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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE / COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

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MASTERS IN DEFENCE STUDIES RESEARCH PAPER

**IRAN IN PERSPECTIVE: MENACING OR MISUNDERSTOOD?**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper assesses Iran's likelihood of becoming the next flashpoint of violence in the Middle East. Iran wishes to re-ascend to the status of being the dominant regional power in the Middle East and Central Asia. This paper argues that Iran will most probably *not* become an increased threat to itself or to other states and will not be the next flashpoint of violence in the Middle East. Iran will not seek to achieve its endstate of regional hegemony through violent conflict in the kinetic or conventional sense, nor does it appear ready for revolution or implosion. Instead, Iran will continue to engage in resumption of what it views to be its rightful place in the Middle East through political manoeuvre, proxy warfare, and brinkmanship.

In order to present this argument, this paper considers the historical pretext as well as the demographic and economic factors that are typically considered as threat catalysts. Besides the overarching aspects of conventional, unconventional, and paramilitary forces, the key issue of nuclear weapon acquisition will be assessed. The political aspects of Iran, namely the religious underpinnings of the regime in addition to the rational and realist manner that characterizes Iran's behaviour will be examined. The paper concludes with a summary threat assessment highlighting the keys elements of each chapter, and the conclusion that Iran's projection and direction of proxies and manipulative use of hydrocarbons, force careful consideration of how to best approach the overarching security concerns of all Iranians, not just the regime. In doing so, it finds at the base of all these elements of the Islamic Republic are the people. Iranians are not unlike most other populations of the world. They seek improvements in education, employment, social programs, information, freedom and most of all respect. A respect that will only be attained when Iran is once again the dominant power in the Middle East, but not through the use of force. Iran is not a threat; it only appears to be one.

## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

It would appear by the amount of alarm generated in recent years that Western perceptions of Iran have arguably formed only upon the basis of contemporary history. Moreover, this view is also somewhat skewed by a simplistic “war-on-terrorism” rhetoric that has seen the image Iran unjustly smeared by its labelled inclusion as a member of the “Axis of Evil.”<sup>2</sup> Adding to this is the entire question of nuclear proliferation and the potential effects to the regional balance of power, global stability, and the potential malevolent use of technology by non-state actors. For lengthy periods, Iran has been a country of significant world import; however, Iran’s recent notoriety increased considerably in 1979 when the Iranian Revolution ended the Pahlavi Dynasty.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the last 30 years of Iran’s history is only a very small fraction of the thousands of years that Persia as both empire and state has existed. An existence characterized by Iran’s constant struggle to either become or remain as the dominant regional power.<sup>4</sup>

While there are many who understand that Iran is one of the world’s oldest civilizations, few will recall the enormity of the Persian Empire approximately 2,500 years ago. At its zenith under Cyrus the Great, circa 550 before Common Era (BCE), Persia invented the science of naval warfare, pioneered the use of cavalry, and generated armies not rivalled until the

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<sup>1</sup>Glenn E. Curtis and Eric J. Hooglund, eds., *Iran: A Country Study*, Fifth ed. (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division Library of Congress, 2008), xii. The adopted spelling of names for purposes of consistency will use this source.

<sup>2</sup>Deborah Campbell, "Iran's Quiet Revolution," *The Walrus* 3, no. 7 (September, 2006), 55.; Roger Cohen, "Cohen: Iran, the Jews and Germany," *International Herald Tribune* March 1, 2009, <http://www.iht.com/bin/printfriendly.php?id=20503279> (accessed March 2, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 158.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), xi.

Napoleonic era. Its empire stretched thousands of miles from the Indus River to the Aegean Sea, and from the Aral Sea to the deserts of Libya.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the rise and fall of Persian empires, dynasties and revolutions, Iran has attempted to maintain a strong culture and an even stronger military.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the four invasions of the past two hundred years represent only a small fraction of the history Iran has been involved in, and serve only to provide the most recent context to the tremendous account of the Persians.<sup>7</sup> What is important to understand, is that Iran's history forms a very important part of its outlook on the future.

In as much as Iran's lengthy existence shapes it historically and influences its future, Iran's singularity also helps to drive its identity.<sup>8</sup> Iran is unlike most other states in the region. It has a unique geostrategic position based upon hydrocarbons and geography. Its population size is greater than its neighbours and yet finds itself as religious minority when compared with Sunnis. Moreover, Iran is a remarkably complex country that reaches Byzantine status in its political self-image, foreign policy machinery and government workings.<sup>9</sup> What is more, Iranians do not think like Westerners.<sup>10</sup> For Iranians, history remains central to their identity and

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<sup>5</sup>Richard A. Gabriel, *Great Battles of Antiquity: The Campaigns of Alexander* (n.p.: n.p., 1992), 14.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Ledeen, "The Iranian Time-Bomb," *The Sydney Papers* 20, no. 1 (Summer, 2008), 60, <<http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=161280720234010;res=IELHSS>> (accessed January 16, 2009).

<sup>7</sup>Mahmoud Ghafouri, "Iran and the West: Confrontation Or Accomodation?" *New Zealand International Review* 32, no. 6 (November-December, 2007), 28. Invasions were by Tsarist Russia in 1810s-20s, Soviet Russia in 1920, the Soviet Union and Britain during the Second World War and Iraq in 1980.

<sup>8</sup>Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 425.

<sup>9</sup>Kenneth Pollack, "The Future of Iran," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (2008), <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200809.pollack.futureiran.html> (accessed April 3, 2009).

<sup>10</sup>Robert Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 234.

continues to figure prominently in what they perceive as their destiny – a return to the stature of regional empire and a garnering of respect worldwide.

Iran has long faced threats to both its existence and its control of resources. Its current pursuit of power in the Middle East should come as no surprise.<sup>11</sup> The recent events in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, dealings with the Kurds, threats towards Israel and the United States (US), and struggle for the “soul of Islam,” are the geo-political chessboard on which Iran finds itself.<sup>12</sup> Iran holds that for the sake of its long-term survival, it must re-ascend to its traditional position of being a dominant regional power. Its vital geographic position, population size, resources and view of history drive it to no other choice.<sup>13</sup> At the risk of conflating the state of Iran and the Persian Empire, the current designs of the modern state of Iran are not intended to see it become a regional or global empire, as was the case at heights of the Persian realm. Instead, modern Iran continues to draw upon its history to provide context and a view to what it can become.

Iran wishes to ascend again to the status of being the dominant regional power in the Middle East and Central Asia. Notwithstanding the recent attempts at rapprochement by US President Barack Obama, Iran would appear headed for increasing levels of conflict in the Levant and with the US, Israel and its Persian Gulf neighbours. This paper will argue that Iran will *not* become an increased threat by descending into self-destruction via revolution or to other states. Accordingly, Iran will not be the next flashpoint of violence in the Middle East. Iran will

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<sup>11</sup>M. R. Dabros, "Rogue State Or Rational State Actor? Understanding and Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Aspirations" (National Strategic Studies Program 10 - Course Paper, Canadian Forces College), 42, <http://wps.cfc.forces.gc.ca/papers/nssc/nssc10/dabros.doc> (accessed January 19, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 181. The struggle for the “soul of Islam” is not meant to assume that Islam is a monolithic faith that is without or lacking diversity, but is meant to acknowledge the present Sunni-Shia dynamic.

<sup>13</sup>Dabros, *Rogue State Or Rational State Actor? Understanding and Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Aspirations*, 42.



not seek to achieve its endstate of regional hegemony in the kinetic or conventional sense. Instead, Iran will continue to engage in reassuming what it views to be its rightful place in the Middle East through political manoeuvre, proxy warfare, and brinkmanship.<sup>14</sup> When the analysis is complete, it will suggest that Iran is not a threat, it only appears to be one.

Threats to worldwide or regional stability aside, it is reasonable to posit that Iran will continue its funding and support of low intensity violence outside its own borders - as is the case with Hizballah. However, it will be shown that Iran does not have the desire nor the sustainable capacities to allow it undertake activities that will bring any significant level of violence or kinetic type conflict proximate to or inside its borders. Iran remains much too weary from the 1980-1988 war with Iraq in terms of the human costs and resource implications. It has gained wisdom in the ways in which it achieves foreign policy objectives and would not willingly precipitate violence.

Analysis of this current ascent will include an examination of Iran's people, its economic base, military structures and the political factors that buttress the foreign policy of the current regime. While it might be tempting for reasons of topical popularity to discuss the political aspects of Iran first and then examine everything else, this paper will follow a different path. The chapters on demography, the economy, and Iran's military capabilities have all been placed ahead of the political. Not unlike other states, those three areas form the three legs of the political stool on which Iran stands. Remove or not understand one of the legs, and the view of Iran could be incomplete. Thus, it would not seem correct to study the political aspects of Iran without first having an understanding of how people, money, and arms make up the political fabric of this important and contentious Islamic Nation.

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<sup>14</sup>Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 81.

Beginning with its population, Iran must contend with the dynamics of the exploding under-30 demographic segment. Pressure on the government for the development of education, access to information, and growth of the economy will continue to mount. This cohort will continue to demand changes in the ends, ways, and means of the current regime. Iran must also find a way to improve the lives of an already disaffected eighteen percent of its citizens who live below the poverty line. State controlled media and access to non-state controlled information will also pose a challenge for the Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ali Hoseini Khamenei and his regime, as it seeks to affect an information campaign to both internal and external audiences. The perplexing and dominating Twelver Shiism also fuels Iran's ambition and its effects on the psyche of the state.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, as Iran's leaders continue to re-position it in the region; they must also navigate somewhat carefully within their own borders. Dissatisfaction is heightening with the regime owing to a perceived lack of effort and ability to deliver economic policies that improves the lives of average Iranians. Compounding this is what population sees as a misplaced priority when it comes to the nuclear agenda of Iran and its placement ahead of their economic well-being. These two elements are having an adverse effect on morale or mood of average Iranians.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to a pre-revolutionary state portrayed by American mainstream media, Iranians want the respect afforded a regional power; they also want prosperity and are therefore unlikely to support foreign policy that will bring about hostility within their borders.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 118.

<sup>16</sup>Yossi Melman and Meir Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007), 163.

<sup>17</sup>Christopher De Bellaigue, *The Struggle for Iran* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2007), 175.; Robert Baer, "Iranian Resurrection," *The National Interest* (November/December, 2008), 36, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=20092> (accessed March 12, 2008).

The economic reality of Iran's oil reserves, aging economic infrastructure, and geo-strategic position, contribute to its foreign policy objective of regional domination.<sup>18</sup> Iran has the second largest combined oil and gas reserves in the world and is located in the hub of the Middle East petroleum producing countries.<sup>19</sup> While there is often question about the certainty of statistics especially concerning proven reserves, the point remains that Iran is well endowed with hydrocarbons and this fact enables it to tighten or loosen the hold it has on a fossil fuel-dependent world. While Iran has a position of economic and geostrategic advantage in the region, it faces challenges with modernizing its refineries and therefore maximizing its return on resource extraction. Moreover, it is handicapped by an ineffective state sector that has an over-reliance on petroleum revenues, and a shocking sixty percent of foreign trade that occurs outside the government's administrative rule because of corruption and inefficiency.<sup>20</sup> Combine this with an unemployment rate nearing thirty percent, and working class Iranians are contending with significant economic difficulties.<sup>21</sup> Despite this friction, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad knows the importance his state's oil plays in the world economy and will continue to leverage every bit of power he can from it.

While Iran's economic power is being leveraged to propel its rise to Middle East domination, its military forces in all forms have grown to the point where Iran has transformed

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<sup>18</sup>Abbas Maleki, "Iran's Regional Foreign/Energy Policy," *POLITIKA* 2007, 1.

<sup>19</sup>Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook - Iran," United States Government, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html> (accessed March 29, 2009).

<sup>20</sup>Kazem Alamdari, "The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 8 (2005), 1291, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4017715>.

<sup>21</sup>Pollack, *The Future of Iran*, 3

from a nascent revolutionary state to a classic military power.<sup>22</sup> Deterrence of invasion is a key tenet of Iran's foreign policy. This is something Iran views as an absolute requirement given its previous history and the various level of distrust it holds for all states. In addition, while Iran would prefer not to fight another conventional war like the one with Iraq, it has not let its military atrophy despite the affect of sanctions. It has kept up with equipment modernization and continued to place support behind the already powerful and politically connected Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Therefore, as the conventional force continues to provide a deterrent effect, Iran uses its al-Quds special force within the IRGC to execute the proxy wars it believes necessary for elimination of perceived threats like Israel and to increase the authority it already holds in the region. The regime manages these efforts, like its political actions, with dexterity, wary of the continuing dangers of playing with fire.

