2020: 76, updated by scholars until May 2024.

The spiritual leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei who proclaimed a *fatwa* in 2000s not to establish a nuclear weapon changed their verdict in the coming years. They also believe that, nuclear program is the only way of obtaining national pride and honor in the international community. While giving a speech to the members of nuclear industry, he supported that the present strategic decisions on developing and expansion of nuclear infrastructure must not be roll back<sup>23</sup>. We have options to develop this infrastructure for maintaining security shield for our nation in Middle East.

In the post 1979 revolution scenario, the nuclear program of Iran was advocated by every president except Hassan Rouhani, who signed a nuclear deal with P5+1 countries by giving assent that his country will use its nuclear program only for the peaceful objectives. All other presidents

<sup>23</sup> Omer Carmi, “Khamenei’s Nuclear Balancing Act”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, (June 13, 2023), (URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khameneis-nuclear-balancing-act>)

supported the strategic objectives of nuclear program for establishing regional hegemony against Israel and USA. This fear dilemma was predominantly exercised in the post-revolutionary period. At levels of diplomacy, the stakeholders too, use the acquisition of nuclear weapons as a mean to put pressure on western states and the USA.

### **Iran's Diplomacy for its Nuclear Program**

The nuclear program of Iran was not a serious concern for the Western states and USA prior to the internal revolutions of 1979. But the atmosphere was significantly reframed in the post-revolution phase. The USA and Israel put pressure on Tehran for abandoning the efforts for going nuclear. The state face multi-front threats in this direction. When Iran decided to expand the uranium enrichment in 1990s, US administration imposed economic and trade sanctions. In a response to those sanctions, the political elites started finding alternative and concealed assistance through bilateral agreements with China, Russia, Argentina and Pakistan.

Despite sanctions and threats, Iran significantly increased the political and diplomatic sources for establishing the uranium enrichment plants at the advance level. The public speeches and media states in the domestic forums established public support for the nuclear program. One of the statement by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about the expansion and distribution of nuclear program to Islamic countries obtain popularity in 2005. It spread hail in public domain<sup>24</sup>.

In tackling the prevailing issues of nuclear program, Iran focused on diplomatic channels. The leadership proclaimed to establish cooperation with IAEA. Eventually, normalization of relations with the Western countries occurred. However, in case of retaliation and imposition of sanctions by US, EU and UN, Iran again started threatening the international power regime for considering the expansion of uranium enrichment as a mean to establish nuclear regime in the Middle East. It worries not only the EU and USA but the challenges of stability have also multiplied in the regional political scenario of Iran<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> "Iran's President says his regime prepared to give atomic technology to other Muslim states, *Boston Herald*, (September 15, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Singh, "Iran's Nuclear Diplomacy: Faints and Advance", *The Washington Institute for Near East*, (September 14, 2023), (URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-nuclear-diplomacy-feint-and-advance>)

Political elites of Iran used nuclear aspiration as a choice to minimize its fear dilemma while also pursuing regional strategic balance in Middle East. It is evident that diplomatic channels forcibly choice coercive means against western bloc to find security ease for a short while.

### **Denuclearization of Iran**

The debate on denuclearization of Iran is in continues process from 1992. On other end, Iran too wish to establish cooperation with these instrumental efforts. On several times by various presidents unequivocally maintained that Iran's nuclear program is only for achieving the peaceful objectives, however it is Israel and Americans which put pressure on its regime to blindly go for strategic achievement in case of any serious threat. That is why Iran consider the denuclearization effort only in case of complete support for restoration of its domestic economic conditions.

For developing denuclearization, first of all US administration put pressure on Russia, China and Argentina during 1990s to assure complete roll backing of strategic cooperation. Despite this pressure, Iran took domestic arrangements with hidden technical support from these countries, while advocating that its nuclear program is halted or developing on peaceful line at the international platforms such as UN general assembly annual sessions.

The P5+1 platform drive a successful campaign for establishing denuclearized regime in Iran. They signed an agreement called Iran nuclear deal in 2015. This agreement was signed between Iran and six important European countries including USA as the main country. Under this agreement, Iran halted the uranium enrichment that was previously expected by western bloc as going beyond the boundary. In an immediate response, the EU, USA and UN lifted many sanctions. However the US administration withdrew from the agreement in 2018 and again imposed sanctions by arguing that until Iran halt its missile program, there is no negotiation path between the two states. Although the other states which were involved in the P5+1 negotiation process criticized this decision<sup>26</sup>. But still, these is no flexibility from the USA.

The US government is now expecting new conditions with fresh demands associated with the strategic balance in Middle East to resolve tensions with Iran. However, the later country is taking it as serious as he took serious of JCPOA. The coming environment is becoming more

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Einhorn, "Let's Get Realistic on North Korea and Iran", *Brooking Institute*, (October 05, 2018), (URL:<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lets-get-realistic-on-north-korea-and-iran/>)

insecure for both Iran, regional states and for US in case no serious deal be decided. In case of imposition of more sanctions, Iran definitely will cross the limit of going strategically nuclear which will establish new fear dilemma for many other Arab states as well.

## **Conclusion**

Iran is surrounded by Missile threats from Israel, military and cyber-attacks from US and Saudi political antagonism as well. This scenario is very complex strategically, militarily, regionally and politically not for Iran itself but is also equally threatened for its regime stability, image balance, diplomatic channels and for political integrity. It is a matter of complexity in security, deep understanding in political affairs and strategically making smart to Iran in its regional and international scenario. This is known as fear *dilemma*. The dilemma where state make certain rules, national behavior, regional prestige and international image. Where state makes strategies often associated with terror, threats, instability and insecurity.

Iran developed this dilemma in 1980s, when Iraq attacked with chemical weapons. That incident pushed the political state to make choice for deterrence. The deterrence which must not be retaliated. It should provide a permanent security shield. Having no reliable security partner, Iran opted to establish nuclear program in the strategic direction under AMAD during 1990s. The fear dilemma coincided with regional insecurity established the nuclear program of Iran in the strategic direction. The state took assistance by signing agreements with China, India, Russia, Pakistan and Argentina. The state elites took very deep interest as closely monitoring the whole development under their political offices.

The next three decades started win-lose game both for Iran, regional states and the international political actors. Neither Iran reciprocated nor the regional and international actors proclaimed any success in establishing any meaningful strategically stable environment in the Middle East. The security atmosphere get inclined towards more insecure, less politically mature and advance in security threats. Iran's security needs increased. Hence the security arrangements re-evaluated. At one moment Iran self-proclaimed as nuclear state having reached the value of enrichment at 20%.

Now, serious diplomatic means are required to establish a security framework equally acceptable to all regional international actors. That means rigorous discussion on issues pertaining to overcome the fear dilemma of Iran. Acquiring of symmetric options for exploring durable peace

in Middle East. The either side must avoid from choices. It must be a win-win game for all states. However, that is still far away to practice.