Demographics, economic strength, military forces, and political finesse form the standard power base of nations. The skilful control of those entities by the Khamenei regime, for the most part, is what more cursory observers of Iran may be missing. Iran is a theocratic state whose control is solidified under the tight reign of the Supreme Leader and reinforced by the Council of Experts. Underpinned by religion, the confusing and complicated government of Iran has deliberately ensured it democratically represents the minor interests of its electorate. Nevertheless, the real calculated control over the pursuit of major national interests lies not with the people, the President or the Parliament, but with the Supreme Leader. Khamenei's control over the state is substantial: he determines the overall path of the Islamic Republic. This gives rise to the notion that appearances of real power sharing between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad

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<sup>22</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 77-78.

are but token and ceremonial.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the direction of Iran appears to be rational, pragmatic and the result of careful calculations.

The closing chapter will summarize the threats of violence or conflict, taking into consideration the factors of people, economics, military forces, and the political tendencies and trends. It will provide an assessment indicating that based upon the aforementioned factors Iran will not be the next flashpoint of violence. Instead, Iran will continue to rationally, aggressively and non-violently through brinkmanship, proxy warfare and influence operations, climb to the zenith of power in the Middle East. Iran seeks regional hegemony and global respect through appearance and influence. That it will likely achieve this non-violently, speaks to the enduring need to satisfy its internal obligations.

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<sup>23</sup>Keith Crane, Rollie Lal and Jeffrey Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities* (USA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 10.

## CHAPTER 2 - PEOPLE

Accepting the idea that Iran is acting to reassert again itself regionally and globally, much of this chapter will discuss the demography of Iran as well as its concerns and trends as they relate to the risk of violence. Analysis suggests that the people of Iran do not want violence and conflict. They wish their state to return to being a centre of culture and influence. Iranians are proud of their long and ancient heritage, cognizant of their history, and concerned about their future.

In general, the average Iranian is concerned with employment, inflation, education, poverty, and access to information. Behind those priorities, they are a nationalistic populace with a desire to elevate the status of their nation using all means possible, including the development of a nuclear capability, but stopping short of violence that could visit their own country or the Persian Gulf region. Evidence indicates the compatibility of Islam and democracy is established in Iran. Fundamentalism, secularism, ethnicity and nationalism play an important, but lesser role in how Iranians think of themselves. The view of nationalism that best applies to Iran is one that features an “ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population.”<sup>24</sup>

### POPULATION

The most striking feature of Iran’s population is its youthfulness.<sup>25</sup> In a country of 70 million people, seventy percent are under 30 years of age.<sup>26</sup> This means that seven in ten people have not lived in the pre-revolution period before 1979 and largely know only the

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<sup>24</sup>Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London, UK: University of Nevada Press, 1993), 73.

<sup>25</sup>Campbell, *Iran's Quiet Revolution*, 58.

<sup>26</sup>Sanam Vakil, "Tehran Gambles to Survive," *Current History* 106, no. 704 (December, 2007), 418.

disappointment of the political and economic situation that now confronts them.<sup>27</sup> As of 2007 estimates, for some eighteen percent of the population, that economic situation translates into poverty.<sup>28</sup> These figures point to an increasingly disaffected cohort that wishes improvement in the domestic and overall economic situation of their country.

This is reflected in the government's action following elections in 2007. While not the entire 49 million under-30 group is eligible to vote, the move by the government after Ahmadinejad's embarrassing 2007 loss in local elections to increase the voting age from 15 to 18 indicates that the regime must increasingly pay closer attention to the youth of its state.<sup>29</sup> The move was initially intended to reduce the number of voters in this cohort; however, that move sent the wrong message. The government may be heeding this signal, and reversing its thinking, as at least one on-line source is reporting that the Iranian administration is working on lowering the age to 16 with a view to encouraging a more active participation in democracy.<sup>30</sup> Despite the adjustments to suffrage, the youth in Iran can be characterized as not being receptive to the ideas of its government. Moreover, as will be shown, concerns over the efficacy of government and legitimacy of the regime combine with economic and social factors to affect adversely the morale of that group and the country in general.

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<sup>27</sup>Jane's, "Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran," Jane's Information Group, [http://sentinel.janes.com/docs/sentinel/GULFS\\_country.jsp?Prod\\_Name=GULFS&Sent\\_Country=Iran&](http://sentinel.janes.com/docs/sentinel/GULFS_country.jsp?Prod_Name=GULFS&Sent_Country=Iran&) (accessed March 18, 2009).

<sup>28</sup>Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook - Iran," United States Government, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html> (accessed March 29, 2009).

<sup>29</sup>Associated Press, "Iran Increases Voting Age from 15 to 18 in National Elections," *USA TODAY*, sec. World, January 13, 2007, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-01-13-iran-voting-age\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-01-13-iran-voting-age_x.htm) (accessed March 18, 2009).

<sup>30</sup>Mithridates, "Voting Age in Iran to be Lowered to 16," <http://mithridates.blogspot.com/2008/09/voting-age-in-iran-to-be-lowered-to-16.html> (accessed March 18, 2009).

## MORALE

The spirit of Iran is filled with scepticism. Elected as a populist, Ahmadinejad has not delivered on many of the promises made in his 2005 election platform. Furthermore, the conservative views of the regime are being called into question by young people. As Ray Takeyh writes:

Despite the apparent consolidation of conservative power and the election to the presidency in 2005 of an unreconstructed ideologue, Iran will change. In the end, Iran's sophisticated and youthful populace can be neither appeased by cosmetic concessions nor silenced by threats of coercion.<sup>31</sup>

While not yet a full-blown crisis in morale, it is clear that the majority of people have higher expectations than what is being delivered. Since being elected in 2005, Ahmadinejad's poor performance has been attributed to increases in housing costs, inflation and unemployment, not to mention the unpopular rationing of gasoline. This sentiment of discontent has manifested itself into ire on occasion, as Ahmadinejad received chants of "[D]eath to the Dictator" during a visit to the University of Tehran in 2007.<sup>32</sup>

While discontent with the economy mounts, population growth has slowed. However, there still exists considerable pressure on the government to provide health and education services, which are still largely viewed as unsatisfactory.<sup>33</sup> While many Iranians subscribe to the regime's view on Israel and the path towards nuclear capability, they seem equally dejected over Ahmadinejad's broken promise of a hydrocarbon dividend that was offered as payment for every Iranian.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 3.

<sup>32</sup>Vakil, *Tehran Gambles to Survive*, 419.

<sup>33</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 59-62.

<sup>34</sup>De Bellaigue, *The Struggle for Iran*, 227.



Iran's lack of morale does not entirely stem from Ahmadinejad or the government as a whole. The clerics are often linked to corruption, and are accused of lining their pockets and neglecting the promises of social justice for the poor. Blame has also been placed at the feet of the Supreme Leader as one author writes, accusing Khamenei of "...deflecting discontent and blame."<sup>35</sup> The impression from all of these views is that Iran is mired in a malaise of disappointments. Morale shows no sign of improving and blame is widely dispersed within the regime's leadership. It is therefore not surprising that amongst average Iranians their thoughts turn not to conflict, but to the hope of improving their lives tomorrow: "[T]here is real social and political change afoot in Iran, in which the natural dynamic toward greater awareness, greater education, and greater freedom is prominent."<sup>36</sup> This move to greater individual freedom suggests that average Iranians are more concerned with improving their lives rather than fighting an ideological war of the state.

## **MEDIA INFLUENCES**

Awareness of the world outside Iran has increased dramatically over the years. Satellite television access, the BBC's Farsi service, Radio Farda and most significantly the Internet have all contributed to this. Iranians attribute particular importance to their Internet access, offering that they are not isolated from information unlike the hermit states of Cuba or the North Korea.<sup>37</sup> While estimates for bloggers exceed one million, more staggering is the fact that Farsi is the

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<sup>35</sup>Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 61.

<sup>36</sup>Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 288.

<sup>37</sup>Cohen, *Cohen: Iran, the Jews and Germany*.

third most used language on the Internet next to English and Chinese.<sup>38</sup> Some 70,000 blogs are active in Iran promoting free discussion and access to information, despite the constraining efforts of the regime.<sup>39</sup> This access and the web of networks that have been created, provides a voice to the youth of Iran, offering different views than that of state controlled media.

Iranian life, according to journalist Deborah Campbell, is divided between what the government wants to present and what the “real society” wants to do in terms of political, social, and economic change.<sup>40</sup> The impression is becoming clearer; the youth of Iran are not focussed on irredentism or the problems of the Levant. Further, the sense is that they are not idealistic like the revolutionary generation. The youth of Iran are money and material-oriented, attracted to Western merchandise, are absorbed primarily in their own interests and activities. They harbour a desire to become worldlier. More telling: “[T]hey aren’t interested in the ideals of the Islamic government” and want a more moderate Iran that is edging carefully backwards away from the possibility of conflict.<sup>41</sup> The views of the younger generation would seem to be moving farther away from the views of the state.

## RELIGION

Key to understanding the people of Iran is having an appreciation of its religious characteristics and its influence in the Iranian state. These influences take the form of Shia Islam, the dominant sect of Twelver Shiism, its influence on Ahmadinejad, and the divide in Islam between the Sunni and Shia. The advancement of secularism and the notion of

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<sup>38</sup>Barbara J. Falk, *The Relevance of the Dissident Oeuvre to the Middle East Today, Or... Why the Palestinians Ought to Read Michnik and how Iran could be the Next Poland*, (2008), 19.

<sup>39</sup>Campbell, *Iran's Quiet Revolution*, 59.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 59-60.

fundamentalism will also be discussed as they relate to Iran and its possibilities of violence and threats to non-Shia states.

### **Shia Islam**

Within Iran, ninety percent of its population follow the teachings of Shia Islam.<sup>42</sup> This is juxtaposed against the rest of the nearly one billion Muslims in the world, the majority of which are Sunni.<sup>43</sup> The Shia religion has been characterized by: "...passive melancholy, modesty, a belief in the righteousness of humble self sacrifice, and in the virtue of quietly doing good in adverse circumstances."<sup>44</sup> Historian Tom Axworthy goes further in identifying the key tenets of Shia Islam in the following comparison from *Empire of the Mind*:

A more apposite analogy...can be drawn between, on the one hand, the emphasis on law and tradition in Sunni Islam and Judaism and, on the other hand, the emphasis on humility, sacrifice, and the religious hierarchy in Christianity and Shi'ism.<sup>45</sup>

Shia Islam also appears to be more open to the use of logic and reason in its theological underpinnings, is less inclined to determinism and favours more the application of freewill, and finally, is generally more open to unorthodox ideas of the Islamic sphere.<sup>46</sup> These points are underpinned in that Shia Islam seems pre-disposed to a more peaceful, independent, rational and well-meaning existence. This is not to say that the rest of the Islamic sects are not worthy without their merits. While any religion or sect can be misinterpreted, abused, twisted and put to unproductive and violent use, Shiism does not seem to lend itself at the basic level to those trends. Certainly,

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<sup>42</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 118.

<sup>43</sup>Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men : An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 22.

<sup>44</sup>Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 175.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.

Shiism appears to be a version of Islam that is not predisposed to a clash with other religions nor is it bent on rigidity at the sake of reason.

### **Twelver Shias**

Iran's religious history has been subjected to clerics who are disciples of the belief in the return of the Twelfth Imam.<sup>47</sup> Twelver Shias believe in an arrival, which is supposed to occur on "[J]udgment day."<sup>48</sup> There exists some consternation about how strongly the Iranian leadership believe this prophecy. Key amongst the concerns are those surrounding Ahmadinejad. His acts to prepare for this eventual return have featured a preparation of a boulevard and improvements to the shrine and mosque for the "Mahdi" to the sum of 20 million dollars (US). The significance of religion is exemplified by the fact that money could have been arguably spent elsewhere, especially in the social sector.<sup>49</sup>

Possibly more concerning are the contracts Ahmadinejad had his cabinet sign and drop down a well; contracts to welcome and hasten the return of the "Hidden Imam."<sup>50</sup> There is some linkage to the return of the Twelfth Imam and that event being in the midst of violence and chaos "to lead an era of Islamic justice."<sup>51</sup> While it is unlikely that Ahmadinejad would do anything other than ceremonial religious worship that would seed the return of the Imam, the optics of his actions and the willingness of his immediate followers could be construed as disconcerting, especially if he is able to allow his faith to cloud his judgment in foreign policy. This type of

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<sup>47</sup>Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (United states of America: Yale University Press, 2006), 318.

<sup>48</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 120.

<sup>49</sup>Hussein Solomon, "Is Religious and Cultural Extremism a Global Security Threat?" In *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Global Issues*, eds. James E. Harf and Mark Owen Lombardi, Fifth ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 330.

<sup>50</sup>Ledeem, *The Iranian Time-Bomb*, 59.

<sup>51</sup>Solomon, *Is Religious and Cultural Extremism a Global Security Threat?*, 330.

behaviour seems bizarre when viewed out of context. However, many political leaders around the world worship in their respective religions and some may even wish for the return of a deity. The fact that Ahmadinejad's and the Islamic regimes' worship are more public in their manifestations, and as such receive more scrutiny, is perhaps allowing the "Axis of Evil" characterization to influence unfairly the perception of Iran.

### **Fundamentalism**

Fundamentalism in Iran or the Persian Gulf Region deserves consideration for potentially placing it at a greater risk of violence. Well-known Iranian dissident, Akbar Ganji's book *The Road to Democracy in Iran* offers a view on how the West and Islam are defined by their conflictive past. He espouses "liberal democratic humanism" or as he also expresses it "freedom, justice, and love" as the antidotes along with reasons for the "fundamentalist readings of politics and religion."<sup>52</sup> Fundamentalism exists in any number of states worldwide. It ebbs and flows with the times and the cause. Subject to the exigencies of fundamentalism, Iran is no different and conceivably suffers from excessive enquiry in this regard. This results from being under the world's microscope for several decades and more recently under an even higher power lens owing to the nuclear issue. If Ganji is right, then the youth of Iran are likely to reject the fundamentalist ideology and not allow its negative aspects to bring unfortunate events to Iran and the world.<sup>53</sup>

Another theory that counters the effects fundamentalism has in Iran and the region is posited in Vali Nasr's *The Shia Revival*. He believes that:

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<sup>52</sup>Akbar Ganji, *The Road to Democracy in Iran* (USA: A Boston Review Book, 2008), 110-112.

<sup>53</sup>Jane's, *Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran*, 149.

The Shia revival constitutes the most powerful resistance and challenge to Sunni extremism and jihadi activism within the region. Shia revival is an anti-Wahhabi and anti-extremist force. Its objectives are served by change in the regional balance of power and democracy. In turn, democracy will unleash the full extent of the Shia challenge to Sunni extremism. Democracy will bring to power Shia majorities and give greater voice to Shia minorities, whose ideology and politics diverge from the extremist bent of Sunni radicalism.<sup>54</sup>

From the perspective of wanting stability in the Islamic world, it may be in the best interest of global security to have Shia power on the rise. As the former US Central Intelligence Agent Roberts Baer submits, there are disturbing movements within the Sunni faith. Disaffected Sunnis are becoming extremist *tafkdiris*, recruiting young men and women to kill Westerners and those Muslims who cooperate with the West. He equates them to the Khmer Rouge of Islam, indicating they know only how to destroy and not how to build societies.<sup>55</sup> If true, fundamentalism or extremism is a threat that menaces Iran then it would seem that the heterodox and informed youth espoused in Ganji's liberal democratic humanist philosophy and the revival of the Shia are measure enough to counter this threat.

### **The Shia Crescent**

A Shia revival to help counter the effects of fundamentalism has merit.

However, can an increase in the influence of the 'Shia Crescent' present a threat, as suggested by the author, to stability? As Pierre Pahlavi posits:

The growth of Iranian influence and the reaffirmation of their identity by the Shia of Iraq, Lebanon and Pakistan have fed the fear in several Sunni and Western capitals of seeing the emergence of a pan-Shia sphere of solidarity under Iranian influence, stretching from the Great Wall of China to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. From this apprehension over the past few years has developed the thesis of a 'Shia Crescent', a new geopolitical grouping

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<sup>54</sup>Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 251.

<sup>55</sup>Baer, *Iranian Resurrection*, 203-204.

occupying a key position on the Eurasian chessboard, and a potential source of regional and international instability.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps the aggressive policy and attitude of Iran is striking a note of concern in Sunni and Western capitals. Although, in the assessment of Axworthy the notion of Shiism as a movement that will attract support outside of Hizballah in Lebanon and Iran itself he contends that Shias outside Iran have only a mild interest in "...Iranian-style Islamic rule." Moreover, he adds that the *velayat-e-faqih* is emerging as a form of government that overstepped its original design and purpose.<sup>57</sup> Whatever side of the argument is selected, two points bear consideration. The first is a sheer appreciation of the demographic numbers. The majority of Muslims in the world are Sunni, and that in itself presents a significant challenge to the pan-Shia community and Iran. This leads to the second point, which is that, it is only human nature for groups of people who are in minority situations to attempt to coalesce and provide a counter to a larger adversary, perceived or real. This religious rivalry has been going on since events at Karbala in 680 CE. It would appear therefore, that neither side should gain too much of the upper hand, and while a resurgence of the Shia community is undoubtedly in progress it would appear to be a natural response, and should not be immediate cause for concern. Vali Nasr holds a supporting view:

The 2005 presidential election mobilized and gave voice to those Iranians who feel most drawn to the Shia revival and resent the Sunni backlash against it most keenly. The throngs who voted for Ahmadinejad come from humble religious backgrounds. Regardless of what they feel about politics, they are deeply attached to the core values and piety of Shiism, which is in turn tightly bound with the shrine cities of Iraq, and they are offended by the tenor and ferocity of sectarian violence. The conservative leaders who have risen to the

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<sup>56</sup>Pierre Pahlavi, "The Place of Shi'ism in Iranian Grand Strategy," *Defense Nationale Et Sécurité Collective* (August/September, 2008), 51. Despite the Journal's French title, this article was also published by the Journal in English as well as French.

<sup>57</sup>Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 14.

top in Iran share these feelings, and their language of power echoes the mood on the street.<sup>58</sup>

## **Secularism**

Akbar Ganji pleads tolerance when it comes to the rivalry among the world's major faiths. He declares that all faiths must cease their attachment for declaring their superiority and move away from the power of the state. Without this, there cannot be peace and as a result, war, violence, and religious unrest will continue.<sup>59</sup> While most liberal democrats would agree in principle with this idea, Hussein Salmon holds that reforms leading to secularism are not possible due to the "totalitarian theocratic" construct of the Iranian state arguing that reforms in this area have in general, encountered tremendous difficulty in moving against the authoritarian core of Iran.<sup>60</sup>

The movement of the Iranian government away from the religion of Islam will be a long and arduous movement, and needs to be negotiated between the state and its people. The increase in the move towards a more secular Iran will only lead to violence if the state is unable to adapt gradually to its people; no regime can remain perfectly totalitarian. All regimes are necessarily strict in their immaturity, but as times and attitudes change so do people, and therefore states that do not 'give a little' risk sowing the seeds of rebellion. Values of the people change, so must the state do the same.<sup>61</sup> Iran appears to be changing, albeit very gradually, and without much support from the regime.

## **ETHNICITY AND IRANIAN NATIONALISM**

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<sup>58</sup>Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, 226.

<sup>59</sup>Ganji, *The Road to Democracy in Iran*, 112-113.

<sup>60</sup>Solomon, *Is Religious and Cultural Extremism a Global Security Threat?*, 334.

<sup>61</sup>Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 43.



Ethnic differences often form the tinder for conflict and violence. The former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Iraq are but a few recent examples of this. Iran is a multiethnic society, whose largest component is Persian accounting for fifty to fifty-five percent of the population.<sup>62</sup> Ethnic divisions do exist in Iran and have largely been muted by the government's indoctrination of Iranians with a strong sense of nationalism and stressing the uniting effect of Shiism.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, Iran like Turkey, Syria, and Iraq face significant problems with the Kurds that exist in each of their countries. As Robert Baer writes in the *Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, at an estimated worldwide population of between 20 and 35 million, Kurds are "...the largest ethnic group without their own country."<sup>64</sup> Baer sizes up the problem in Iran, by predicting that it will continue to use the Kurds as burrs under their neighbours' saddles, funding, arming, and training them for guerrilla warfare aimed at destabilizing Iraq, Syria, and Turkey should the need arise again.<sup>65</sup>

From an internal security perspective, the Kurds do not appear to pose a threat. Having watched the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq increase with the removal of Saddam, Iran will continue to maintain a strong security force presence to curtail any ideas of unrest.<sup>66</sup> As Crane *et al*, in their report for the respected RAND Corporation, estimate:

Iran's Kurdish community has little potential to fight for autonomy. It lacks critical mass and remains split among factions within Iran and in relation to Kurdish groups in neighbo[u]ring states. Iranian Kurds may remain a source of

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<sup>62</sup>Jane's, *Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran*, 148.

<sup>63</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 37-56.

<sup>64</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 114.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 114

<sup>66</sup>Keith Crane, Rollie Lal and Jeffrey Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities* (USA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 53.

opposition to the Iranian regime but will not pose an existential challenge to the state.<sup>67</sup>

This does not mean that Iran could not face violence in this domain in the future, but that assessed the probability is low at this time.

Iran has shown astuteness, demonstrating that it can suppress ethnic nationalism by leveraging the unifying effects of Shiism, and intertwining it with nationalism that takes its strength from a common culture and history.<sup>68</sup> This combined with dim prospects of the Iranian Kurds gathering enough “critical mass” to start a movement towards independence indicates that the likelihood of violence emanating from an ethnic problem in Iran is doubtful. In other words, the Kurds may present some potential internal challenges to the Iranian state; however, this does not appear probable.

## **A CONSOLIDATED VIEW**

This chapter set out to highlight the demographic factors that could potentially serve as catalyst for violence. It briefly described the key population trends led by the under-30 cohort, signifying that there is “real social and political change afoot” that will lead to increased levels of freedom, education and awareness.<sup>69</sup> The increased awareness is largely the result of booming Internet usage, which provides access to information and allows average Iranians to explore beyond their borders and network with each other.<sup>70</sup> Internet access also affords a greater degree of awareness about the theocratic ideology of the regime, the outside world’s perceptions of it as well as and government shortcomings.

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<sup>67</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 53

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 41

<sup>69</sup>Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 288

<sup>70</sup>Campbell, *Iran's Quiet Revolution*, 59-60.

Morale suffers in Iran. While Iran's politicians and power brokers engage in public debate about the nuclear issue, average people are concerned about the price of day-to-day living.<sup>71</sup> While the Ahmadinejad administration was elected on a populist agenda, his government's efforts to address inflation, housing, and public transportation have not met the expectations of the populace.<sup>72</sup> Although religious issues are omnipresent in Iran, the overriding sense is that, as Axworthy argues:

...many ordinary Iranians do not much like seeing their government spending money and effort on behalf of foreigners— whether Iraqis, Lebanese, or Palestinians—when plenty of Iranians lack jobs, housing, and decent living conditions.<sup>73</sup>

The Shia Revival, secularism, and nationalism all are germane issues, but seem to take a backseat for the average Iranian whose is concerned more with the quality of life than with the problem of church and state. This point is underscored by Hooman Majd in his 2008 book *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*. Based upon his travels throughout Iran, he argues people were more concerned with a possible war against the US, economic sanctions, and the country's financial health than with rumours of the Supreme Leader's death.

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<sup>71</sup>De Bellaigue, *The Struggle for Iran*, 116.

<sup>72</sup>Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 386.

<sup>73</sup>Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 287.

## CHAPTER 3 - ECONOMICS

When a state decides to achieve a grand strategic goal, it needs a sustainable supply of human capital and resources. Iran is no different in this regard. Despite its meagre efforts to diversify, the centrepiece of its economy is the hydrocarbon sector. Iran's oil and gas reserves combined make it second in world rankings of proven reserves.<sup>74</sup> Eighty-five percent of its state-generated revenues come from this sector alone.<sup>75</sup> The dependence of Iran on its under-earth treasure cannot be overstated. Given this reliance, it makes sense that Iran, while aspiring to greater power in the region and the world, would not doggedly pursue an objective that would endanger its treasury source. In other words, Iran cannot jeopardize its source of economic power in the near or long term. This chapter will look at two aspects of the economic picture in Iran beginning with the dependency on the hydrocarbon sector, and then it will discuss the inefficiency of the state sector and the impact of sanctions.

### HYDROCARBONS

Until very recently, Iran has enjoyed substantial revenues from rising oil prices. A high price for oil is a necessity for the overall strength of the Iranian economy.<sup>76</sup> It is their economic source of strength – a classic case of the resource curse. Iran is not alone in the world with its almost singular dependence on hydrocarbons. Azerbaijan and Nigeria find themselves in similar

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<sup>74</sup>Ghafouri, *Iran and the West: Confrontation Or Accomodation?*, 27.

<sup>75</sup>Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook - Iran*, 7.

<sup>76</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 67-78.

economic situations.<sup>77</sup> Concomitantly, what makes Iran's situation unique is its geographic position. Iran occupies a vital strategic position to affect both the gulf of Persia and the world oil supply whose transportation lines pass within striking range of its shores.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Iran is expanding its dominance through serious dialogue with potential partners from not only the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz, but it is also expanding its economic influence throughout Central Asia with a view to positioning itself as the key node in the pipeline networks of greater Central Asia with links to Europe.<sup>79</sup> In addition to its substantial reserves and strategic location, from a Sunni-Shia sectarian perspective, Iran has assumed the role as the de facto leader of the Shia owing to the fact that "three-quarters of the region's oil reserves are concentrated in areas which have a population which is two-thirds Shia."<sup>80</sup> These three elements combine to demonstrate how quintessential hydrocarbons are to Iran from a geostrategic, religious, and economic position.

Hydrocarbons are not only Iran's "economic oxygen," but are viewed by Ahmadinejad as protection against further sanction, and possible attack of nuclear infrastructure. Were further sanctions or an attack to occur, Iran has repeatedly threatened to "punish" the world by decreasing or stopping the flow of oil.<sup>81</sup> The influence Iran derives from its hydrocarbons is enhanced further by its ties in this domain with powerful states such as China. A case in point is

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<sup>77</sup> The Economist, "Boom and Gloom" The Economist March 8, 2007 [http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=8819945&fsrc=RSS](http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=8819945&fsrc=RSS) (accessed April 20, 2009); Mkandawire, Thandika and Charles C. Soludo "Our Continent, Our Future" [http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-9389-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-9389-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html) (accessed April 20, 2009).

<sup>78</sup>Maleki, *Iran's Regional Foreign/Energy Policy*, 2.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 7-11.

<sup>80</sup>Pahlavi, *The Place of Shi'ism in Iranian Grand Strategy*, 52.

<sup>81</sup>Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 61.

the unwillingness of China, a veto-holding permanent member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, to support further sanctions against Iran. Iran, along with Saudi Arabia and Angola, are the top three suppliers of oil to China.<sup>82</sup> Iran has power in this regard and wields it with calculating effect.

However, Iran's lifeblood is not without its problems. Iran's paucity of maintenance and scant investment in its refinement infrastructure and technology could cause it to cease being an exporter of oil by as early as 2015.<sup>83</sup> Further, Iran's failure to meet its Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) quota combined with the 2007 introduction of gasoline rationing has resulted in the demise of the President's popularity.<sup>84</sup> More acutely, Robert Baer asserts that Iran could be "tapped out within ten years."<sup>85</sup> In order to assure its supply for domestic and export use he contemplates that:

...Iran could provoke a war with Saudi Arabia, sending ground troops and paratroopers to take Riyadh within forty-eight hours. And it would take even less time for Iran to seize Saudi Arabia's oil fields, which are particularly vulnerable from the sea.<sup>86</sup>

While theoretically possible, the risks associated to Iran, much like those of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, makes this seem unreasonable for a geostrategically savvy state. Iran needs oil to survive, but would not entertain such a course of action to, in effect, cut its nose off without regard for its face. Iran is cleverer than Baer posits.

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<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>83</sup>Pollack, *The Future of Iran*, 3; Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 71.

<sup>84</sup>Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 286.

<sup>85</sup>Baer, *Iranian Resurrection*, 44.

<sup>86</sup>Robert Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 138.

The real impact of oil on Iran relates to its ability to manoeuvre regionally. As Shahram Chubin calculates:

Iran's regional activism and support of the Hamas and [Hizbullah] 'resistance' movements have been aided by the oil windfall of recent years. But as the term 'oil curse' suggests, a fall in the price of oil can succeed its rise with dizzying rapidity, and can do so after recipients of oil rents have become addicted or at least habituated to them. Iran has additional problems: it has a record of economic mismanagement and is under international sanctions. The recent decline in oil prices threatens to have a major impact on Iran's economy and ability to continue as paymaster of the 'resistance', and on Ahmadinejad's political fortunes.<sup>87</sup>

What may be best for the region and for Iran are stable oil prices that are neither outrageously high allowing for bold moves enabled by an Iranian government or prices that are too low causing economic eventual unrest in the worst of circumstances.

Although evidence suggests that Iran's hydrocarbon-based economy is having some difficulties remaining technologically relevant, it is not close to becoming problematic and therefore posing a potentially greater security threat to either itself or others.<sup>88</sup> Some infrastructure and petrochemical technology investment has occurred, and use of foreign contractors has increased. The National Iranian Oil Company's (NIOC) labour force in the sector has improved and gas production has been elevated. Oil production appears to be stable at around four million barrels per day. Despite this, Iran still requires substantial amounts of investment to counter the accumulated neglect over the decades. While the astute Iranian oil technocrats will accept Chinese and Russian money and technology, they would much prefer investment from Western companies like Shell, Exxon, Conoco, and Chevron, which are

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<sup>87</sup>Shahram Chubin, "Iran's Power in Context," *Survival* 51, no. 1 (February-March, 2009), 176.

<sup>88</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 101.

hampered by sanctions.<sup>89</sup> As Kenneth Pollack writes, “...the problems in the oil industry and corruption have crippled Iran’s economy.”<sup>90</sup>

As much as Iran uses its oil power to achieve policy objectives, it needs its oil resource to survive. Any overtures that would upset the strength or worsen the weakness of this critical element of Iranian power will logically be avoided by the regime. This same philosophy holds true for not aggravating the already tough situation for the Iranian leadership and its restricted economy.

### **STATE SECTOR AND THE MACRO EFFECTS OF SANCTIONS**

Contributing to the mediocre performance in the hydrocarbon sector is Iran’s corrupt and ineffective state sector. A staggering sixty percent of foreign trade occurs outside of the government writ.<sup>91</sup> In particular, the *bonyads*, who control an estimated forty percent of the GDP, are largely exempt from taxation, worsening an already thin tax base.<sup>92</sup> The *bonyads* are “government-linked charitable foundations” that should be subject to closer financial scrutiny based upon their dubious efforts to relieve poverty.<sup>93</sup> This translates to potential revenue losses that otherwise could be spent in any number of programs and has led to discontent with the government, particularly in urban areas where the demand for services is high.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Pollack, *The Future of Iran*, 3.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup>Alamdari, *The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government*, 4.

<sup>92</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 192.

<sup>93</sup>Glenn E. Curtis and Eric J. Hooglund, eds., *Iran: A Country Study*, Fifth ed. (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division Library of Congress, 2008), 192.

<sup>94</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 62-65.



Iran's export of non-oil commodities, largely made up of agricultural product and carpets, would not be missed were an interruption of these exports to occur. However, the daily lives of the average Iranian would be affected if imports were to slow or stop owing to new or a tightening of, current sanctions.<sup>95</sup> The leadership of Iran is aware of this, and it is not likely to jeopardize the imbalance in as much as it is already trying to remedy it. As with the hydrocarbon sector, Iran cannot afford further sanctions that may lead to destabilization of its regime. Sanctions exacerbate the problems of "mismanagement" and leave Iran more vulnerable.

Likewise, the impacts of sanctions, mismanagement, corruption, and falling oil prices have also affected Iran's financial sector, which has had trouble in gaining access to international credit.<sup>96</sup> Freedom House International characterizes Iran's economic and financial corruption as "endemic," citing that forty percent of managers admitted to having paid bribes in order to conduct their affairs.<sup>97</sup> This precarious situation is not likely to improve, and the likelihood of increased sanctions is a definite possibility, as the Obama administration will have a greater desire for diplomacy, and a modest tolerance for perceived misbehaviour.<sup>98</sup>

Iran's economy is failing to meet the expectations of Iran's populace. Housing, public transport, and power generation are all areas in which the government is not meeting demands.<sup>99</sup> As Nikki Keddie assesses in her definitive *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*:

In domestic policy, Ahmadinejad has taken steps that have some popular appeal, but they do not meet the need for major reform of the economy, which

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<sup>95</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 199.

<sup>96</sup>Chubin, *Iran's Power in Context*, 178.

<sup>97</sup>Stephen C. Fairbanks, "Iran: Countries at the Crossroads 2007," Freedom House, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=8&ccrcountry=158&section=84&ccrpage=37> (accessed April 13, 2009).

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>99</sup>Jane's, *Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran*, 149.

would have to tackle some of the vested interests that have supported him. Public opinion regarding his domestic policies remains divided, and reports about it are contradictory, Ahmadinejad has support among those who fought in the Iran-Iraq War. Iran is, however, becoming ever more urbanized, educated, and populated by persons who have experience making their desires known.<sup>100</sup>

This would suggest that the government of Iran wants to assure its stability and must concentrate internally as well as externally on policies that improve the everyday lives of Iranians.

## **ECONOMIC APPRAISAL**

This brief overview demonstrated that hydrocarbons are the economic centre of gravity for Iran. In effect, Iran's economic future is inextricably tied to the price of hydrocarbons. Iran oil and gas reserves directly affect its ability to establish and maintain trade relationships and political alliances. This power is buttressed by Iran's geostrategic location, economic might relative to the rest of the Gulf, and religious influence in the pan-Shia sphere. It also highlighted the strain that the Iranian economy is enduring. This is due to chronic mismanagement in both the hydrocarbon and state sector, political corruption and the impact of sanctions.

The risk of Iran becoming more of a threat beyond its borders or violent within them is very much attached to its economic performance. The economy in general and in particular the hydrocarbon sector must not worsen, or the threat to Iran's neighbours could increase and the stability of Iran eroded. The leadership of Iran is cognizant of this difficult period and to its credit is trying to navigate deftly through the sanctions and economic strain. These pressures will only continue to mount as the regime continues to bankroll the "resistance" through Hizballah and use unconventional forces to achieve part of its foreign policy objectives.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 346.

<sup>101</sup>Chubin, *Iran's Power in Context*, 176.

## CHAPTER 4 – THE MILITARY AND OTHER STATE SERVICES

The military alone (and for that matter other state services) cannot secure the hegemony Iran's foreign policy seeks. Iran's main reason for having these conventional forces-in-being is to achieve a deterrent effect. Iran's perceived or real capability to produce a nuclear weapon is the crowning achievement in deterrent effect. Abroad, Iran will continue to use skilfully, covertly, and in a limited manner unconventional forces to further its objectives particularly in the Levant and Iraq. The sense is that Iran is very shrewd in its use of force and will choose its efforts carefully with a view to achieving regional dominance and global recognition. Rather than looking for a fight, Iran actually wants to make sure no one wants to pick a fight with it.

### CONVENTIONAL ARMED FORCES

From Iran's strategic perspective, it has always been surrounded by enemies both real and perceived. Since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its territorial size has been shrunk to half.<sup>102</sup> As a result, and accelerated by the 1979 revolution, Iran has transformed itself into a "classic military power."<sup>103</sup> According to 2007 data, Iran possesses a large conventional armed force of 420,000 organized around the three standard branches of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. However, 220,000 of those personnel are conscripts, all of whom serve in the Army.<sup>104</sup> These conscripts are poorly trained and equipped, giving a positive quantitative impression, but not adding considerably to the qualitative side of the equation. Including the Army's questionable conscripts, at just over half a million active personnel, Iran easily doubles in pure manpower its

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<sup>102</sup>Fariborz Mokhtari, "Mahmud Ahamadinejad's Presidency: What does Iran really Want?" *American Foreign Policy Interests* 28, no. 5 (October 1, 2006), 361, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10803920600957051> (accessed October 16, 2008).

<sup>103</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 77-78.

<sup>104</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 264 and 297.

next nearest Gulf rival in Saudi Arabia at 224, 500.<sup>105</sup> Despite its relative regional superiority the assessment is that Iran's conventional forces are inadequately trained and do not have the logistical wherewithal to support operations significantly outside of Iran's borders.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, Iran would have to modernize significantly its force in order to pursue expeditionary notions and this would only have effect if its neighbours did not keep up with their own force improvements.<sup>107</sup> Other observations of the conventional forces include poor organization and joint integration with sister services and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IGRC).<sup>108</sup> Iran's conventional capabilities are limited regionally and globally.<sup>109</sup> Regardless, they are in line with Iran's principle military doctrine of deterrence.<sup>110</sup>

While the criticisms of the conventional forces are accurate, these forces nevertheless furnishing sufficient deterrent to Iran's Gulf neighbours, offering any likely attacking force the probability of suffering highly.<sup>111</sup> With the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the threat of conventional attack from neighbouring states is low, whether as an allied force or single state. Iran now considers its principal threat to be external to the Gulf in the form of Israel and the US.<sup>112</sup> However, Iranian conventional forces are no match for conventional US forces with or

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<sup>105</sup>Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 38.

<sup>106</sup>Daniel Coats and Charles Robb, *Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development* (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center,[2008]), <http://www.bipartisanpolicy.org/ht/a/GetDocumentAction/i/8448> (accessed March 11, 2009).

<sup>107</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*.

<sup>108</sup>Jane's, *Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran*, 10.

<sup>109</sup>Chubin, *Iran's Power in Context*, 180.

<sup>110</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 282.

<sup>111</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 109.

<sup>112</sup>Coats and Robb, *Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development*, 28.

without Israel. A credible comparison to the nature of the conflict that occurred between the US (along with its Allies) and Iraq posited that Iranian forces would likely succumb just as quickly as the Iraqis did in both Gulf Wars.<sup>113</sup>

For Iran, the notion of contemplating conventional kinetic conflict borders on being preposterous. Iran has few corners where it can shield its forces from the military might and the reach of US forces. It is adjacent to seven countries by land borders and shares the Gulfs of Oman and Persia with an additional six states, making its porosity a significant concern in the event of hostilities. With near impunity owing to its “command of the commons—command of the sea, space, and air,” US forces would be able to strike literally anywhere in Iran.<sup>114</sup> Centres of government control, key command and control nodes, infrastructure, and transportation hubs and ports could be targeted with devastating effect as witnessed in the wars with Iraq.<sup>115</sup> Iran learned its bloody lesson on conventional war with Iraq in the 1980s. Suffering casualties of between one and two million and losing an entire generation of Iranian youth. Iran came away with the realization that it had more success with asymmetrical tactics and unconventional forces than with attrition style warfare in the name of the Supreme Leader.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup>Baer, *Iranian Resurrection*, 36.

<sup>114</sup>Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer, 2003), 7.

<sup>115</sup>Michael Scheuer, *Through our Enemies' Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*, 2006th ed. (USA: Potomac Books, 2006), 196.

<sup>116</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 98-99.

## UNCONVENTIONAL FORCES

After the Iran-Iraq war, the unconventional forces decreased from a high of 350,000 personnel to its present day total of 125,000.<sup>117</sup> It consists of the IRGC or *Pasdaran*, which was originally born out of Khomeini's 1979 desire to have a formation with a *raison d'être* of preventing those forces still loyal to the Shah from staging a counterrevolutionary coup as faith in the army was not complete.<sup>118</sup> Selected for their political leanings, this force began at 10,000 and now rivals or surpasses each of their respective conventional counterparts in influence and effectiveness. In addition to having its own army, navy, and air force, the IGRC has a secretive special operations force called *Al Qods*. Initially created by the Ayatollah to protect the revolution, it was also conceived to "help the clerics enforce Islamic ethics and codes."<sup>119</sup>

The IGRC and *Al Qods* have a different mandate than that of the conventional forces. As Cordesman and Kleiber write in their excellent 2007 analysis of *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*:

As an asymmetric threat that can seek to intimidate or attack using unconventional forces, Iran has established a large mix of unconventional forces that can challenge its neighbours in a wide variety of asymmetric wars, including a low-level war of attrition."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 297.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>119</sup>Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 210.

<sup>120</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 195.

Iran uses the IRGC to front operations outside of Iran and enable relationships with groups like Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad through its *Al Qods* force.<sup>121</sup> While it is not a unique capability, the Iranians have been noted for their maven like skills in this type of warfare, making full use of the cloak of the state to remain as covert as possible.<sup>122</sup> This combined with the Ayatollah's support, increased empowerment in politics, and the economy, has made the IGRC a force of strategic import.<sup>123</sup>

*Jane's* reports that the IRGC has adopted new doctrine that was apparently tested in Iran during 2004. Aimed at repelling conventionally superior US and Israeli forces, the principles of this kind of asymmetrical warfare would see invading forces attacked outside of Iran's borders.<sup>124</sup> This could be construed as an indication that the IGRC and indeed Iran's leadership may be placing the state on more of a war footing that it already is. However, given Iran's previous conventional war experience this should be seen as the normal exercising of forces. Any other nation in the world with comparable and genuine security concerns would arguably be doing the same.

The main concern from the perspective of this essay is whether the IRGC poses a threat to instability and violence in Iran. Frederic Tellier, a former French Attaché to Iran does not believe this to be likely:

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<sup>121</sup>Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 210.

<sup>122</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 202; Baer, *Iranian Resurrection*, 36-37.

<sup>123</sup>Akbar Ganji, "The Latter-Day Sultan: Power and Politics in Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 6 (November/December, 2008), 53, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20081001faessay87604/akbar-ganji/the-latter-day-sultan.html> (accessed 16 January 2009).

<sup>124</sup>Jane's, *Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran*, 126.

Although the Revolutionary Guards do indeed constitute, more than ever, an effective and pampered military force, their role in Iran's new political configuration is in no way limited to posing such threats. As we have seen, the Revolutionary Guards, before being a military power, are a social and economic power that uses military means as a safeguard. Financial dealings are the bedrock of both the Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader poles, and the Pasdaran is a highly effective, not to say crucial, component in the Islamic authorities' economic prosperity. For now, this parallel army, composed mainly of draftees, has no interest in a coup d'état, which would merely weaken the power that it already enjoys in the Islamic machine and that it hopes to increase through its business networks. Indeed, this power has the advantage of conforming both to the Pasdaran's own interests and to the expectations of the mainstream.<sup>125</sup>

For the time being at least, the IRGC seems to enjoy being the lap dog of the regime. Its loyalty to the regime in the upper echelons, the IGRC Intelligence branch and the key services is without question.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, there should be little doubt that “Iran, particularly the IRGC, has acquired a structure for unconventional warfare that partly compensates for its conventional weakness.”<sup>127</sup> The status quo appears to be the probable way ahead for IGRC.

## PARAMILITARY

The two preceding sections examined the two major categories of forces that could potentially mire Iran in violence. The focus will now shift to those paramilitary forces that operate within the state. The Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS), the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), and the *Basij* Resistance Force are the forces that could possibly be the catalyst for a coup. Each will be examined briefly.

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<sup>125</sup>Frederic Tellier, ed., *The Iranian Moment*, #52 ed. (USA: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006), 17.

<sup>126</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 131.

<sup>127</sup>Coats and Robb, *Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development*, 30.



## Ministry of Information and Security

Created between 1979 and 1984 as a branch for national intelligence, MOIS has been mandated with the key task of supporting pro-regime religious groups, neutralizing dissidents, and conducting counter-intelligence both at home and abroad. The MOIS works closely with the IRGC and *Al Qods* in those roles.<sup>128</sup> Further, it is also employed to counter strikes and demonstrations aimed at dissent, “monitoring of clerics and government officials, [as well as]...preventing conspiracies.”<sup>129</sup> The Ministry is comprised of civilians totalling 15,000 with support staff, and it is estimated that some 2,000 operatives are deployed throughout the Middle East and Central Asia.<sup>130</sup> The Minister is always a trusted agent and is handpicked by the Supreme Leader.<sup>131</sup> This suggests that any likely challenges to the regime’s authority from this force will be unlikely.

The personnel of MOIS are assessed as having a high degree of professional loyalty to the regime, and would not be easily swayed by other branches of the state such as the military, or religious or political leaders. The branch has been subject to political leanings of each president with an attempt to remove those opposed to the sitting president. Further, some debate exists

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<sup>128</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 277.

<sup>129</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 131.

<sup>130</sup>Jane's, *Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran*, 128.

<sup>131</sup>Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 207.

within the government concerning control and oversight of Ministry.<sup>132</sup> Overall indications are that this part of the state machine appears stable.

### **Law Enforcement Forces (LEF)**

Established in 1991, the LEF, also referred to the Islamic Republic of Iran Police (IRIP), is a triumvirate of forces consisting of the police, the gendarmerie, and the revolutionary committees.<sup>133</sup> It is charged with a trio of principle roles to include “law enforcement, border patrol and maintaining public order.”<sup>134</sup> The force numbers about 40,000 as of 2005 and contains the “Police-110 rapid response unit” which specializes in raids to restore public order and enforcement of Islamic law at social gatherings.<sup>135</sup>

There are no indications of issues with respect to loyalties to the regime, although Khamenei is viewed as having little competence in domestic security issues that could be a point of friction within the LEFs superior headquarters, which is the little known Ministry of Information (MOI).<sup>136</sup> Additionally, at least one former minister has stated his concern with the paucity of control with the LEF. As with the MOIS, the LEF and it parent ministry show no signs of lacking loyalty or otherwise becoming an area of concern.

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<sup>132</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 131.

<sup>133</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 278.

<sup>134</sup>Jane's, *Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran*, 124.

<sup>135</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 133.

<sup>136</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 278.

## **The *Basij***

The *Basij* is essentially a reserve element of the IGRC.<sup>137</sup> It is ostensibly a volunteer force which for some time has been party to the arrest of “the regime's political opponents, including students, intellectuals, and minorities.”<sup>138</sup> When mobilized, at over one million personnel at the upper end of its mobilization capacity. Currently, it is a sizable force of 300,000, consisting largely of mature men and youth, who have completed service in the military. Its readiness is believed to be low and it has no significant weapons systems.<sup>139</sup> The force is all-purpose in nature. It fielded 550,000 men for the war with Iraq and has responded to earthquakes and other civil disasters. In non-emergency situations, it is assigned to urban patrolling and encouraging the “Islamization” of Iran particularly where young people gather or codes such as dress and alcohol consumption are likely to be broken.<sup>140</sup>

Since the Iran-Iraq war where it was noted for its suicide style martyr attacks,<sup>141</sup> the *Basij* has been largely used for internal security with its military role being minimized.<sup>142</sup> In short, the *Basij* are a “static militia force” that should be viewed as the most innocuous relative to the other paramilitary forces, in terms of causing violence in Iran.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America*, 151.

<sup>138</sup>Vakil, *Tehran Gambles to Survive*, 415.

<sup>139</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 132; and Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 297.

<sup>140</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 270-271.

<sup>141</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 132.

<sup>142</sup>Jane's, *Sentinel Country Risk Assessments - Iran*, 104.

<sup>143</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 132.

## THE NUCLEAR WEAPON ISSUE

The last section of this chapter will examine the nuclear capability of Iran. While this issue is especially topical and attracts the majority of mainstream media attention given to Iran, it is better to examine the nuclear capability from an acquisition perspective in order to have a realistic idea of its development and potential rather than intermingling it with the political dimensions that will be discussed in the chapter that follows. The discussion in this chapter will cover three areas: purpose, capability and delivery, and potential use by non-state groups.

### Purpose

When examining the arguments surrounding Iran's nuclear acquisition program<sup>144</sup>, two factors appear to drive it down this path: deterrence and nationalism. Iran's defence policy has as its goal deterrence.<sup>145</sup> Other authors suggest that given that there has been only one country to use a nuclear weapon (albeit twice in the same war); Iran is not likely to use this weapon in an offensive manner. Moreover, stigmatizing Iran can be seen as serving US foreign policy and does not fully take into account Iranian interests in any sphere.<sup>146</sup> Since 1945, the key message from the nuclear era has been that these capabilities are not the weapons of choice for attack, their greatest utility lies in avoidance.<sup>147</sup> As Bruno Tertrais writes in his futuristic assessment of nuclear proliferation: "...as the ultimate guarantee of survival will remain, for there is no

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<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>145</sup>Curtis and Hooglund, *Iran: A Country Study*, 282.

<sup>146</sup>James E. Harf and Mark Owen Lombardi, eds., *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Global Issues*, Fifth ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 375.

<sup>147</sup>Christoph Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation*, Vol. 110 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2008), 14.

available and affordable technology on the horizon with comparable effects.”<sup>148</sup> Iran wants to assure its survival and the simplest, most effective way to do so is to acquire or give the perception of having created a nuclear weapon.

As previously discussed in the introduction, history forms a central part of the Iranian national psyche. Iran’s history over the past two hundred years had led them to a state of quasi-paranoia, recently fuelled by war with Iraq.<sup>149</sup> Add to this, perceived encirclement by the US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq and the picture that Iran has of its security situation becomes clearer.<sup>150</sup> Survival of the regime also enters into the Iranian mindset of deterrence, providing, in their view, a degree of protection from the threat of invasion.<sup>151</sup>

The Iranian rationale for deterrence in the form of a nuclear capability also contains a religious element. While the origins of the Pakistani program were to be a counter to India’s ‘Hindu’ bomb, and while that still holds true, the perception in Iran is that during the 1990s with Saudi Arabian backing, this bomb became not only ‘Islamic’ but also ‘Sunni’ in nature.<sup>152</sup>

Keddie’s epilogue, commenting on the 2003-2006 period, in *Modern Iran*, sums the notions of invasion prevention and regime survival and captures the point of retaliation:

The same is true of nuclear-weapons capability, which, by those who want it, is wanted for deterrent purposes, as any first use would bring devastating retaliation. Most Iranians want nuclear independence for peaceful

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<sup>148</sup>Bruno Tertrais, "Under the Shadow," *The World Today* 63, no. 2 (February, 2007), 8.

<sup>149</sup>Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 148.

<sup>150</sup>Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 141; Mokhtari, *Mahmud Ahamadinejad's Presidency: What does Iran really Want?*, 361.

<sup>151</sup>Elliot Hen-Tov, "Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism," *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (Winter, 2006-2007), 169, [http://www.twq.com/07winter/docs/07winter\\_hentov.pdf](http://www.twq.com/07winter/docs/07winter_hentov.pdf) (accessed March 10, 2009).; Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 292-293.

<sup>152</sup>Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, 222-223.

development. They also want guarantees against foreign attack, and the government wants guarantees against foreign attempts to overthrow it.<sup>153</sup>

Keddie's excerpt also hints at the idea of Iranian nationalism and its link to the nuclear issue. This view is further supported, asserting that the acquisition of a nuclear capability for non-energy purposes, but rather as a strategic deterrent has now become a powerful symbol in their national identity, drawn in part from Iran's history.<sup>154</sup> Ahmadinejad for one is propelled by this, firmly believing that he has the support of the Iranian people.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, while he suffers in popularity over economic problems on behalf of the regime, the regime itself enjoys the support of its youth, and having voiced their opposition against yielding to international demands for the alteration or cessation of the nuclear program.<sup>156</sup> This suggests that the youth of sees the acquisition of a nuclear weapon as necessary for Iran's survival. Further, the respect it could garner from this status may help Iran engage more states on an equal footing with a greater chance for trade and other economic spin-offs.

### **Capability and Delivery**

This is a controversial subject, and this paper does not seek to examine as a major topic, the myriad of nuclear issues surrounding Iran. It does however, based upon the balance of probability, assume that Iran is acquiring a nuclear weapons capability as covertly as it can to

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<sup>153</sup>Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 346.

<sup>154</sup>Campbell, *Iran's Quiet Revolution*, 55; Mokhtari, *Mahmud Ahamadinejad's Presidency: What does Iran really Want?*, 361; Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation*, 18. Bertram is careful to make the distinction that he sees the nuclear calling of Iran as function of its 200 hundred year subjugation to colonial influences, and this does not extend back the to ancient periods of Persia.

<sup>155</sup>Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 72.

<sup>156</sup>Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 156.

prevent interference with its desire.<sup>157</sup> The volume of suspicion, if not overwhelming, provides enough grounds to consider Iran as a country that has a nuclear weapon. To do otherwise would fall short of analysis regarding the threat of Iran in all mediums.

It acknowledged that the volume of sources is significant and makes it difficult to know who or what to believe. There are disagreements between the IAEA<sup>158</sup> and nations like the US and Israel,<sup>159</sup> not to mention lack agreements between key US leaders.<sup>160</sup> There are voluminous studies that calculate uranium and plutonium centrifuge enrichment capacity and equally perplexing estimates that range from hours to years in predicting how long it will take to generate weapons grade fissile material.<sup>161</sup> There are calculations about missile systems, their warhead capacities, ranges, launch procedures and tactical deployment times.<sup>162</sup> All of these technical assessments points may be moot. Key to Iran is the achievement of the initial portions of the effect it wants with the “breakout capability.”<sup>163</sup> A capability that can be achieved by having enough weapons grade fissile material possibly to produce a bomb, perhaps without

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<sup>157</sup>Hen-Tov, *Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism*, 168; Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 195.

<sup>158</sup>Institute for Science and International Security, *IAEA Report on Iran: Nuclear Weapons Breakout Capability Achieved* (Washington, DC: Institute for Science and International Security,[2009]).

<sup>159</sup>Richard Haass, "We must Talk Iran Out of the Bomb: How to Stop Tehran's Uranium Enrichment Effort? Live with it, Attack it, Or..." *The Globe and Mail*, sec. News >>> Comment, December 23, 2008, globeandmail.com.

<sup>160</sup>Pamela Hess, "Officials: Iran does Not have Key Nuclear Material," *Washington Post*, sec. Nation > Wires, March 11, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/10/AR2009031002371.html> (accessed March 13, 2009).;Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council,[2007]), [http://www.dni.gov/press\\_releases/20071203\\_release.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf) (accessed March 16, 2009).

<sup>161</sup>Coats and Robb, *Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development*, 36-52.

<sup>162</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 134-156 and 169-194. This reference is meant to detract from what otherwise is an excellent analysis of Iran's warfighting capability that exceeds Jane's and other solid works.

<sup>163</sup>Coats and Robb, *Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development*, 52.

actually doing so. Part of that effect, is Iran garnering the respect it believes it is due by having a nuclear deterrent capability that is real or, as a perceived compromise.<sup>164</sup>

### **Potential WMD Usage by Terrorists**

Linking back to the origins of this paper on the risk of violence surrounding Iran, one of the arguments put forth concerning Iran's program is the prospect of the technology or capacity being acquired by terrorists, extremists, and radical regimes. This concern is rightly expressed clearly in a co-chaired effort by two US Senators in an effort to provide an independent view of Iranian nuclear development in light of Iran's history and association (albeit officially denied) with terrorist groups.<sup>165</sup> The whole notion is that a nuclear Iran will place nuclear weapons into the hands of extremists, but this view is based upon the assumption that the regime is acting upon fundamentalist motives rather than realist ones.<sup>166</sup>

The counter points to these concerns are derived from comparing the risks with other members of the nuclear club and by questioning the naivety of the clerics in dealings with entities not under firm control of the state. As Moktari describes:

Admittedly this is a murky consideration, defying accurate predictive determination. The potential danger of fissile material falling into terrorist hands is unfortunately present at the margins of several existing nuclear programs worldwide. Targeting Iran exclusively begs the question: Are fissile materials in China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Russia absolutely safe? The answer is not likely to be absolutely positive.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup>Mokhtari, *Mahmud Ahamadinejad's Presidency: What does Iran really Want?*, 362.

<sup>165</sup>Coats and Robb, *Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development*, 52.

<sup>166</sup>Harf and Lombardi, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Global Issues*, 375-376.

<sup>167</sup>Mokhtari, *Mahmud Ahamadinejad's Presidency: What does Iran really Want?*, 363.



On that basis, this concern seems somewhat unjustly levelled at Iran. The issue of the wariness of the clerics assume that they lack the foresight and prudence in the handlings of sensitive matters. This does not stand to reason:

They have seen terrorists, once unleashed turn against their benefactors and know that a dirty bomb will be as devastating in [E]sfahan or Tehran as it would be in cities in other countries. They recognize that Iran's national interest and the aims of terrorist organizations—even friendly ones—do not converge.<sup>168</sup>

The select and stringent control of nuclear weapons arsenals has been achieved by every state to date. For Iran, whose nuclear capabilities are held and controlled by the faithful IRGC, the possibility of this notion exists. However, it does not seem plausible under examination of past practices and that idea that something so fundamentally important to Iran would be carelessly transferred. The punitive measures attributed to Iran would not merit the risk.<sup>169</sup>

Two additional points make up the case on potential transfers of nuclear knowledge or weapons to unsavoury groups. The first is that Iran has had links to terrorism for at least twenty years, and has had chemical weapons capability for some fifteen of those years and yet no passage of that capability has occurred.<sup>170</sup> Finally, Iran has arguably become more guarded in its support of terrorist groups. With so much at

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<sup>168</sup>*Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>169</sup>Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation*, 16.

<sup>170</sup>Daniel Byman, "Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 3 (March 01, 2008), 169.

stake in the next months and years, Iran would likely not take a risk that would bring down the wrath of the most powerful states.<sup>171</sup>

This discussion of nuclear capability has centred on three aspects: purpose, capability and delivery, and potential use by terrorists. The acquisition rationale was anchored around deterrence and lines of nationalism. Capability and the confounding status of development were outlined and drew the conclusion that predictability with any degree of certainty is difficult and that “breakout capability” is all Iran ostensibly needs in the short term to achieve the strategic effects it desires. The last subject discussed was the risk of transfer or loss of control surrounding technology or materials to extremists, terrorist and radical governments. This was countered by comparing the risk to other states’ programs and the guardedness that they all possess with the utmost vigilance surrounding their nuclear programs and the obvious retributive effects that would be visited upon Iran were such an instance to occur.

## **DEFENCE AND DETERRENCE ONLY**

This chapter set out to assess risk of violence in Iran from conventional, unconventional, paramilitary, and nuclear capabilities. It determined that paramilitary and conventional forces pose the least risk. The paramilitary forces of Iran, excepting MOIS, are numerous, but generally not well equipped or organized to pose a threat to overthrow the regime. Moreover, the loyalty that LEF and the *Basij* show to the theocracy appears to be unwavering and there appears to be no other unusual factors that would preclude this conclusion. MOIS has, as expected, unflinching loyalty to the government and its leader it does not materialize as a violent threat to the regime.

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<sup>171</sup>*Ibid.*, 169.

The conventional forces of Iran, which does not include the IGRC, are in existence for largely conventional deterrent purposes. Despite their size, the assessment was that these forces would have difficulty in prosecuting expeditionary operations owing to the logistical sustainment required. Further sixty percent of the regular Army is composed of conscripts with the normal characteristics of poor training and suspect motivation. Similar to the paramilitary forces the conventional force does not appear on the surface to have fault lines loyalty to the state that could serve as a catalyst for violence.

The nuclear question suggests that Iran is likely on the path to weaponizing nuclear materials for the purpose of strategic deterrence and in some ways to fulfill the nationalistic ambitions of the Shia nation and the state of Iran. Determining the status of the capability in light of the many sources and disagreements is difficult. It was argued that Iran would not be at any more at risk of proliferating nuclear technology and materials to terrorists, extremists and radical states than other nuclear powers. Iran has had a chemical weapons program for over 15 years and would have had plenty of opportunity to delegate its use, however has wisely chosen not to do so. Finally, it supported the view that Iran would closely guard any such capability, and gave some credit with regards to the prudence of the theocracy in dealing with groups not sworn to the constitution of Iran.

The conclusions surrounding the IGRC and *Al Qods* were mixed. It is clear they are completely loyal to the regime and the cause of guarding the revolution. They appear on paper to be content with their pampered status in the state and are satisfied to continue expanding their business interests. The *Al Qods* force will continue to operate on behalf of the regime, the proxy war and likewise enjoy the privileged status afforded them by the Supreme Leader.

Concerning the complete force and state services situation, it would seem that Iran has acknowledged its strategic weakness conventionally. Wisely, it bolstered forces that can attack or intimidate asymmetrically through the “development of long-range strike systems and weapons of mass (WMD) destruction” and the “creation of ties to proxies and partners it can join or use in asymmetric conflicts.”<sup>172</sup> Thus, the threat that Iran poses in the immediate region increases, but it remains at arms length and is under regime control. Iran has compensated for its weaker conventional forces by developing unconventional forces under the umbrella of the IRGC and *Al Qods*. Indications are that it will continue to use carefully these forces to achieve its objective through their use of proxies. Therefore, the overall estimation of military forces is assessed as low for conventional or paramilitary, and similarly for the potential use of a nuclear weapon. The impact edges toward moderate when the use of proxies is included.

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<sup>172</sup>Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 199.

## CHAPTER 5 – POLITY

Iran's regime, government and foreign policy are acting in a manner that conveys an aggressive, rational, calculating, and maximizing philosophy, underpinning the attainment of grand strategy objectives. The regime is strongly influenced by ideology, but not completely overcome by it, despite the views of the President and Supreme Leader. It will continue the pursuit of its interests through proxy warfare and influence operations in adjacent states. Further, it will continue to pursue a nuclear capability development verging on brinksmanship until it secures the global and regional respect it desires. This chapter will also discuss assessments that contribute to the thesis that Iran is not a threat that will generate an increased violence in the Middle East inside or outside of Iran's borders.

### THE ISLAMIC REGIME

The structure of Iran's government is complex and not easy to understand.<sup>173</sup> The Guardian and Expediency councils as well as the Assembly of Experts all contribute to the vexing network of power in Tehran.<sup>174</sup> Contributing negatively to the reservations about the predictability and intent of the regime are authors and commentators like Michael Ledeen. In pieces such as his *Iranian Time Bomb*, he asserts that Iran is nothing more than a theological regime possessed of an “absurd messianic vision” that believes it should make the world violent and bloody to hasten the return of the Twelfth Imam.<sup>175</sup> This point of view preys on the

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<sup>173</sup>Alamdari, *The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government*, 1296.

<sup>174</sup>Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 287.

<sup>175</sup>Ledeen, *The Iranian Time-Bomb*, 59-60.

stigmatic fears of the Western world and uses a lens for detecting fanatical threats more indicative of Iran in 1979 that does not represent the current reality. Authors like Ledeen do not seem to consider the security needs of a country that is permeated by a mistrust of nearly all other states. Iran's bark truly is worse than its bite.

A more balanced view features Iran as the most democratic state in the Middle East next to Israel with some scope for dissent, albeit limited.<sup>176</sup> While the point that Iran is theologically driven is not challenged, another view held that Iran was becoming a military autocracy. It sees Iran being dominated by "power ministries" heavily influenced and controlled by members of the IGRC; thereby, reducing the power of the clerics.<sup>177</sup> Based upon analysis, this view is not supported by credible analysts such as the RAND Corporation who uphold the idea that Iran is a constrained democracy, but a functioning democracy nonetheless.<sup>178</sup>

Another viewpoint on the flavour of Iranian politics is the notion of nationalism and its extensive approval throughout the population. A nationalism that was forged by Iran's history of meddling in Iranian affairs from the British involvement in oil rights to the American supported coup against Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953. In short:

Iran is passionately nationalistic. Although the citizenry may criticize the system, the clerics, and the president, the majority of Iranians feel they belong to one country.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 10-13; Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 287.

<sup>177</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 72-73; Alamdari, *The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government*, 1296.

<sup>178</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 10-13.

<sup>179</sup>*Ibid.*, 34-35.

Indeed, Iran is a theocracy, but with a sense of nationalism, that intertwines all its political influences. It is not the messianic engine or the militaristic tyranny that some have proposed. As Akbar Ganji assesses modern Iran remains very much a theological state, but “no single ideology dominates the country.”<sup>180</sup>

Another aspect of religion in Iranian politics is the shared ideological influences of the current President and the Supreme Leader. Many in the Western media point fingers at Iran’s leadership and Ahmadinejad in particular as ‘insane.’ This type of labelling is of no use analytically and serves to further, and undeservedly, stigmatize Iranians and arguably the greater Muslim population. Moreover, those who subscribe to the belief of Ahmadinejad fanaticism, incorrectly think that his vision of the world is somehow is representative of the polity.<sup>181</sup> This is faulty in two aspects.

First, there is unwavering agreement that the most powerful man in Iran is Khamenei.<sup>182</sup> Iran’s constitution bestows upon him compelling authority over institution, appointments and policy instruments. Moreover, he has been manoeuvring since appointment as Supreme Leader to increase his influence over all of Iran, ensuring that the ‘supreme’ leader remains just that.<sup>183</sup> This leads to the second aspect, which is that even though Khamenei and Ahmadinejad partake of the same religious ideology, between them, they do not possess enough overall power to assert their religious beliefs throughout Iran and more specifically in the numerous power centres that

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<sup>180</sup>Ganji, *The Latter-Day Sultan: Power and Politics in Iran*, 48.

<sup>181</sup>Campbell, *Iran's Quiet Revolution*, 65.

<sup>182</sup>Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 32.

<sup>183</sup>Ganji, *The Latter-Day Sultan: Power and Politics in Iran*, 45.

complicate the regime structure.<sup>184</sup> Iran is not a state of “Islamofascists.”<sup>185</sup> More pointedly, not only is Ahmadinejad’s influence as a religious figure in question, his authority as president and leader of the government in decline.

It would seem that Ahmadinejad’s power is being neutralized by both the parliament and the Khamenei. His inflammatory rhetoric especially against Israel has been countered, and the *Majlis*, Iran’s parliament has not support his populist agenda. The Imam Reza Care Fund was a central plank in the Ahmadinejad platform, it sought to provide interest-free loans to people considering marriage, and to the unemployed. It was not sustained by the *Majlis* and was taken apart, weakening Ahmadinejad’s popularity.<sup>186</sup> Any authority and strength that remains for Ahmadinejad in the *Majlis* has been seriously checked by the Supreme Leader’s appointment of an unelected thirty-two 32 person Expediency Council. In the event that parliament is unable to resolve an issue, the council has been mandated to supervise the parliament a render final decision in favour of the regime, or to block legislation would not meet with religious edicts issued by the clerics.<sup>187</sup>

## **RATIONAL ACTOR**

Having indicated that Iran’s regime is heavily influenced by theology but not maniacally disposed to it, the next aspect of the polity to be examined will be the assertion that Iran is a

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<sup>184</sup>Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 5.

<sup>185</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 77-78.

<sup>186</sup>Hussein Solomon, "Is Religious and Cultural Extremism a Global Security Threat?" In *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Global Issues*, eds. James E. Harf and Mark Owen Lombardi, Fifth ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 332.

<sup>187</sup>*Ibid.*, 332-333.



“rational, pragmatic and calculating” actor.<sup>188</sup> Iran, like most revolutionary states, has moderated and normalized its behaviour over time and returned to pragmatism and realism as a means of defending their national interest.<sup>189</sup> As new regimes mature, they do not discard their definitive goals. They acquire information about the greater system they are in and then begin adapt, likewise for the system about the regime.<sup>190</sup> Iran is no different in this regard. It has transformed from a “Shia rebellion and a terrorist state” to a regional military power.<sup>191</sup> The clerics have led this transformation and are not going to set a course for Iran that would endanger their lives or positions of power and privilege.<sup>192</sup> In many ways, Iran is adhering to normal state and international behaviour and it is the extremist rhetoric and the nuclear weapons issue that obscure this more balanced view of Iran.

Revolutionary states are typically paranoid. They will seem uncertain of other states, will categorize their enemies as “incorrigibly hostile,” and will likely harbour fears about the future based upon their state’s experience in the past.<sup>193</sup> Iran’s last two centuries of history and more recently until 2006, the US calls for regime change, and the rhetoric towards and from Iran all contribute to Iran’s current suspicions.<sup>194</sup> They make Iran seem irrational, but when its bluster is disregarded and its goals and regional security concerns along with its fears of Western

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<sup>188</sup>*Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>189</sup>Sam Razavi, *Post-Khomeini Iran: A Case Study of Pragmatic Foreign Policy* (New York: Paper presented at the International Studies Association 50th annual convention, February 17, 2009), 2.

<sup>190</sup>Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 43.

<sup>191</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 77-78.

<sup>192</sup>Mokhtari, *Mahmud Ahamadinejad's Presidency: What does Iran really Want?*, 361.

<sup>193</sup>Walt, *Revolution and War*, 33-34.

<sup>194</sup>Anthony H. Cordesman and Adam C. Seitz, *Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction: Strategic and Warfighting Implications of a Nuclear Iran* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies,[2009]), [http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/090121\\_iranwmdstrategy.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/090121_iranwmdstrategy.pdf) (accessed March 11, 2009).

domination are taken into consideration, Iran's behaviour appears quite rational. "[C]ollective memories of hurt and humiliation" have scarred Iran, and go a long way in explaining its current path internationally.<sup>195</sup> When judged in this context, Iran's leaders are not the "Islamic zealots" some would believe, but are merely religious conservatives who fear that the events of the past may be revisited upon them.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, Iran appears to be forcefully exerting its dominion and attempting to dissuade nation from interfering with it in a menacing way.

Remaining with the assessment of Iran's behaviour as conservative and wishing to manoeuvre politically while maintaining the status quo, Iran is cautious of further escalating the violence that is already occurring in the Middle East.<sup>197</sup> It realizes that it is under the international community's microscope and does not want to jeopardize the ground it has gained since the revolution or the possibility of its regional reassertion and garnering of global respect it craves. After witnessing the ousting of the Taliban from Afghanistan and the toppling of the Baathist regime in Iraq, Iran has in 2007, held bilateral talks with the US on Iraq. Those talks, the first in some 27 years, naturally sought to establish stability in Iraq, but also had the effect of bringing a small degree of progress towards stability in the region.<sup>198</sup> This want of stability in its neighbours, particularly Iraq and Afghanistan has always been a point of pragmatic insistence for the regime.<sup>199</sup> Another set of talks, this time focussing on Afghanistan, held in March 2009, also

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<sup>195</sup>De Bellaigue, *The Struggle for Iran*, 221-222.

<sup>196</sup>*Ibid.*, 221-222.

<sup>197</sup>Chatham House, *Iran, its Neighbours and the Regional Crisis* (UK: Chatham House,[2006]), [http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/3376\\_iran0806.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/3376_iran0806.pdf) (accessed March 10, 2009).

<sup>198</sup>Alidad Mafinezam and Aria Mehrabi, *Iran and its Place among Nations* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 128.

<sup>199</sup>Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, 289.

indicates that Iran is again being rational, by wanting to take part in the steps toward regional stability.<sup>200</sup>

Another example of Iran's pragmatic actions relates to its policies regarding hydrocarbons in Central Asia. As Hojati and Pahlavi write:

... a number of factors have warranted Iranian leaders to reduce their expectations and move closer to a position of pragmatism and prudence, centered on the need to develop and capitalize on Iran's religious, cultural and soft power potentials, in order to assert Iran as a legitimate and credible actor in its own right, along with other important regional actors, be they Western or Asian powers.<sup>201</sup>

This helps to show that Iran can apply reason and comprehends the optics of its situation. Where it is necessary to demonstrate a hard line approach on all matters such as those with the US, Iran appears to have irreconcilable viewpoints that give the impression that it will be dangerously unpredictable only when it wants to ensure its survival, and not invite invasion or airstrikes. Iran has too much to lose and it knows it. Thus, it will continue with the bravado, brinkmanship and posturing, all aimed at positioning itself for further rapprochement with the West, led by the US.

Iran shows an ability to think and act clearly.<sup>202</sup> It understands very well the stakes of the struggle it is in and has taken calculated measures to develop allies in Russia and China. Russia needs to sell weapons to Iran for its starving defence industries.<sup>203</sup> China's reliance on Iranian

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<sup>200</sup>Rory Mulholland, "Iran, US Find Common Cause on Afghanistan," Associated Foreign Press, [http://uk.news.yahoo.com/18/20090331/tw1-iran-us-find-common-cause-on-afghani-3cd7efd\\_2.html](http://uk.news.yahoo.com/18/20090331/tw1-iran-us-find-common-cause-on-afghani-3cd7efd_2.html) (accessed April 5, 2009).

<sup>201</sup>Afshin Hojati and Pierre Pahlavi, "The 'New' Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors," *Forthcoming- not specified* (n.p.)

<sup>202</sup>Pahlavi, *The Place of Shi'ism in Iranian Grand Strategy*, 56.

<sup>203</sup>Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 78.

oil, as discussed earlier, has made both countries selectively supportive of Iran.<sup>204</sup> Iran has shown with these relationships and those with other states that it has influence. Likewise, it can be influenced in some cases to alter its direction based upon international pressure calculating the cost-benefit of international relations.<sup>205</sup>

This was shown in 2003 when pressure was exerted on it over the status of its nuclear development program at that time.<sup>206</sup> This demonstrates a realist approach to Iran's behaviour indicating that it desires power and security and will subjugate ideals and ethics in that cause. Moreover, it has been argued that Iran's policy towards nuclear development and the perceived target of generating a warhead correspond to a "reasonable and rational policy option" despite certain objections.<sup>207</sup> Iran is capable of not only generating hard line approaches of nuclear weapons to its security concerns, but has also developed soft power tools, such as media, trade, and cultural links to advance its agenda in a more pragmatic and patient way.<sup>208</sup> In drawing to a close on the discussion of Iran's regime as a rational actor, Pahlavi states succinctly:

The masters of Iran are far from being the dangerous fanatics of people's everyday imaginings: they are, on the contrary, cold and very intelligent

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<sup>204</sup>Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 61-62.

<sup>205</sup>William Luers, Thomas R. Pickering and Jim Walsh, "A Solution for the US-Iran Nuclear Standoff," *The New York Review of Books* 55, no. 4 (2008), 3.

<sup>206</sup>Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, 7.

<sup>207</sup>Dabros, *Rogue State Or Rational State Actor? Understanding and Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Aspirations*, 41.

<sup>208</sup>Ethan Chorin and Haim Malka, "Iran's Soft Power Creates Hard Realities," *Center for Strategic Studies - Middle East Notes and Comments* (April, 2008), 1, [http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/0408\\_menc.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/0408_menc.pdf) (accessed March 11, 2009).

calculators who have never stopped thinking in terms of grand strategy, national interest and the maximisation of power.<sup>209</sup>

Iran in this regard is acting as a normal and rational state.<sup>210</sup> Ignorance, fear, and alarmism are fuelling unwarranted perceptions of Iran as a threat.

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<sup>209</sup>Pahlavi, *The Place of Shi'ism in Iranian Grand Strategy*, 59-60.

<sup>210</sup>Dabros, *Rogue State Or Rational State Actor? Understanding and Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Aspirations*, 41.

## CHAPTER 6 – IS CONCERN WITH IRAN JUSTIFIED?

This final chapter will draw from the preceding discussions on the demographic, economic, military and political discussion with a view to articulating the degree of threat that Iran poses to itself, the states adjacent to it, the greater Middle East and the world. The use of the word threat should not be construed as a pre-determined appraisal of Iran. The term is used without connotation and is merely meant to indicate that Iran, like all states, presents specific concerns in widely varying degrees relative to the interests of other states, its region and the world.

### PEOPLE

The balanced view of Iran sees that its people are not primed for another revolution. They seek stability in their state and they collectively feel exhausted by the still-present effects of the revolution and war with Iraq.<sup>211</sup> The people of Iran have endured a considerable amount of turmoil in the twentieth century and there is no appetite for another champion to appear and displace the regime, launching Iran into another period of tumultuous bloodshed and unpredictable change. This feeling is largely shared in the West and most importantly by the US, who renounced regime change as one of its objectives in Iran. Moreover, while there are still those, both who inside and outside the US government, who advocate that Iran is revolution-ready and the makings of war should be pursued, this not the general mood. Nor is their appetite for instigating violence in the region aimed at changing the regime in Iran from outside its

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<sup>211</sup>Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 1985, 2000), 6.

borders.<sup>212</sup> Shirin Ebadi's thoughts on the reticence of Iran are on the mark, stating that people are "...tired of bloodletting and violence."<sup>213</sup> The people of Iran are concerned about their socio-economic security and do not wish to see their state undergo anymore trauma. In addition, while they are increasingly critical of the regime, and becoming less and less attached to its religious values they wish not to have wholesale disruptive change.

Much has been written about the likelihood of violence from the impending or ongoing collision of the Shia and Sunni sects.<sup>214</sup> While there are certainly plays for power, concerns by Sunni and Shia dominated states, and suspicion on both sides, Iran is using religion as another means to elevate its position in all realms. It seeks to "exploit its ethnic and religious links" to achieve a positive position in the region.<sup>215</sup> The eventual success Iran will have in this regard will play out in the next decades. There are some who argue that this point of leverage will not achieve its full potential as the people of Iran are largely descended from the Indo-European race lines and as such hold little chance of dominating the "Arab East."<sup>216</sup> As such, they will never be accepted 'true' Muslims because their bloodlines do not emanate from the Arabic race.

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<sup>212</sup>Ledeen, *The Iranian Time-Bomb*, 63.

<sup>213</sup>Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (New York: Random House, 2006), 214.

<sup>214</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 181.

<sup>215</sup>Pahlavi, *The Place of Shi'ism in Iranian Grand Strategy*, 56.

<sup>216</sup>Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 76.

## ECONOMICS

The correct assertion regarding the necessity of oil revenues for the functioning of the Iranian economy, and by extension that of the state is without serious challenge.<sup>217</sup> Unemployment, corruption, trade imbalances, and lack of diversity hobble its hydrocarbon economy. However, the only role that could emanate from the economic sector of Iran would be that of a causal factor. Should something catastrophic occur to the long-term price of oil or Iran be completely sanctioned from investment in its processing infrastructure then it could be imagined that discontent would foment unrest and internal violence could ensue. There is no doubt that the demagogic Ahmadinejad has suffered in popularity for his economic policies and the overall status of the economy is less than ideal, but both of these elements alone or combined do not appear to be propelling Iran towards conflict and trouble in or outside its borders.

As the second largest holder of oil and gas reserves in the world, Iran's economic engine is its' hydrocarbons, providing a form of protection from the enemies and agents of change who wish to alter its behaviour.<sup>218</sup> It is therefore likely, that people, the government or the clerics would do everything they could to ensure that this portion of its economy continues to offer the source of strength that it does.

## MILITARY AND STATE SERVICES

Iran's strength in armed forces is significant when compared to its regional counterparts. From this perspective, it could appear that Iran possesses a large conventional standing force,

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<sup>217</sup>Crane, Lal and Martini, *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, 67-78.

<sup>218</sup>Melman and Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*, 61.



updated with recent acquisitions, for irredentist purposes.<sup>219</sup> However, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter, the sentiment in Iran does not envision Iran using its forces for offensive purposes. Even from a defensive view, the scars and laments of “never again” still reside in the Iranian populace and thus make the threat of conventional force use very unlikely.<sup>220</sup> Iran has neither the fortitude for another war, such as the one with Iraq, nor does it have an expeditionary force capable of sustained offensive operations. Further, like its paramilitary counterparts, it shows complete loyalty to the regime and remains focussed on the defence of Iran and its internal security.

The threat of invasion is what partially drives Iran to pursue a nuclear weapons capability. Within the mindset of Iran is the need to possess a credible strategic deterrent and provide the threat of retaliatory response to action against it. As much as the ‘nuclear club’ does not want a new member, the manoeuvre by Iran to gain membership is a rational response to the security threats that it faces. The fears that Iranian nuclear technology or materials will fall into the hands of terrorists does not match with the guile and smarts of the regime. Iran wants a nuclear weapon capability to help assure its survival, offering nuclear ‘know-how’ to extremists would be a sure way to bring even more attention and possible action from the world down upon it. Indications are that Iran would be as trustworthy as the majority of other members of the nuclear club. The threat from a nuclear-Iran is not from the bomb, but rather from the development of it and what some states may do to prevent or arrest that development. Based

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<sup>219</sup>Baer, *The Devil we Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, 99-111.

<sup>220</sup>Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 142.

upon the previous analysis there exists the possibility of hostility, but the Iranians will not instigate violent action unless they are struck first.<sup>221</sup>

The prospect of continued and possibly increasing levels of violence outside of Iran perpetrated by its proxies, particularly Hizballah, remains of concern. Iran's IGRC and *Al-Qods* Special Forces controlled use of proxies serves two purposes. First to achieve its ideological goals, and secondly to manoeuvre attention away from itself directly, shielding the nuclear program somewhat, and avoiding the prospect of violence on its own soil, thus acting in a pragmatic manner.<sup>222</sup> It is acknowledged that Iran is acting very dangerously in pursuing goals such as these and sponsoring groups like Hizballah. Nonetheless, Iran is very cognizant of this dynamic and has been shown to act in a restraining and calculating manner. This is especially clear in the careful management of the situation regarding proxies and Israel, the US, and other potential victims of proxy-related violence, with care being taken to not escalate the situation.<sup>223</sup> Iran has been adept at its use of proxies, taking care not to surpass the point of international tolerance, whereby decisive foreign action would be undertaken against it.

In sum, regarding Iran as a military threat holds very little weight when examined against the backdrop of Iran's internal and international security needs and rational goals. The use of proxies, the retention of regionally potent conventional forces and the nuclear issue cloud what may be viewed as the biggest threat from Iran, which is political.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup>Christoph Marcinkowski, *Between Greater Iran and Shi'ite Crescent: Some Thoughts on the Nature of Iran's Ambitions in the Middle East*, Vol. No. 124 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2007), 33-34.

<sup>222</sup>Coats and Robb, *Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development*, 34.

<sup>223</sup>Byman, *Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, 175.

<sup>224</sup>Chubin, *Iran's Power in Context*, 165.

## POLITICAL

The clerical regime in Iran is focussed on but one thing – its survival.<sup>225</sup> This is the point that manifests itself in international exchanges of rhetoric, oscillating between the Supreme Leader and the President fuelling the fears and concerns aided by the Western media. At face value, the regime's rhetoric vis-à-vis Israel, and especially comments originating from the current President, are naturally concerning. However, the rhetoric is more about demonstrating that the regime is operating from a position of strength and that it will not submit easily to international pressure. Moreover, when looking at Iran as a nation, the most significant desire it has is the garnering of international respect that believes is so richly deserved.<sup>226</sup> Iran wants to be regarded without prejudice and wishes a seat at the table, feeling it deserves to be acknowledged for the place it holds in the Middle East and the power it can wield. A power that not only finds its source from strategic deterrents like a nuclear weapon, but from respect afforded through its want of redevelopment into a traditional regional centre of culture, education, science, and commerce.<sup>227</sup>

This leads to an often-confusing foreign policy on the part of Iran. On the one hand is the blustery and rhetoric prone regime, broadcasting a confounding mix of ideological and nationalistic themes, contrasted against what are realist goals to earn global respect. This confusion is purposeful as the Iranians use this like all other tools in their arsenal to achieve better their vision as rightful players in the world.<sup>228</sup> This is key to understanding Iran's behaviour. While it appears that Iran is irrational and ideologically bent, it is in fact acting in a

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<sup>225</sup>Mokhtari, *Mahmud Ahamadinejad's Presidency: What does Iran really Want?*, 364.

<sup>226</sup>*Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>227</sup>*Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>228</sup>Pahlavi, *The Place of Shi'ism in Iranian Grand Strategy*, 59.

realist manner to subordinate the zest it has for religious action to the practical needs relating to the security and long-term survival of the state.<sup>229</sup> This behaviour is underpinned by what appears to be confusing, but is indeed a pragmatic foreign policy. This supports the idea that Iran is not a 'rogue' state, but is characterized as such because of the paucity in understanding the fundamental security issues at stake for Iran.<sup>230</sup> Issues that Iran wants to discuss at times when it will be favourable to Iran and not the West.<sup>231</sup> Hence, given Iran's historically understandable concerns over its security, the mildly narcissistic view of its desired strategic, as well as its religious and cultural position in the world, then Iran's political situation appears rational, calculating, and normal. Iran has been on the "strategic defensive" for two hundred years.<sup>232</sup> The treatment of Iran as a threat has made it into one. Iran must be studied and approached differently; to do so may change the current paradigm, which is characterized by fear and distrust with the West.<sup>233</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper set out to argue that Iran would not pose a threat to itself, its neighbours, the Middle East or the international community, or at the very least show that Iran will not increase in those areas that it is considered as a threat already. The historical pretext of Iran was examined, as well as the demographic and economic factors that could lead Iran to the likelihood of it becoming a threat. Assessment of the potential threats from conventional, unconventional,

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<sup>229</sup>Razavi, *Post-Khomeini Iran: A Case Study of Pragmatic Foreign Policy*, 13.

<sup>230</sup>Dabros, *Rogue State Or Rational State Actor? Understanding and Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Aspirations*, 40.

<sup>231</sup>Ganji, *The Latter-Day Sultan: Power and Politics in Iran*, 57.

<sup>232</sup>Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* (New York: BasicBooks, 2006), 240.

<sup>233</sup>Doug Saunders, "Iran: The Enemy that almost Isn't," *The Globe and Mail*, sec. Focus, Saturday, 2009.

and paramilitary forces, in addition to the key issue of nuclear weapon acquisition occurred. A tour d'horizon was completed by focussing on the political aspects of Iran, namely the religious underpinnings of the regime and the rational and realist manner that characterizes Iran's behaviour upon closer study. The discussion finished with a threat assessment highlighting the keys elements of each chapter. The key conclusion that from the analysis conducted is that Iran is not really a threat; it only appears to be one. The paucity of meaningful understanding of its security concerns combined with its menacing rhetoric, and confusing foreign policy all intermix to form an image of Iran that does not truly project its real strategic intentions, nor the well-meaning desires of people.

There is no doubt that Islamic Republic's behaviour causes concern in the West and the greater Middle East region. Iran remains a difficult and complex state to predict. Its byzantine political workings intertwined with a democratic government and theocratic regime makes it a challenging study. Iran's clever projection and direction of proxies and manipulative use of oil force careful consideration of how to best approach the overarching security concerns of all Iranians, not the just the regime. However, at the base of these elements of the Islamic Republic are the people. Iranians are like most other populations in the world and seek improvements in education, employment, social programs, information, freedom and most of all respect. A respect that will only be attained when Iran is once again the dominant power in the Middle East, but not through the use of force.

This essay provided analysis that suggests Iran will *not* become an increased threat to itself or to other states and will not be the next flashpoint of violence in the Middle East. Iran desires to rise again to the status of being the prevailing regional power in the Middle East. It will not seek to achieve its endstate of regional hegemony in a kinetic or conventional warfare

sense. Instead, Iran will continue to engage in reassuming what it views to be its rightful place in the Middle East through political manoeuvre, proxy warfare, and brinkmanship. This thrust towards domination is cause for concern when looked at purely in the light of power politics. However, when Iran's historic and current day security concerns are taken into account a different opinion materializes. Upon closer study, it is understood that Iran is a rational, calculating and pragmatic entity, which will not alight into violence.

The government of Iran cannot be viewed from a Western context. It must be considered in light of history, peoples, religion, resources and geostrategic position. Iran may not act as a western democracy, but its citizens desire long-term political and economic stability within a Shia religious context. In this light, Iran is unlikely to plunge willingly itself, the region or the world into conflagration. It is hoped that this kind of thinking will come to characterize the paradigm that now occupies the relationship between Iran and the West.

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